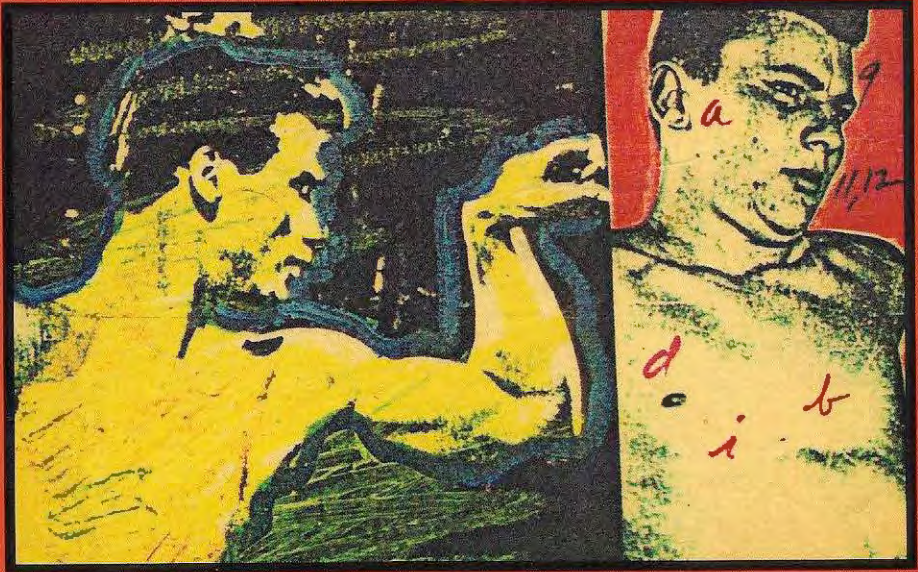


# AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF POSING



ESSAYS ON CAMP, DRAG, AND SEXUALITY

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MOE MEYER

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MOE MEYER



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## INTRODUCTION

For the last two years, I have been an avid fan of the television show *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, an elimination show in which drag queens compete to be the new American drag superstar. The show has been amazingly successful in promoting drag as an art form in its own right while bringing in huge new audiences to local live drag shows. The new audiences are younger, just as often straight as gay. Due to the familiarization effects of the television show, drag is no longer viewed as a sort of contagion. Proximity to drag queens in gay social contexts (as opposed to the long history of "tourist shows") is no longer threatening, and being present as an audience member no longer calls into question one's own personal sexual orientation or identity through a guilt by association.

On the one hand, this has been refreshing for building an appreciation of a minority art form. On the other, the show evokes an odd kind of nostalgia; perhaps we could call it hyper-nostalgia. For in the show's glitzy packaging, mediated and edited imagery, and high-profile marketing, I also experience a melancholy, a feeling of loss, a longing for the "good old days" when the shock and awe created by the social stigma of drag could produce noteworthy cultural and political effects. I began to ask: is Camp dead? As much as *Ru Paul's Drag Race* could be said to inaugurate a new era for Camp and drag, it simultaneously marks the end of a previous one.

I have maintained an understanding of Camp as the production of gay social visibility, i.e. the process for the social signification of gayness. I have not wavered from that basic definition. But what has changed dramatically is the *need* for such visibility. Traditionally, Camp has been central to the process of individual identity formation, the forging of community, and a viable political tactic. In the last decade, the need for Camp—the need to produce a social signification of gay identity—has waned. It certainly is not dead, despite the death certificates prematurely issued by many critics both pro and con.

Camp reveals itself, as I originally argued in "The Signifying Invert," as a social agency based on remembering and citing the bodies of gay

forebears; it is a set of strategies and tactics that exist within the collective memories (the performance repertoire) of gay men. We saw this clearly when the Camp political tactics of Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the late 60s and early 70s, used to contest oppressive discourses of gender, were recovered and redeployed in the late 80s and early 90s by organizations such as ACT UP and Queer Nation to negotiate and contest the oppressive discourses surrounding AIDS.

The discourse of Camp is in fact concrete and knowable; it is a set of accessible techniques localized in body/space. Indeed, this was Foucault's argument in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* where his model of discourse was the troublesome, often overlooked, and misinterpreted concept that discourses are only called into being through practices, techniques, and spaces. A discourse may not be able to be accounted for by a chronological analysis of causes and effects; it may in fact skip in and out of history, as I demonstrate in "Rethinking *Paris Is Burning*." Perhaps this is what was happening when 60s GLF Camp tactics reappeared in 90s Queer Nation activism. The time gap between these two deployments of Camp calls into question the death metaphors that have so often been applied.

The title of Caryl Flinn's essay "The Deaths of Camp" (1995) wryly alludes to just how many times Camp has been declared dead. Of course, Camp is not really dead, not as long as there are bodies out there that can even potentially re-claim, re-enact, and re-deploy it. Flinn concludes that what is called a "death" of Camp is a metaphor marking a reconfiguration of Camp. I am not so sure. Rather than a *reconfiguration of the discourse*, I see instead a *refiguration of the frame of performance*. It is this refiguration of the frame that is so fabulously striking about *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. A new performance frame always seems to generate an anxiety that Camp is dead, especially on the part of critics, myself included, who often lag substantially behind the social agents who actions they seek to describe.

The issue of the frame of performance is central to understanding the current manifestations of Camp as they have emerged in the last decade. Since the early 90s, the field of Queer Theory has intentionally and aggressively swerved away from material/physical performance analysis, holding suspect the framed/bounded event. Concepts of "performativity" were elaborated and then substituted for actual "performance" (a process analyzed in detail in "In Defense of Gay/Performance"). Queer perfor-

mativity critics find material performances to be inadequate to the study of identity/performance. In fact, in prefacing remarks to *Cruising the Performative*, editors Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Foster make the claim that "performativity" offers a broader perspective on all varieties of performance than the concept of "performance" can itself offer! As Thomas A. King has explained:

The denigration of performance vis-à-vis performativity is based on an assumption that bounded performances enacted by identifiable agents reinscribe a humanistic subject who is alleged to hold a power to effect change through intentional acts or utterances. The distinction assumes [on the part of the performativity critic] that agents/performers understand that there is a homologous relation between performances and identities."<sup>1</sup>

Hence Judith Butler's dictum that "The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake."<sup>2</sup> If material performance analysis is reductionary (and a mistake) then contemporary Camp may be also.

Contemporary Camp in the early twenty-first century is characterized by the reduction of its own performativity to performances that are highly bounded and framed (often ritualized) material enactments. During a green room gab session in season two of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, the queens discussed their motives for doing drag. The consensus was that drag was the only way that gay male effeminacy was currently acceptable and legitimated. An effeminate male had to push his mannerisms to the edge, and then institutionalize his performance within the context of a traditional art form. What started out as an everyday life enactment on the streets (performativity) had to squeeze itself into the frame of the drag show (performance) in order to survive. Would Butler want to tell those queens that "the reduction of effeminacy to the drag show would be a mistake?"

That agents construct performance spaces and frame particular acts raises the problem of authenticity for queer performativity critics only if we believe that those agents construe those frames as homologous to "identity," where the latter is understood as a "self-identity" that is continuous over time and across spaces, that is if we hold that agents actually believe that in mapping space they are producing stable pictures of themselves. Contemporary Camp and drag demonstrates clearly that the actual gay

performers (as opposed to their queer critics) know that they are engaged in the construction of multiple self-identities that are discontinuous. In fact, the highly self-reflexive manipulation of discontinuous identity is reported by the queens as liberating. A drag performer studying her image in the mirror before her stage entrance can say “that’s me” or she can just as easily celebrate with “that’s *not* me,” though more often will say both. Each of the utterances, though contradictory, is simultaneously true.

In “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” I insisted that Camp was a solely gay discourse. This led several critics to charge that my ideas were essentialist (some more hostile in tone than others). Yet, as I hope the writings in this volume will show, while I said (and continue to do so) that Camp is a solely gay phenomenon, I never posited, as Queer Theory assumes, that the Camp agent believes in the homologous relation between discursive statements (performances) and self-identity. Camp, as I have defined it, is the process for the *social signification* of gayness—the production of gay social visibility—and that this signification must be present to make a determination of whether any act is Camp or not. That does mean that one must hold a personal and stable self-identity as a gay man prior to engagement with the discourse.

In the early 70s, at the height of the GLF promotion of the concept of “coming out” (making a public proclamation of gay identity), the first famous personage to do so was David Bowie. Interestingly, Bowie was not gay, but he was able to produce the first high-profile social signification of gay identity. He demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the gay discourse, and actually set the styles for everyday life Camp performance on the part of many radical gay men and queens for several years after. The fact that Bowie was, in everyday life, a straight man did not reconfigure Camp as something other than gay. His private self-identity as heterosexual, which pre-existed his public signification of gayness, did not result in the production of something that could be construed as “straight camp.” This is an example of why I have said that Camp is a solely gay discourse. It is the social signification of gay identity that determines Camp, not the self-identity of the performer that exists prior to his/her engagement of the discourse.

As the need, both personal and political, for gay social visibility diminishes, the need for Camp changes as well. What I think we are seeing

with Camp now is the transformation of expansive and once vital practices into communal rituals that can preserve actions and procedures within bounded and framed events (performances). This transformation marks what folklore studies identifies as the effect of (post)modernity upon the practices of a folk or “traditional culture.” For example, as the effeminate male homosexual disappears from the practice of everyday life, he is re-located within the formal frame of the drag show as the queen contestants on *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* so cogently expressed. Yet the discourse of Camp itself has not changed. It still functions in the same way, it still deploys the historical-theatrical signifying codes, and it still allows creative free play with cultural referents. What has changed is the way in which it is framed.

The issue of the performance frame emerges again as Camp evolves into ritual. This is not to say that Camp will be contained within the bounded event for all time. It seems to be something happening now. And given how Camp seems to fade away and then unexpectedly return in a new smock years and even decades after a lapse of practice, it would be ultimately unproductive if not impossible to predict its future mutations. One might say that, for the observer/critic of gay and Camp performance, it takes all the swishing you can do just to stay in the same place.

I see six major performance arenas where contemporary Camp has its strongest expressions. These are all ritualized, framed, and bounded events meant to produce gay social visibility: 1) the drag show, which re-cites and re-plays the history and practices of the gay male institution of effeminacy from which modern gay identity developed; 2) the pride parade, a processional, seasonal, and carnivalesque ritual performance of community which re-plays and re-stages the great myths of liberation; 3) the political protest action, in which Camp-as-tactic is called into service when the need arises; 4) the public gay marriage ceremony, that is, the ritual display of gay partnering which, because it is both personal and political, may constitute a separate and unexpected, probably transient, expression of Camp; 5) the temporary transformation (mapping) of public spaces into specifically gay space as seen in street fairs, gay rodeos, gay sports events, and the like; and 6) reality-based television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*, which present the traditional Camp staples (the swishy walk, the banter of the queen, the flamboyant



gesture) for mass consumption by the general public. All of these are accessible to analysis only through a study of *gay performance* and not *queer performativity*. This not to say that traditional Camp signifying has disappeared completely, but that its everyday life enactments are in the process of fading away, replaced with ritualized performances seemingly meant as a preservative.

When Camp is declared “dead,” it seems that what is being referred to is Pop camp. Pop camp consists of all those operations of taste and style appropriated by dominant culture after the publication of Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” in 1964, that loose cluster of indefinable aesthetic phenomena that includes works of art, films, plays, fashion, furniture, and bric-a-brac. I would agree with the critics that that particular brand of camp is dead. For forty years, the mistaken identification of random objects as “camp” has obscured a functional analysis of Camp as a solely gay discourse. Certainly before Sontag’s and Pop culture’s appropriation of Camp, the “gayness” of Camp was never in dispute. And now that the smoke has cleared and Sontag’s model of Camp has been declared obsolete and dead, we can take a closer look at gay Camp through a clearer, less obstructed, and less critically crowded historical vantage point.

What is needed now are solid, on-the-ground, ethnographic performance analyses that can adequately deal with this latest figuration of Camp as gay ritual. The methodological rationale and argument for this move is put forward in “In Defense of Gay/Performance.” In that essay, we suggest that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s constellation of shame/performativity be replaced by a concept of the “contestation of normalization,” and that the anthropological, sociological, and ethnographic aspects of the field of Performance Studies be mobilized as crucial grounding for analyses of gay performance. This is especially important as Sedgwick claimed that “shame/performativity” was the best model for the study of a “camp” defined as a “loose cluster of phenomena.”<sup>3</sup> By that, it is apparent that what she was writing about was the Pop camp that emerged from the late twentieth-century elaboration of Sontag’s “Notes” (as opposed to a specifically gay Camp that is definable, knowable, and comprised of accessible techniques). That version of camp (i.e., Pop), as the critics tell us, is dead. Thus the constellation of “shame/performativity,” still so prevalent in queer studies, reveals itself as a mortuary science with perhaps little or even no

practical application to the manifestations of contemporary gay Camp.

As a scholar originally trained in anthropology, ritual studies, and performance ethnography, I should be quite content with the transformation of Camp into framed and ritualized performances. Yet I experience, as stated earlier, *melancholia*, a sadness in the realization that the category “gay” might be but a brief moment in history, and that the grand vehicle of twentieth-century homosexual/gay identity formation—Camp—is itself falling victim to the ravages of time. Traditional Camp seems like an old drag queen staring at her sagging face in the mirror before her farewell performance. It is a new era of Camp—packaged, professionalized, and marketed. For that reason I have decided to collect some of my essays on Camp and drag in this volume, to mark the end of an era and the start of another. The Queen is dead; long live the Queen, so to speak.



The essays in this volume are presented in a roughly chronological order. They do not have to be read in any particular order, with the exception of chapters three and four which should be read in succession. Throughout, I have largely abandoned the term “queer” in favor of “gay” and “homosexual” (for reasons explained in “In Defense of Gay/Performance”). The title of the collection, *An Archaeology of Posing*, was taken from an essay that was not included here but which has resonances with the included materials. Additionally, the concept of “archaeology” seems the most appropriate for talking about previous manifestations that are reaching the end of their time, now to be replaced by “ethnography,” the practice that will ground the essays for a subsequent anthology dealing with contemporary Camp.

When the first essay was written at the beginning of the 90s, social constructionism had reached its apogee. In “Unveiling the Word,” I wanted to explore that philosophy beyond its usual analysis of the construction of social “types” in representation. Rather I wanted to investigate how any particular social construction was embodied by an individual, by a social agent capable of discursive engagements through conscious selection from the historical inventory. I had been influenced by Phillip Zarrilli’s method of “microanalysis” which provided a means to deconstruct atomistically performed/embodied constructions; Ann Daly’s suc-

successful application of narrative analyses to the sequencing of gestures, postures, and movements in dance; and by Clifford Geertz's application of dramaturgical metaphors to cultural performance in order to effect a discourse analysis.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the subject of drag had become a hotbed of theoretical activity after the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. I was particularly dismayed at the primarily feminist theorizations of drag that did not seem to be grounded in any actual performances or practices, and which invariably turned against gay men.<sup>5</sup> Feminist theories of drag did not distinguish in any way between drag queens, female impersonators, transvestites, or transsexuals. Thus I took my model from the earlier work of Esther Newton in *Mother Camp*, an ethnographic study based on analysis of specific drag queens in specific contexts, and which displayed none of the homophobia evinced in the more recent feminist works.

"Unveiling the Word" began as an ethnographic field study that narrowed its focus from a particular drag show to a particular act by one performer. Applying a narrative analysis to the drag performer's processual unfolding of gesture and movement, I hoped to demonstrate, amongst other things, that a universal theory of drag was an impossibility, that each act of a drag show might be embodying completely different discourses and politics, and that it was possible for a single performer to actually juggle multiple discourses purely for stage effect. More importantly, I wanted to show that there was a direct relationship between stage performance and discourse in material enactments, not just in academic theoretical engagements.

In this revised and expanded version of "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," I wanted to avoid the primary trap of the original publication, i.e. the definition of "queer" which introduced the essay. Several people have commented that the essay actually reads if the word "gay male" is substituted for "queer." And those people were correct. The original publication was held up by editors and reviewers who insisted that not only should "queer" be used instead of "gay" ("queer" was "flavor of the month" according to one editor), but that I should define the term (against my better judgement) if the work was to see publication. In this new version, I have gone back to the original text and substituted "gay" for "queer."

The essay was meant to fill a void in the larger field of the study of

identity performance/politics that was dominant in the early and mid-90s. Every identity—racial, sexual, ethnic, national, gendered—had developed its own distinct critique based on the subject position inhabited by its uniquely identified authors/critics, all that is except for gay men. In meetings, conversations, and symposia we searched for a specific gay male critique, which we located in Camp and drag.<sup>6</sup> But we discovered that camp and drag were already being theorized (and territorialized) by almost every group imaginable. There was lesbian camp, straight camp, black camp, Jewish camp, and Hispanic camp, to name a just a few. Yet, for those who actually lived Camp, who embodied it and performed it, there was no doubt that this was a specifically gay cultural critique and not simply an intellectual exercise. "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp" was intended to do exactly what the title promised, while making an initial attempt to explain how and why this gay cultural critique had been colonized.

In "The Signifying Invert," I focused on Camp from 1890-1950, a period that saw both its formation and its development into the theatrical signifying system so identifiable in the performance of effeminacy. Prior to 1950, Camp has none of the ambiguity that characterizes Sontag's Pop camp, nor was it contested intellectual territory. Popular culture theorists were content to accept Camp as a gay discourse in the period prior to their colonization of it.<sup>7</sup> My goal was to stabilize a concept of Camp as both a solely gay discourse and as a set of accessible, knowable, and physical performance techniques so that its transformations after 1950 could be tracked.

"Top Camp/Bottom Camp," intended as a sequel to "The Signifying Invert," was an attempt to explain how camp came to be used as an adjective in the description of static objects and Pop culture (i.e., non-gay) phenomena after 1950. While Camp has been described as a relationship between things, activities, situations, and gayness, the mechanics of that relationship had never been analyzed.<sup>8</sup> If that relationship could be described, then perhaps it would be possible to understand how Sontag reached the mistaken conclusions she advanced when she described camp as an innate quality of objects rather than as a *relationship* between an object and gayness.

Additionally, the essay takes into account the material sexual practices of gay men, those practices that were (at the time) defining aspects of gay

identity. If Camp was a relationship between things and gayness, then that relationship would have to be grounded in sexual practice, the arena where the relationships between gay bodies were articulated. LGBTQ studies are conspicuously lacking a sexological component. This has always been puzzling. How can sexuality be theorized if the specifics of sexual practice are not described? Perhaps that is because there is a fine line demarcating an academic study of sexual practice from pornography, making it simply too problematic and politically dangerous to engage.<sup>9</sup> “Top Camp/Bottom Camp” was the first cautious move to establish sexual practice as a foundation for theorization.

“Rethinking *Paris Is Burning*” articulated a frustration over an impasse in gender and queer studies. I came to understand the impossibility of singular analyses of gender and/or sexuality.<sup>10</sup> This impasse was recognized by others at the time as well. There were calls to produce studies that took into account race, class *and* gender simultaneously. Yet, despite the claims that sex/gender could only be analyzed in conjunction with race and class, few studies ever appeared. There was a flurry of theoretical writing concerning the *need* for such practices, but very few engagements. I took the project onboard in the essay and wove together race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and religion. The conclusions reached were the opposite of those offered in other studies of the film that were based in only one aspect such as gender or race. At the same time, I wanted to see an end to those studies of drag performance that used the queens as objects of study to anchor particular academic theoretical and political agendas, studies which too often denied agency, knowledgeability, and humanness to drag queens.

The short piece, “Celebrity Jack,” was first presented as a paper at the 2008 Annual Conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). I include a version here because it represented the first articulation of a new era of Camp, and forms the marker for both the end of one formulation of “gay” and the beginning of another. The essay argues for the unavailability of academic engagement with historically specific analyses of material sexual practices, the element that is missing from most gender and queer studies.

“In Defense of Gay/Performance,” co-authored with Thomas A. King, is a statement of method, including the ideological implications and jus-

tifications, for the study of gay male-specific performance studies. Concerned since the early 1990s about an increasing elision of the two terms “queer” and “gay” and the submergence of gay male specificity within the LGBTQ alphabet, and about the increasing domination of performance studies by linguistic theories of performativity (and the inevitable confusion of the two terms “performance” and “performativity” in much scholarship since then), we have turned here to a different project. This work, originally intended as the Introduction to a proposed collection to be titled *Memory, Practice, Pleasure: Gay Performances*, was an initial attempt to reopen a discussion of specific gay male performance practices as these have been grounded in and intersected with materialities of space and location, technique and technology, access to everyday and aesthetic performance resources, and other markers of personhood such as race, ethnicity, and class.

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## UNVEILING THE WORD: SCIENCE AND NARRATIVE IN TRANSSEXUAL STRIPTease

It was Sunday night at Club La Cage, and the Holly Brown Show was under way.<sup>1</sup> Just after seeing an obese transvestite on roller skates do an impression of Shirley Temple, I was waiting for the tenth act to begin. The audience appeared to be in various states of intoxication, the smoke-filled lounge loud with chatter that sometimes continued even while the actors were performing. The crowd was in a holiday mood.

The lights dimmed slowly to black, signaling the start of another act. Out of the darkness came the sound of the theme song from the television sitcom "I Dream of Jeannie," an appropriation from pop culture that sent a clear message—we would be experiencing "High Camp," the grandest manifestation of the gay subcultural aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

The only set piece on the now visible stage was a four-foot-high genie bottle. That, and the cloud of smoke that issued from offstage, marked the entrance of what could only be an impression of Barbara Eden in her role as Jeannie from the television series. No sooner were the signals received than a beautiful impersonator emerged from the cloud, giving a very believable impression of the bosomy blonde star.

Covered by a floor-length, gold lamé cape, the impersonator strutted the length of the stage while the audience responded to the comedy with enthusiastic laughter, screams, and applause. It was still too early to know where Jeannie would go with this act. The television theme song would be over shortly, and the performer would have to surpass the quality of the entrance.

As the song came to a close, Jeannie executed a few spins on her spiked



heels, sending yards of gold lamé into the air after the style of Loïe Fuller. As the cape came to rest, she opened it with outstretched arms, displaying a very female figure. A gold lamé halter supported ample breasts, while the scant gold panties barely covered the crotch. Over this was a body harness made up of numerous strands of rhinestones positioned to accent the narrow waist and long legs. We got a good look before the cape closed again.

The crowd became uncommonly silent for a moment. We had been misled. This wasn't a female impersonator; this was a transsexual.<sup>3</sup> A female nude in this venue would be inappropriate and would hold no interest for the predominantly gay male audience. This incongruity was the clue to the transsexual identity of the dancer. The realization complete, the music and attitude onstage changed radically. A soft disco tune, ironically titled "Jeannie's Got to Go," charged the space with a relentless, pulsing beat. The original impression of Barbara Eden was surrendered, seriousness replaced camp humour, and Jeannie turned her efforts to the dance.

In the remaining four minutes, Jeannie removed her costume piece by piece. Sensuous yet strong walks carried her from one side of the stage to the other; her arms, hands, and wrists moved fluidly while her hips swayed with a suggestive undulation—all meant to signify femininity. Spins and turns created oversized, abstract shapes as the cape billowed about her. Several times in the dance she moved downstage to accept money from approving spectators, enveloping one of them in the folds of her cape as it closed over his face, which was buried in her crotch; her eyes glazed with a studied aura of syrupy desire.

Between these movements, her clothing slowly disappeared. The massive cape would close briefly to obscure the motions of her hands as they undid various fastenings. First, the rhinestone harness was discarded, revealing the smooth skin and hairless body. This was followed by the halter, uncovering large, perfectly formed breasts whose nipples were graced with pasties. The panties went next, leaving Jeannie with nothing but a g-string. As a finale, she pulled down the g-string and executed two full turns to display her artificially created vagina. With the cheesecake completed, she darted offstage as the house went silent and dark. Pause. Applause.

### The Transsexual Narrative

I first saw Jeannie's performance in 1988 while carrying out an ethnographic study of female impersonators. The subjects of the fieldwork were the transvestite performers of the Holly Brown Show, an ongoing drag revue staged weekly at La Cage nightclub in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Several times a year, Jeannie performs as a solo guest artist in the revue, making a colorful addition to the work of the resident company.

I was immediately drawn to her biological realism. It contrasted sharply with the performances of the transvestites whose gender illusions depended on the manipulation of costume and makeup. Jeannie's art, on the other hand, was marked by a process of costume reduction that terminated in a theatrical display of her nude body, something the other performers could not duplicate.

Further comparison, primarily of characterization technique, provided additional distinctions between Jeannie's striptease act and the work of the impersonators. Because a drag show act only lasts a few minutes, a broadly sketched character is generally established within the first few seconds. Though Jeannie's five-minute dance shared this feature with the other performances, she added an unusual twist. She established her character, ostensibly an impression of Barbara Eden, but terminated it only one minute into the act, and she spent the remaining time out of character. The other drag show performers I have seen achieve success through sustained portrayals of mass culture media stars, which serve as binding referents. By discarding this convention in mid-performance, Jeannie produced an uncommon and unsettling effect. At first viewing, it seemed that an impersonation was irrelevant to the main body of the performance. Why, then, was a character painstakingly constructed only to be discarded like an article of her clothing?

Paul Bouissac, in his structural analysis of circus acts, has identified key features in the pattern of successive transformations characterizing many of the performances, from acrobats to clowns.<sup>4</sup> He defined the principal divisions as:

1. Identification of the hero, who incidentally is often introduced as a non-autochthon.
2. Qualifying test, which the artist considers a warm-up exercise.
3. Main test, which can consist of several tests presented in a variety of sequences.

4. Glorifying test, which is usually preceded by a special announcement and accompanied by a drum roll.

5. Public acknowledgment of the fulfillment of the task.

He illustrates this sequence in a diagram [fig. 1].

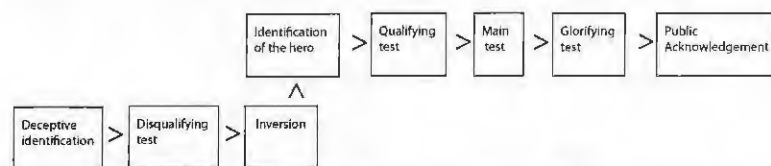


FIGURE 1 Progressive stages of acts. Based on Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture*.

Citing V. Propp's work on the morphology of the folk tales, Bouissac observes that this same structure is common to many forms of Western folk theater, of which circus is one.<sup>5</sup> The plots involve the entrance of the hero, who arrives purposefully disguised and therefore unrecognized.<sup>6</sup> After being misidentified by the other characters and/or audience, the hero calls attention to his deception and makes a claim to an alternate and supposedly true identity. The hero is then required to submit to a series of tests to verify his claim. The tests consist of any series of actions appropriate for validation of the social role claimed by the hero, and their administration forms the basis of the plot. The testing process involves the accomplishment of increasingly difficult tasks, culminating in a finale whose outcome supports, beyond a doubt, the hero's claimed identity.

In my opinion, the drag show falls into this category as the basic folk performance form for the gay male subculture. Jeannie's initial deception as a Barbara Eden impressionist, then, is a necessary precondition for administering the tests. In her exotic dance, the hero—in this case a man who has undergone a sex change—is tested through a progressive disrobing, each article of clothing removed constituting a single test whose revelations lead us on a journey that culminates in a view of the genitals, the ultimate test of the dancer in support of her claim to a transsexual identity. Incidentally, Propp states that the final identification is often made by recognition of a wound or other idiosyncratic mark that the hero alone is known to possess.<sup>7</sup> In Jeannie's act, this identifying mark would be the

surgical alteration whose display is both the purpose and culmination of the performance.

Using Bouissac's diagram and divisions of the process of heroic identification, I outline Jeannie's dance as follows:

1. She arrives, a heroine disguised as Barbara Eden. This disguise sets the scene so that the dancer can claim an alternative and true identity, making it necessary to submit herself to the tests of proof.

2. The first opening of the cape to display her body in tableau serves both to disqualify her as Barbara Eden and to make an initial claim to a transsexual identity. At this moment, a liminal moment when the performer is between representations, the character is inverted, neither one character nor the other.

3. The main test, consisting of several subtests, is the removal of individual costume pieces. In sequence, she removes the rhinestone body harness to reveal the female silhouette; the halter to display the breasts; the panties, which only partially expose the crotch.

4. The glorifying test, the finale, is the removal of the g-string, forcing the audience to inspect her genitals, the proof final of the hero's—or heroine's—sociosexual status.

5. The objective being met, the public offers acknowledgment in the form of applause.

Why is Jeannie's impression of Barbara Eden necessary to the performance? What function does this theatrical structure play in the interpretation of transsexual striptease?

Miss Bobbi St. Charles, who worked as a professional female impersonator in Chicago from 1972 to 1979, says he has seen the device of the introductory deceptive impression used by many performing transsexuals. This practice, he told me in an interview on 08 April 1989, was "to freak out the audience, of course." In other words, the realization of the transsexual identity of the performer was most effective when the cueing mechanism contained the element of surprise.

In terms of the drag show revue, the revelatory shock accompanying recognition of the transsexual's status was necessary for the dance's inclusion. Complete clothing removal by a female would not occur in a drag show. To clarify the intention of the performance, Jeannie first had to cre-

ate a link to the conventions of female impersonators. Through the Barbara Eden impression executed in a camp aesthetic, she fulfilled audience expectations of the genre's style of sexual representation while simultaneously aligning herself to the subcultural values of the audience. Without her doing so, there could be confusion or possible resentment in the presence of female eroticism on a stage presumably dominated by same-gender male sexuality. The shock or "freak-out" induced by Jeannie is, then, a justification.

Just in case a few audience members have not made a successful identification, Holly Brown—the show's director—comes out after Jeannie's dance and tells them, "Don't get yourself too worked up over her. It's all man-made." On all levels of production, the goal of the performance is proper identification of the transsexual body.

Jeannie also does striptease in Las Vegas nightclubs for a nongay audience and with co-performers who are biological females. The fact that she is a transsexual is never revealed and is irrelevant under these circumstances. But when the act is performed as part of the drag show, it is the transsexual body, not the female body, that becomes the object of the gaze. It is the introductory deceptive impression that is responsible for the subtle shift from female to transsexual subject. Simultaneously, the transfer engages a plot borrowed from the narrative of the mythic hero.

Teresa de Lauretis has explained that the mythic narrative can be reduced to a transaction between a hero and an obstacle. The story defines "two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human . . . and female-object-boundary-space."<sup>8</sup> This marking of sexual difference in the mythic narrative—its very goal according to Lauretis—explains why Jeannie's introductory deceptive impression can produce a transsexual subject.

When Jeannie wishes to appear as a biological female in a nongay nightclub, there is no attempt to work through a mythic narrative. She thus dances a straightforward striptease with a single female image. But by engaging the mythic narrative in the drag show, she introduces the hero who, appearing as a female impersonator, functions as a male signifier overlaying and containing the female dancing image. Her clothing removal then reads as a series of tests or female obstacles that, by spatializing the feminine body through segmentation, sexually differentiates it from the male hero in the abrupt transition from Barbara Eden impression to

striptease dance. Simultaneously acting as male-hero and female-obstacle, the transsexual becomes both the subject and object of the performance, a double identification with both gaze and image.

The two versions of Jeannie's dance—gay and nongay, transsexual and female subject—suggest that it is the narrative collapse of gaze and image that produces the transsexual. To support this contention, I have noted the deployment of this narrative sequence in the sex-change surgery itself. Both the transsexual identity and physical body are brought into existence through an identical narrative, in an example of what Lauretis describes as "a subject engendered precisely by the process of its engagement in narrative genres."<sup>9</sup> The structure of Jeannie's performance becomes a quotation of the surgical theory and procedure of the sex-change operation.

Before I argue this point I want to look first at the particular character chosen by the performer in the deceptive impression. Not just an impersonation of a media star—Barbara Eden—but the particular role played by that actress is my point of departure for deconstructing Jeannie's exotic dance. Exposing the identity of the narrative's hero is a necessary "test" that, if passed, will reveal an ideological framework that supports the hidden seams joining scientific knowledge and narrative.

### **The Fallen Woman**

Jeannie's introductory double impression of Barbara Eden in her role as a sitcom character—also named Jeannie—fulfills a dual presentational aesthetic that is a particular responsibility of a transsexual stripper in a drag show. This responsibility is manifested in the need to present simultaneously two images of women. The drag show performer utilizes a convention of impersonating larger-than-life women whose images are appropriated from pop and mass culture; while, as Roland Barthes has noted, the stripper adopts representations of the Exotic Other.<sup>10</sup>

Jeannie cleverly responded to the situation by creating an impression of a pop star in her television role as an exotic, oriental female. The sitcom "I Dream of Jeannie" portrays the title character as an oriental genie possessing unlimited magical powers together with the alluring sexual attributes of a voluptuous woman, magnified by a vulnerable naïveté. Dressed in the garb of a harem girl, Barbara Eden's character is a peculiar interface of the dynamic, erotic woman and Daddy's Little Girl.



This double-edged femininity, the erotic and the domestic, forms the core of that type of television comedy called "battle of the sexes." The plots revolve around a domestic woman, usually a housewife, forced into a strait-jacketed, superficial existence whose efforts toward independence are continually thwarted by the husband. She attempts to liberate herself by becoming the erotic and exotic, often with an arsenal of cruel and practical jokes. The husband's efforts to restrain the naughty girl, and the game of mental chess that follows, result in comedy. The representation of exoticism teamed with naughtiness is, perhaps, most extreme with Barbara Eden's Jeannie. Yet it is echoed to varying degrees in numerous other sitcoms: for example, the character of Lisa Douglas in "Green Acres" and Samantha Stephens in "Bewitched." Even that seminal entertainment "I Love Lucy" achieves its status through Lucy's continual conflict between wife/mother and showgirl.

Barbara Eden's oriental exotic, Jeannie, is a simplistic character seen as humorous in a contemporary sitcom; yet the motivation behind her disruptive antics is a clearly articulated erotic impulse. This all-powerful harem girl will stop at nothing to win the heart of the show's male protagonist, even if it requires placing him in uncomfortable if not actually life-threatening situations. Take away the canned laughter from her enactments of violence, and Jeannie emerges not as the naughty girl but as the evil woman. As such, Jeannie is clearly a recent representation of the *femme fatale*, the image of feminine evil inherited from the nineteenth century during which it achieved a spectacular prominence.

The *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* was a woman of independence, seducing and then leading men to their doom as sacrifices to her self-indulgent sexual desires. Far from being comic, this free-thinking woman was seen as a deadly threat to upstanding men and society in general. This concept of Woman was symbolized by the oriental female, often portrayed as a dancing girl. The oriental female was a symbol for the erotic and independent woman, the antithesis of the domestic wife, evolved from a nineteenth-century representation of a sexualized Orient, an erotic landscape on which were projected the sexual fantasies of repressed Victorian culture.<sup>11</sup>

It is not difficult to understand the public furor and charges of indecency that surrounded the appearance of a generation of oriental, exotic, Salome, hootchy-kootchy, and Little Egypt dancers at the end of the cen-

ture. It wasn't that the dances themselves were obscene but that the connection between the oriental female and erotic sex was firmly fixed in the American mind. In the public's eye, the oriental female was a metaphor for the sexual act.<sup>12</sup>

Having been yoked to notions of sex, the image of the oriental dancing girl became a convenient repository for erotic characterization in general, a site wherein multiple concepts of Victorian sexuality could converge to find expression through a single representation. The image of the oriental female as a sexual metaphor thus found an additional application as an image of the prostitute.<sup>13</sup>

The *femme fatale/prostitute* image established itself as the visual representation of one side of the binary concept of Woman, wherein she was defined either as asexual and domestic or erotic and independent. Like Barbara Eden's Jeannie, she was both "the virgin and the whore, the saint and the vampire—two designates for a single dual opposition: that of woman as man's exclusive and forever pliable private property, on the one hand, into a polyandrous predator indiscriminately lusting after man's seminal essence, on the other."<sup>14</sup>

The implicit evil within the image of the *femme fatale* was not simply fantasy or an aesthetic device. The paintings and posed photographs of Arab harem girls, Indian nautch girls and maharanis, and the perennial dancing nymphs provided a concrete visual articulation and an aesthetic imagery for the women of commerce whose proliferation pressed itself ever more noticeably upon the public landscape; for while the *femme fatale* flourished in art, prostitution was flourishing in nineteenth-century America.<sup>15</sup> Outside of marriage and domesticity, women had few options for achieving economic independence other than factory labor or prostitution. In such a situation, it was not surprising that so many women chose the more viable economics of the streets. This choice between extremes only reinforced the concept of women as virgins or whores. It was there to see, enacted in daily life.

The fear and sexual evil that permeated the image of the oriental dancing girl was a projection of the hostility expressed toward the prostitute. Her independence was blamed as the cause of all social ills: violent crime, disease epidemics, social anarchy, economic ruin, atheism, and the spiritual rot of American culture.<sup>16</sup>



But help was on its way. Victorian medical theory joined the concepts of the *femme fatale* and the prostitute to create the cultural paradigm of the Fallen Woman, a female pathology of erotic sex in which all sexual practice outside of marriage and reproduction was treated as a disease symptom.<sup>17</sup> This belief in a biological source of morality, with its roots in social Darwinism and developed by medical thought on prostitution, had far-reaching social effects. "It presumed . . . a female deviance based on sexual inclination rather than specific acts of misconduct" and shifted the basis of diagnosis from the body to the psyche and, finally, to lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> The prostitute was diseased because she had the *potential* to engage in some types of sexuality. Michel Foucault has discussed how this ideology, freed from specifically physical symptomology, was extended to encompass diagnosis based solely on the *object* of sexual desire.<sup>19</sup>

### The Fallen Man

The pathologizing of the prostitute opened the door for extending this diagnosis to homosexuals.<sup>20</sup> Because of their potential or desire to engage in some types of sexuality, homosexuals joined prostitutes in the medical line-up. The newly arrived medical science of sexual aberrations described the homosexual as "a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology."<sup>21</sup> In fact, the term "homosexual" was invented only in 1869 as part of the developing vocabulary in the field of sexology.<sup>22</sup>

"The majority of researchers believe that self-identified gay people are strictly a phenomenon of the last 75-100 years," one factor in the development of a public sexual identity that "was part of the contemporaneous debate over an ideological definition of housewife and mother," on the one hand, and the erotic and independent woman on the other; a debate that resulted in the invention of the homosexual.<sup>23</sup> Homosexuality, though previously considered a sin that could be committed by any man, was fixed by medical literature into a "type" of personality that exists independent of specific sexual activity.<sup>24</sup>

The number and visibility of prostitutes had provided the impetus for pathologizing sexual misconduct, the diagnoses being based on the application of visual criteria to public deportment; but which features of the nineteenth-century homosexual subculture were making it noticeable to

the medical community? The sexual act itself was practiced behind closed doors, so what exactly were scientists seeing? Which behaviors and activities, if not explicitly sexual, were being used as the criteria for classification?

The clear separation of males and females while socializing in the nineteenth century meant that men, when not at home, spent their time in the company of other men. Two men together, as opposed to contemporary social interpretation, would not have indicated homosexuality. In fact, Peter Gay believes that gay men were safe from discovery in a Victorian culture precisely because same-sex socializing and companionship was the norm.<sup>25</sup> As is known today, most gay men are unrecognizable from their nongay counterparts. Who, then, were the medical researchers observing?

I assert that, because of their extreme visibility and because homosexuality was automatically associated with them, the new classification was derived from observations of effeminate men and transvestites. In the early stages of concept formation about homosexuals, acts of cross-dressing became, at times, the only distinguishing feature with which to identify homosexuals; consequently, many scientists believed that transvestites constituted the entire social subgroup:

The earliest descriptions of homosexuals do not coincide exactly with the modern conception. There is much more stress on effeminacy and in particular on transvestism, to such an extent that there seems to be no distinction at first between homosexuality and transvestism.<sup>26</sup>

The equation of transvestism with homosexuality was firmly established as far back as the mid-1700s, and was only discarded several decades ago in the foundational medical studies.<sup>27</sup> Not until 1919 did Havelock Ellis begin to separate transvestism from homosexuality in general. As late as 1934, scientific writers such as Wilhelm Stekel vehemently disagreed with Havelock Ellis's initial conceptual separation of the two terms, stating that he was confusing the issues and was erroneous in attempting to separate cross-dressing from homosexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Among the invert population itself, the association of homosexuality with transvestism was no less marked. Effeminate and cross-dressing men defined themselves as homosexual. Their partners, if not exhibiting such

outward behavior, were classified as heterosexual by both the gay and nongay publics. In most instances, the partner could be considered heterosexual regardless of his participation in same-sex sexual activity.<sup>29</sup> George Chauncey, in his analysis of courtroom and other public documents of the era, has concluded that "the determining criterion in labeling a man as 'straight' or 'queer' was not the extent of his homosexual activity," but his choice and use of particular signifying gestures of social gender role enactment.<sup>30</sup>

The specific disease these transvestite-homosexuals suffered from was "gender inversion." The term and accompanying discourse developed from the writing of Karl Ulrichs, an activist lawyer for homosexual rights in Germany, who saw the homosexual as a "third sex" in whom the soul of a woman is trapped in the body of man.<sup>31</sup> The invert was seen as a type of hermaphrodite whose condition manifested in a mind/body split. The body was male, but the mind was female. The supposed characteristics of homosexuality, "passion, emotional ill-discipline, and sexual looseness," were those associated with the Fallen Woman.<sup>32</sup> It was the feminine evil of the homosexual psyche that formed the link to Victorian medical theory and brought about its conception as a form of female sexual pathology.

Returning to the striptease dance, Jeannie's oriental dancing girl also reads as an image of the nineteenth-century gender invert whose transvestism links him to the paradigm of the Fallen Woman/prostitute through specific representation of the erotic. Both historically and in this stage act, the transsexual body is prefigured in a display of the sexualized Exotic Other.

### Inventing the Transsexual

The study on male sexuality issued by Alfred Kinsey in 1948 was a major factor in the social redefinition of homosexuality. Kinsey's report indicated that the number of homosexuals was far greater than had been imagined. His figures suggested that as many as 37 percent of all men had engaged in homosexual activity and that 10 percent were actively homosexual at the time. Prior to this report, it was believed, by some authorities, that homosexuals constituted only .1 percent of the population.<sup>33</sup>

The Kinsey report not only brought about a new understanding of the prevalence of homosexuality but reconceptualized the gay personality and

social role. Gay men, it was found, could and usually did look and act like heterosexual men. This discovery was a radical development, breaking with past models that saw homosexuals as effeminate. The study was as surprising a revelation to the gay community as it was to nongay Americans.<sup>34</sup> The minority status of transvestites within this group was finally established. The transvestite-homosexual link had been broken.

Though the classification of "invert" had faded from usage, now replaced by the "homosexual" of Kinsey's report, the particular pathology indicated by the former term found a new application under another name. In the 1960s, a condition known as "transsexualism" took the place of the older "gender inversion."<sup>35</sup> One of the leading medical authorities, Erwin K. Koranyi, defines the transsexual as one who is "anatomically a man by current available biological measurements, but with a distinct core identity of a woman, the male transsexual feels, grows up, acts and behaves as closely to the female as he can."<sup>36</sup> But lest we forget what is really being discussed here, Koranyi adds that "their identity is often described as 'females, locked in a male's body.'" He goes on to state that transsexuals like to spend their time engaging in female social behavior. Specific activities leading to diagnosis are suggested, such as "girltalk and shopping."<sup>37</sup>

These beliefs clearly have their source in the discourse on the "third sex" of Karl Ulrichs, while the definition of the "transsexual" remains identical to nineteenth-century writings on "gender inversion." What is different are the demographics. No longer confusing transvestites and homosexuals, as before, the medical community prefers to see transsexualism as an extremely rare psychic disturbance, by no means to be confused with homosexuality.<sup>38</sup>

The sex-change operation, or conversion therapy, is now an accepted cure for the transsexual condition, eliminating the psychological self-perception that one is a woman trapped in a man's body.<sup>39</sup> There is one flaw, though, in this medical narrative of mega-cure: that is, the term "transsexual" was not invented until the early 1960s and was not in medical usage until the late sixties and seventies. When Christine Jorgenson submitted to her sex-change operation in 1953, there had been twenty-eight prior surgeries performed between 1932 and 1952.<sup>40</sup> Conversion therapy predates the condition it is supposed to cure by almost three decades!

The implications of this surgical dating are, first, that the sex-change surgery was to have been a cure for “gender inversion,” a hi-tech surgical intervention that would harmonize the mind/body split of the invert; and, second, the concept of transsexualism was based on outdated theories discontinued in the academy in order to provide the new technology with a justification after the demise of “gender inversion” as a legitimate area of research. I do not think it beyond coincidence that Christine Jorgenson became a celebrated techno-body immediately following the release of the Kinsey report, with its attendant reconceptualization of homosexuality.

The pathological condition known as transsexualism did not achieve recognition as a distinct condition until the late sixties and early seventies. I suggest that this differentiation was connected with the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement. Beginning in the late sixties, militant gay activists mounted an intensive attack on medical authority, which forced the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its index of mental disorders in 1973. The loss of control over the issue of homosexuality—the medical community’s great bastion of nineteenth-century sexual pathology—was an attack against the cultural legitimacy of the profession, calling into question its privileged position regarding social morality. John D’Emilio has argued that the last century’s discourse on sexology formed the basis for a professional narrative on social and cultural legitimation, a major tool in the acquisition of political power.<sup>41</sup>

Rather than humbly relinquishing theories of “gender inversion,” the community recognized transsexualism as a symbolic pathology where antiquated beliefs in a biological source of morality could be played out. This realignment resulted in a curious, but perhaps not uncommon, phenomenon in American medicine—the cure predating the disease. The discrepancy did not escape attention. In *Hartin v. Director of Bureau of Records*, New York State (1973), the court described the sex-change operation as “an experimental form of psychotherapy in which mutilating surgery is conducted on a person with the intent of setting his mind at ease.”<sup>42</sup> Though the American Medical Association has successfully appealed this law that refused to grant female gender status to their sexually reassigned clients, the surgery is still perceived by many as having no therapeutic

value. The question I ask is, What exactly is being performed by the surgeons during the conversion therapy? When attention is directed away from the transsexual body and directed toward the physician, an interesting hypothesis emerges.

### Letting the Genie Out of the Bottle

According to descriptions by Harry Benjamin, Deborah Feinbloom, and Erwin Koranyi, conversion therapy is performed in phases over the course of several years. The procedure is initiated by ordering the patient to assume a female social role in full female attire. Next are the external alterations, including electrolysis, estrogen therapy to create a female silhouette, addition of breast prostheses, and cosmetic surgery to feminize facial features. This step is followed by surgery consisting of castration, amputation of the penis, and creation of the vagina. After surgery, the patient receives a new set of legal documents such as birth certificate, passport, and so on, which confer a female social status.

The sex-change surgery and conversion therapy follow the folk performance plot based on the mythic narrative identified by Bouissac, which is also operative in Jeannie’s striptease act. The familiar process of testing and heroic identification manifested in transsexual stage performance are again detected in the therapy. I outline the five stages of the folk plot as follows:

1. The patient arrives with the false identity of a biological male. He makes a claim to an alternate and true identity—a woman. This claim sets the scene, making it necessary to submit the patient to tests of proof.
2. The disqualifying test is given by the physician. The hero, still possessing the physical attributes of a male, is ordered to live, work, dress, and pass as a woman in daily life for a period of exactly one year. During this phase the character is inverted; it is a liminal moment when the performer is between representations, neither one character nor the other.
3. The main test, consisting of several subtests, is the removal or alteration of individual body parts. In sequence, the transsexual, through the agency of the physician, removes body hair, removes Adam’s apple, takes female hormones to begin breast development, hip enlargement, and shrinking of the penis, receives breast prostheses and cosmetic alterations of the face, removes testicles, and amputates penis.



4. The glorifying test, the finale, is the creation of the vagina, the proof positive of the hero's—or heroine's—sociosexual status.

5. The objective being met, the public offers acknowledgment in the form of a recognized legal status and new set of public documents.

Evidenced by its repetition, the main theme of this performance is inversion. There are the obvious examples of this theme—the theories of gender inversion that inform the surgery—as well as more interesting manifestations. Notable among these is Bouissac's use of the term theatrical “inversion” in his diagram. In this surgical example, Bouissac's character inversion occurs precisely at the moment the patient assumes a social role that is identical to nineteenth century descriptions of gender inverts. In addition, the creation of the vagina is described by surgeons as “genital inversion,” a literal and physical inverting of the male organs to create female ones.

The concept of genital inversion has its origins in a medical discourse that predates nineteenth-century theory by more than one thousand years. The fourth-century physiologist, Nemesius of Syria, put forth that “women have the same genitals as men, except theirs are inside the body and outside it.”<sup>43</sup> This belief dominated medical education from Galen to the seventeenth century, when anatomical textbooks could be found depicting the vagina as an inverted penis.<sup>44</sup>

The discovery of the theme of inversion in conversion therapy indicates that medical practice is not the linear evolutionary advance of scientific knowledge that is professed by physicians. To follow a line of thought initiated by Michel Foucault and Susan Sontag, medical science is, in any given procedure, a conglomeration of images, theories, beliefs, and technologies drawn from a variety of sources and assembled into what I call a “therapeutic score.”<sup>45</sup> There may be more than a suggestion that medical science is itself a narrative genre, a complex tradition of folk theatre whose performers are known as physicians.

At first, it would appear that the active figure in Jeannie's striptease dance is Jeannie herself. I maintain that her dance is the surgeon's performance. Both the transsexual identity and the physical body of the dancer are creations of medical science. The striptease could not have been presented without the surgeon's prior labor. His presence, even on

the stage of the drag show, is implicit at all times.

Transsexuals are classified as preoperative before surgery and postoperative afterward. This vocabulary defines the transsexual by her relationship to the surgeon's activities, establishing the centrality of the medical practitioner. Transsexuals also use the appellations of “Pre-op” and “Post-op” in self-description to clarify the relationship.

The active role played by the physician is often resented by the patients, who sometimes feel the practitioner's demands are unreasonable and that they are being forced, against their better judgment, into compliance with a therapeutic score that is not always rational. A TV broadcast of “The Sally Jesse Raphael Show” on 15 May 1989 presented a panel of preoperative transsexuals. One of them, speaking about the tests administered by the physician, stated that the demand that they live and pass for women in daily life for one year in order to qualify as “true” transsexuals was an allogical directive that put them in a vulnerable position and subject to possible public attack. Many of them must perform this task before physical alteration occurs, while still bearing recognizable characteristics of biological men and before they can achieve an ideal social gender image. Statements like these amount to textual criticism and locate the transsexuals as an outsider to the surgeon's performance.

The comments made by some transsexuals concerning the difficulties of the required year spent as a transvestite prior to surgery answer a major question regarding transsexual origins. If transsexualism is a medical model originating in outdated nineteenth-century discourse, then where do physicians find men who still identify themselves as gender inverts in a society that has renounced homosexuality as a pathology?

I assert that the transsexual is created during the first-year test in which he is ordered to become a transvestite in daily life. The surgeon demands that this task be fulfilled in order to confirm a transsexual identity. Yet, in reality, the process forces the patient into conformation with the pre-established medical model and its mythic narrative. The first-year therapy amounts to an educational program in which the subject is trained to look and act like a nineteenth-century gender invert. This being accomplished, the surgeon has created his transsexual—a homosexual golem—who can now be put through conversion therapy.



The mythic narrative used by Jeannie in her dance is a representation of the surgical procedure itself, while conversion therapy dictates the striptease aesthetic. As performed by Jeannie, the unveiling of her body is accomplished utilizing the same pattern of successive transformations that unfolds in the sex-change surgery. Beginning with the mistaken identity of the performer, followed by the process of identification, and then in the exposure of body parts that are viewed in a temporal progression identical to the surgeon's handiwork sequence—all this amounts to scientific display, a showcase for medical technology.

The duplication, by the striptease, of the surgical plot gives evidence that each is bound to the other through a folk narrative that has been engaged both to define and justify its object. In this regard, Jean-François Lyotard has discussed at length the reliance of scientific knowledge upon narrative. He argues that scientific knowledge can only claim its status by positing narrative as an Other against which to define itself, and that efforts toward legitimation and validation of scientific knowledge must necessarily invoke narrative in the process. Further, "knowledge is only worthy of that name to the extent that it reduplicates itself by citing its own statements in a second-level discourse that functions to legitimate itself."<sup>46</sup>

Jeannie has only one narrative to express, and that is the one that gave her birth and in which she experiences existence—the Victorian myth of the gender invert. The transsexual striptease, then, is an integral part of the surgery, functioning as a second-level discourse that legitimates the statements of scientific knowledge through citation on the stage. Her dance is a reduplication of the folk narrative which serves as the Logos of the transsexual body while providing the repetition of discourse needed to elevate its first utterance to the status of scientific knowledge.

Without a way to reduplicate itself, the ideology and legitimacy of the sex-change surgery would dissolve, and the striptease would vanish. Without cultural legitimacy, Jeannie would be trapped in a bottle, a no-exit techno-body stripped of meaning. Like her stage character's prototype—Salome—she celebrates the body while flirting with death; for as long as she dances, both the transsexual body and its creative narrative can feed off each other, prolonging life and knowledge.



FIGURE 2 Dale Curry &amp; Louis Rightmire c. 1954.

## TWO

## RECLAIMING THE DISCOURSE OF CAMP

There was a new presence in Chicago's 1991 mayoral election. In April of that year, the race for city hall hosted an unexpected surprise in the figure of Joan Jett Blakk, the first official Queer Nation candidate for municipal office in the Windy City.<sup>1</sup> [fig. 3] Running a drag queen for the office of mayor did not set well with the powers that be. Despite the flurry of activity and grass-roots support, Ms. Blakk's campaign (her slogan was "putting the Camp into campaign") was ignored by the gay press even though she attracted enough attention to elevate her to international Superqueen status. Assimilationist gays—many in editorial positions—were especially dismayed by Blakk's campaign strategy, one based on the practice of Camp. Taken for granted to be apolitical, Camp was deemed flippant and demeaning as the foundation for a campaign. Many thought that Blakk needed to be silenced, that her Camp strategy was not serious work, and that the Queer Nation candidate would do damage to the gains made by so-called legitimate caucuses. To delineate a basic division in gay politics along the predictable lines of essentialist (sexual orientation as innate) and constructionist (sex/gender as ideologically interpellated) philosophies does not explain the reactions, because the way that Blakk's campaign was evaluated by both of the opposing positions was through an interpretation of Camp. The role of Camp in the formation of these political factions superseded any allegiance to philosophical theories of identity in favor of more immediate issues of praxis.

The Queer Nation campaign raised some interesting questions. First, if Camp is apolitical why was it appearing in an overtly political and ac-



FIGURE 3 Joan Jett Blakk, "The Mayor of Queer Chicago," 1991, Chicago.

tivist situation? Second, if Camp, as generally defined, is merely an aestheticized sensibility characterized by triviality and lack of content, or simply an operation of taste, then why did it so clearly divide gay political opinion, and in such a strongly articulated way? Clearly there was a conflict. And this conflict was between two constructions of Camp. Joan's actions, identified as Camp by all parties, were being interpreted quite differently depending on whether one believed that Camp is political or apolitical.

Are we talking then about the possibility of multiple forms of Camp—perhaps distinct political and apolitical formations? The answer is no. In the case of Joan Jett Blakk, each party to the debate identified precisely the same actions as Camp. There was no deviation in formal recognition. Thus the differences of interpretation could be attributed only to variable analyses of content. But this leads to an even more provocative situation. That is, Camp has often been defined as a sensibility devoid of content. The mainstream gay politicians used that definition as the justification for silencing Blakk. In other words, what we heard was the familiar discreditation of Camp using the claim that it has no content. But this was a claim advanced through an analysis of the content that isn't supposed to exist.

When Joan decided her primary campaign strategy would be publicized and highly theatrical shopping sprees in the glamour fashion stores of Chicago's wealthy Gold Coast district, everyone recognized the actions as Camp. So the issue was not whether Camp was political, but whether it was appropriate or effective to politicize it. Since the 1980s, when AIDS ACT UP consciously and successfully brought Camp to bear on activist politics in its graphics (e.g., their "queer" parodies of mainstream advertisements), or when Queer Nation based its demonstrations on expressions of Camp executed through street theater (e.g., Joan Jett Blakk's campaign), there has been the need to reevaluate gay parody.<sup>2</sup>

The problem that Joan Jett Blakk and Queer Nation present for Camp theory is an important one. As Camp has come to be recognized as a form par excellence of the postmodern, it has been analyzed in terms of masquerade theory.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on types of gay and lesbian gender performances (almost exclusively concerned with drag and transvestism), critics have established a model of Camp linked to feminist theories of female masquerade and female mimicry grounded in the psychoanalytic trope



of “womanliness as masquerade.”<sup>4</sup> Though masquerade theories of Camp have been successful in redefining Camp as a politicized performance strategy over and against earlier models that conceptualized Camp as a humorous apolitical style meant to signify a gay “sensibility,”<sup>5</sup> I think it is necessary to ask whether a gay male praxis can be adequately or legitimately theorized from a grounding in theories of female masquerade.

In these models of Camp, the reliance upon female masquerade and mimicry theories focuses the critical project upon only one aspect of Camp—that of drag and transvestism. Because of this focus, scholars uncritically conflate Camp and drag. The flaw, as I see it, in recent masquerade theories of Camp is that by using psychoanalytic tropes as interpretive data they focus solely on the body of the drag queen, thus rendering a parodic praxis as a stable object of study. Having stabilized the object, study then shifts to analysis of the relationship between an ideal transvestite psyche and a totalizing, mythic drag practice (thereby foreclosing the process), and does not accommodate further analysis that includes specific means of production and reproduction, the relationship of drag practice to specific cultural contexts, or the ways in which Camp/drag is socially identified by an observer/reader. By ignoring social processes, masquerade theories of Camp tend to skew their analyses.

According to masquerade theories, Joan Jett Blakk would be considered Camp simply because she is a drag queen. But Joan herself explained it differently. Joan saw herself as Camp not because she was a drag queen, but because she was a drag queen running for public office. She explained that the political goal of Queer Nation was the production of gay social visibility, and that Camp was the process whereby this goal was pursued. What made her actions Camp was not that she wore a dress, but that she wore the dress *in public*. Her drag was not a parody of gender, but a parody of politicians accomplished by using drag as a defamiliarization device. More closely aligned to Brechtian theories of theater than to gender masquerade, Blakk saw drag as a mode of distancing with the ability to undermine the reification of social roles, not just social gender roles but those of race, class, and national identity as well.

If Camp, as Joan Jett Blakk and her Queer Nation compatriots state, is a tool for the production of gay social visibility then it is the realm of the public and social, not just the psychological as masquerade theories

would have it, that needs to be foregrounded in contemporary interpretations. My interpretation of Camp is based on the issue of social visibility, not on the issue of drag and gender masquerade *per se*.

### Processing the Notes

In 1964 Camp was propelled into public consciousness via Susan Sontag's now famous essay, “Notes On Camp.” With its homosexual connotations downplayed, sanitized, and made safe for public consumption, Sontag's version of Camp was extolled, emulated, and elaborated upon in a flurry of writing on the subject that lasted until the end of the decade. Though the erasure of homosexuality from the subject of Camp encouraged the public's embrace, it also had a mutational consequence. Earlier versions of Camp were part of an unmistakable homosexual discourse bound together by a shared referent (The “Homosexual”-as-Type). By removing, or at least minimizing, the connotations of homosexuality, Sontag killed off the binding referent of Camp—The Homosexual—and the discourse began to unravel as Camp became confused and conflated with rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque and travesty, and with cultural movements such as Pop.

In two essays written in the mid-60s, “Camp as Adjective” by William White and “Camper's Guide” by Alan Brien, the authors decried the body of writing on Camp that was emerging after the publication of Sontag's essay. Both warned that writers on Camp had failed to engage Sontag critically, having accepted her argument without question. Sontag claimed that her research began with the only written definition of Camp, that of Christopher Isherwood from his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*.<sup>6</sup> Drawing attention to Sontag's inadequate scholarship, Brien and White provided examples of earlier text references to Camp, all of which referred to homosexual expressivity. Both claimed that, had Sontag been aware of and studied the meanings of Camp before 1954, she would have written either a very different interpretation or most likely would not have been able to effect an explication at all.

The adoption, in the 60s, of the term “Camp” to describe so many diverse strategies produced the impression that there were many different kinds of Camp. This unquestioning attitude toward the existence of multiple forms of Camp has provided writers with access to a successful eva-



sive tactic. By conceptualizing Camp as simply a common nomination shared by unrelated cultural phenomena, writers have been spared the task of studying relationships among the total range of expressions that have been labeled as "Camp", or even of defining the object of study. Jonathan Dollimore, for example, writing on Camp in 1990, claims that "The definition of camp is as elusive as the sensibility itself, one reason being that there are different kinds of camp."<sup>7</sup> Dollimore then proceeds with a partial interpretation of Camp justified by the claim that there is simply a surplus of signification.<sup>8</sup> This has been a familiar tactic, one used to support vastly different, often contradictory, interpretations of Camp. While writers on Pop culture simply deny Camp as a homosexual discourse, finding such a construction contradictory to their arguments, gay writers seeking to reclaim the discourse of Camp through a restoration of its homosexual connotations fail to address issues of nongay and Pop culture appropriation.<sup>9</sup> These partial interpretations of Camp derive their authority from Sontag's essay. After all, according to Sontag, Camp is a sensibility and "A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about."<sup>10</sup> She adds that sensibility or taste

has no system and no proofs ... A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.<sup>11</sup>

As long as thinkers, whether gay or nongay, cling to this definition of Camp-as-sensibility, they are invulnerable to critique, forever protected by invoking Sontag's own critical exemption.

In "B/O," Gregory Bredbeck tried to dismantle Sontag's defense system by pointing out the evasive strategy employed by defining Camp as a sensibility: "a 'sensibility,' like that Regency term ... is something understood perfectly until articulated. Sontag's essay demonstrates this slipperiness through its recourse to the most basic theoretical strategy derived from Aristotle, division and classification."<sup>12</sup> The promulgation of various kinds of Camp, argues Bredbeck, effects Camp's transformation into "the nominalists' *flatus vocis*, an empty universal term. It functions as all parts of speech, all parts of a sentence: verb, noun, adjective, adverb; subject, object, modifier";<sup>13</sup> able to become whatever one needs it to be for purposes of argument while simultaneously claiming exemption from criticism.

Bredbeck suggests that "A more productive theorization might start by looking not at what the word means, but how it functions ... [as a] sign."<sup>14</sup>

According to Bredbeck, a study of the function of the Camp sign is required to enable a unifying theory, one that can account for what appears to be completely different phenomena operating under the term "Camp." Working with a theory of agency and material performance, I will attempt the sacrilegious: to produce a definition of Camp. Such a definition should be stable enough to be of benefit to the reader, yet flexible enough to account for the many actions and objects that have come to be described by the term. Following Bredbeck's cue (that it would be more productive to approach the project through a study of the workings of the Camp sign), I will suggest a definition of Camp based upon an analysis of performance and function.

#### Defining the Indefinable

I suggest that Camp is not simply a "style" or "sensibility" as is conventionally accepted. Rather, what emerges is a suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute gay identities. Central to this reappraisal is the understanding that: Camp is political; Camp is solely a gay discourse; and that Camp embodies a specifically gay cultural critique. Additionally, because Camp is defined as a solely gay discourse, all un-gay activities that have been previously accepted as "camp," such as Pop culture expressions, have been redefined as examples of the *appropriation* of gay praxis and no longer qualify as Camp as it is defined here.<sup>15</sup>

Because gender identity is instituted by repetitive acts, then gay performance is not expressive of the social identity but is, rather, the reverse—the identity is self-reflexively constituted by the performances themselves. Accordingly, Judith Butler has theorized that

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.<sup>16</sup>

Whether one subscribes to an essentialist or constructionist theory of gay identity, it comes down to the fact that, at some time, the actor must *do* something in order to produce the social visibility by which the identity is manifested. Postures, gestures, costume and dress, and speech acts become the elements that constitute both the identity and the identity performance. When we shift the study of gay identity into a performance paradigm, then every enactment of that identity depends, ultimately, upon performative gestures. Even the act of “coming out,” that is, the public proclamation of one’s self-nomination as gay, is constituted by an institutionalized speech act.

In the sense that gay identity is performative, it is by the deployment of specific signifying codes that social visibility is produced. Because the function of Camp, as I will argue, is the production of gay social visibility, then the relationship between Camp and gay identity can be posited. Thus I define Camp as *the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a gay identity, with enactment understood as the production of social visibility*. My definition of enactment here is not limited only to the display of comic effeminacy. The quality of humor that has been traditionally attributed to Camp is part of a larger heterocentrist strategy for defusing and discounting homosexuality by seeing it as merely too comic, too laughable, or “just a joke.”<sup>17</sup> When the comic interpretive lens is discarded, what remains—the performative patterns, the process of Camp—can be identified as a central element in all successful gay identity significations, both in effeminate and masculinized enactments. This expanded definition of Camp, one based on identity performance and not solely in some kind of unspecified cognitive identification of an ironic moment, may come as a bit of a jolt to many readers. It means that *all* gay identity performative expressions (serious or comic, butch or femme) are circulated within the signifying system that is Camp. In other words, when Camp is figured as the production of social visibility as opposed to production of the joke, then gay identity is inseparable and indistinguishable from its processual enactment, or Camp. The historical and material evidence demonstrates that this was clearly the case until Sontag’s 1964 essay, “Notes On Camp,” complicated the interpretations by detaching the signifying codes from their gay signified.

This definition of Camp can facilitate a rereading of Sontag and the subsequent appearance of Pop camp that emerged from her interpreta-

tion. By holding to a definition of Camp as the total body of gay signifying practices, then Sontag’s essay does not signal the availability of Camp as an un-gay practice, nor does it signal the birth of multiple forms of Camp. Because the process of Camp has for its purpose the production of gay social visibility, then performative gestures that do not produce a specifically gay visibility or social signification are unavoidably transformed and no longer qualify as Camp. Instead, what emerges from Sontag’s essay is the birth of the camp trace, or residual camp, a strategy of un-gay appropriation of gay praxis whose purpose, I suggest, is the enfusement of the un-gay with the gay aura, acting to stabilize the ontological challenge of Camp through a dominant gesture of reincorporation. Thus there are not different kinds of Camp. There is only one. And it is gay. It can be engaged directly to produce gay social visibility in the praxis of everyday life, or it can be manifested as the camp trace by the un-gay in order, as I will argue, to provide gay access to the apparatus of representation.

### Camp and Parody

Broadly conceptualized, Camp refers to strategies and tactics of gay parody. The definition of parody I use is that of Linda Hutcheon. Her postmodern redefinition of parody differs sharply from conventional usages that conflate parody with irony or satire. Rather, as elaborated by Hutcheon, parody is an intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions, “an extended repetition with critical difference” that “has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications.”<sup>18</sup> Hutcheon explains that “Parody’s overt turning to other art forms,” its derivative nature, and its dependence upon an already existing text in order to fulfill itself is the reason for its traditional denigration, a denigration articulated within a dominant discourse that finds value only in an “original.”<sup>19</sup> Hutcheon clears a space for a reconsideration of parody and, at the same time, provides the opportunity for a reassessment of Camp when Camp is conceptualized as parody. Hutcheon’s theory of parody is valuable for providing the terms needed to differentiate Camp from satire, irony, and travesty; and to terminate, finally, the conflation of Camp with kitsch and schlock, a confusion that entered the discourse as a result of the heterosexual/Pop colonization of Camp in the 60s. When subjected to Hutcheon’s postmodern redefi-

inition, Camp emerges as specifically gay parody possessing cultural and ideological analytic potential.

While Hutcheon's theory is capable of locating the address of a gay parodic praxis, it still needs to be queerly adjusted in order to plumb its potential for a Camp theory. By employing a performance-oriented methodology that privileges process, we can restore a knowledgeable *gay* social agent to the discourse of Camp parody. While Pop/dominant discursive formations of Camp maintain a social agent, that agent is implied, and thus taken for granted to be heterosexual. Camp theorizing has languished since the 60s when Sontag's appropriation banished the homosexual from the discourse, substituting instead a heterosexual bourgeois subject under the banner of Pop. It is this changeling that transformed Camp into the apolitical badge of the consumer whose status quo "sensitivity" is characterized by the depoliticizing Midas touch, and whose control over the apparatus of representation casts the cloak of invisibility over the homosexual at the moment he appropriates and utters the C-word. Yet, in order to reclaim Camp-as-critique, the critique silenced in the 60s, we cannot reverse the process of banishment by ejecting the un-gay from the discourse. That kind of power does not belong to homos. All we can do, perhaps, is to produce intermittent gay social visibility in our exile at the margins long enough to reveal a terminus at the end of a pathway of dominant power with the goal of foregrounding the radical politic of parodic intertextuality.

When parody is seen as process, not as form, then the relationship between texts becomes an indicator of the power relationships between social agents who wield those texts, one who possesses the "original," the other who possesses the parodic alternative. Anthony Giddens has argued that structures of signification can only be understood in relation to power and domination. In fact, he defines power and domination as the ability to produce codes of signification.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, value production is the prerogative of the dominant order, dominant precisely because it controls signification and which is represented by the privilege of nominating its own codes as the "original." The "original," then, is the signifier of dominant presence and, because dominance can be defined as such only by exercising control over signification, it is only through the "original" that we can know and touch that power. In that case, parody becomes the

process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchized advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification. Without the process of parody, the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order.<sup>21</sup> Camp, as specifically gay parody becomes, then, the only process by which the homosexual is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility, or, as Henry Louis Gates writes of parody, "to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically."<sup>22</sup>

For instance, though Joan Jett Blakk's campaign was ignored by the press, she conducted much of it by infiltrating official events.<sup>23</sup> On one particular occasion, Blakk crashed a Democratic Party fundraising dinner at which the honored guest was Geraldine Ferraro. Blakk assumed a position in the reception line next to Ferraro and became a participant in the hand-shaking ritual procession. Blakk had turned the event to her purposes by attaching herself to a major politician. Ferraro, trapped in her politician's persona, could do nothing to stop Blakk without risking the transformation of the fundraiser into a queer spectacle for the media. Needless to say, she resigned herself to the situation and put on the required display of cordiality toward Blakk.

This piggy-backing upon the dominant order's monopoly on the authority of signification explains why Camp appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the specter of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order. Gregg Blachford has reminded us that

the processes at work in the sub-culture are more complicated than might appear at first glance, for there is some evidence that the gay sub-culture negotiates an oppositional challenge to some aspects of the dominant order. The best way to understand this innovatory style is to examine one phenomenon of the gay sub-culture—camp—and to show how it transforms conformity into a challenge.<sup>24</sup>

My goal in the remainder of this essay is to explore that Camp challenge and to investigate precisely the relationship of Camp praxis to the dominant order as a means to analyze the relationship between gay and Pop versions of Camp.



### The Homosexual as Historical Waste

The homosexual's invisibility in representation and his dependence upon dominant structures of signification is, not so much a negative condition to be overcome but is, rather, the very strength to exploit. Michel Foucault, in pointing out that power is not monolithic, but multi-dimensional, argues that

there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power.<sup>25</sup>

Working from this premise, I want to advance a proposal of Camp-as-critique and, based on that proposition, to explore how this can be deployed to reread the literature on Camp and to explain the role of gay social visibility production in subversive transformations of dominant culture. Dick Hebdige has argued that dominant culture always appropriates (thus stabilizing) subcultural signifying practices thereby defusing their critique.<sup>26</sup> I suggest, to the contrary, that appropriated practices do not become frozen, but rather that acts of appropriation activate transformations of the dominant culture.

Susan Sontag (who popularized the notion of Camp as apolitical in "Notes") and her imitators are quick to define Camp as an attribute of objects. Even when Camp is applied as a description to the actions of persons, that person is described as *a* camp. This objectivist bias that reduces people to thinglike status is used to label Camp as extreme aestheticization and therefore apolitical. The arguments that defuse Camp, that deny it power as a cultural critique are based, then, on a denial of agency. Yet Sontag herself cannot entirely escape from the human activity that forms the basis of Camp. After giving the reader a list of objects that are considered "Camp," she reminds us that "the Camp eye has the power to transform experience."<sup>27</sup> Therefore Camp cannot be said to reside in objects, but is clearly a way of reading, of writing, and of doing that originates in the "Camp eye," the "eye" being nothing less than the agent of Camp. By this I do not mean to deny the existence of the object of Camp. Instead, by applying a performance paradigm to the study, the visible lines of a

ghost-like homosexual agent manifest themselves in a shift of focus away from the conventional fixation with the object surface to the process with which the object is handled. When a concept of performance is used to establish the existence of a knowledgeable social agent who signifies *through* Camp, then the conventional interpretation of Camp—as a tool used to facilitate the bourgeois appropriation characteristic of consumer culture—can be overturned.

Andrew Ross's influential essay, "Uses of Camp" (1989), is a noteworthy example of the dehumanizing results achieved by applying an objectivist methodology to the study of Camp.<sup>28</sup> Ross brilliantly described the techniques and motives of appropriation that underlie the formation of Pop camp. But when we cease to define gay Camp and Pop camp as two different kinds of Camp, seeing instead two halves of a single phenomenon, then Ross's essay is helpful in explaining the relationship of gay signifying practices to the dominant order. Because objectification overwhelms and obscures the processual signifying practices through which the homosexual articulates the discourse of Camp, he is erased in representation at the very moment that Camp is subjected to a dominant interpretation.

For example, Sontag champions opera as a "camp" genre throughout her essay.<sup>29</sup> According to interpretations by Michael Bronski and later by Wayne Koestenbaum (*The Queen's Throat*), attendance at the opera was/is a major mode in which gay men enact their identity, that is, and according to my reading, they transform the opera house into a Camp site by displacing a signification Self onto the diva. Bronski's and Koestenbaum's studies of opera describe the presence of what I call Camp in that it is not any particular opera that is gay, but rather the entire performance comes to signify back onto the gay patrons who transform the opera into a sign of homosexuality through the *act of attendance*. Bronski and Koestenbaum describe a dependent relationship between gay patrons and the stage performance as installed in what I would call a "signifying gestalt" (though these authors do not use that vocabulary). The signifying gestalt possesses a compound signifier comprised of a speaking subject *and* an object—they cannot be reduced without skewing the sign. Yet Sontag justifies opera as a camp genre solely on the basis of the visual signifiers of the stage performance. In other words, she has reduced the gestalt to its object. The interactional field generated by the relationship of gay patrons



(as utterance) to the body of the diva (as object) goes completely unrecognized, and opera becomes camp for Sontag in the details of its material production: operas specifically by Bellini or Strauss, in extravagant costume and scenic designs, within the plot structures, or in the acting styles. Because she cannot conceptualize a processual signifier, the gay audience is irrelevant to her analysis and thus rendered invisible. Where Camp is actually generated from an interaction (or relationship) between the gay subject and the object, Sontag sees only an object in which resides an innate property mysteriously called "camp." She does not, cannot, account for the gay subject of Camp because her own definition has rendered him invisible in the very act of its articulation. Pop camp emerges, then, as the product of a visually-biased dominant reading of gay praxis interpreted through the object residue that remains after the gay agent has been rendered invisible.

Andrew Ross, the inheritor of Sontag's theory, defines the camp effect as created "when the products ... of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, become available in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste."<sup>30</sup> Subjecting his definition to a theory of gay agency (entailing a focal shift away from the object) reveals a much different narrative. Remembering that Anthony Giddens has defined dominance as the power to control the construction of cultural meanings, then what Ross calls a "mode of production" is actually a mode of *discursive value* production, not *industrial object* production. Accordingly, what he calls "contemporary codes of taste," is nothing less than the dominant ideology that controls the establishment of signifying codes. When Camp is defined as a specifically gay discourse, it follows that what Ross calls the redefinition of meanings is the appropriation, through the application of unequal power, of gay discourse by the dominant order. This appropriation attempts to defuse the Camp critique by redefining the actions of the homosexual within the nonthreatening context of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality which, because the representational apparatus cannot render a gay subject, constitutes, simply, its erasure. Because the homosexual has been, as Cynthia Morrill describes, "hurled out of representation" at the impacting moment of appropriation, all that remains is the object of camp that now appears, illusorily, as a fossilized remnant. It is never sus-

pected that the act of appropriation itself has killed off the homosexual. In order to account for the absence, the conclusion is that the previous owner of the object must long since have passed away. Without a voice to claim possession of the object, the social knowledge of the homosexual can be ignored because he has been relocated to the mists of the bygone past. The perceived threat to dominant ideology by the homosexual's sexual *nonproductivity* is then silenced through benign renomination as a *discontinued* productivity. Located in the past, the homosexual has been assigned to the site of the grave, of death, of nonexistence, of non-presence, and no longer needs to be taken into account.

Ross's unreflecting use of interpretive codes, by regarding them as simple acts of perception, foregrounds the dominant ideological bases of the objectivist method by producing a misreading that masks and obscures the source of value production.<sup>31</sup> Relocating the homosexual to a past era by defining him as a discontinued mode of production is not the neutral act of identification it is made out to be. Rather, it is a dominant gesture of incorporation meant to muzzle an opposing voice by substituting the act of appropriation itself as the referent of camp. Because the act of appropriation includes the erasure of the gay male, dominant (read Pop) formations of camp translate this activity into a recognition that Camp *was once* a homosexual discourse, but now refers, more correctly, to the redistribution of objects plundered from the "dead" queen's estate. This technique has been called "the spatialization of time" by Johannes Fabian.<sup>32</sup> Fabian explained how unequal contemporaneous power relationships between Self and Other become translated into temporal distance by conflating and then substituting the oppositional terms of "now/then" for the directional binary concept of "here/there."<sup>33</sup> The "here" and "now" that signifies the praxis of everyday life is substituted for the "there" and "then" signification of the not really real. Situating the homosexual's signifying practices in the historical past creates the impression that the objects of camp no longer have owners and are up for grabs. This metaphorical manipulation forms the basis for and justification of heterosexual/Pop colonization of gay discourse and praxis. Thus instead of the harmless reassignment of values to junk store items that Pop theorists have convinced themselves is "camp," the actual maneuver conceals a contemporaneous struggle over meanings and value production by competing discourses.

Importantly, Ross does identify a knowledgeable social agent in his formation of camp. This un-gay agent has some remarkable traits. As he describes: "Camp ... involves a celebration, on the part of cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very process by which unexpected value can be located in some obscure or exorbitant object."<sup>34</sup> Because the homosexual is rendered invisible at the moment when values are reassigned in the act of appropriation, it looks as if the objects of Camp have suddenly materialized from nowhere (which is precisely where the homosexual lives), appearing miraculously as an act of discovery. As if receiving manna in the wilderness, the act of appropriation is perceived as mysterious intervention, a sign of manifest destiny that reinforces the moral authority of the dominant order. Having received the divine dispensation, the bourgeois subject of camp *celebrates* the invisibility of the homosexual, rejoices in the act of appropriation, and, in effect, derives *pleasure* from the erasure of the queen. Ross indicates that the pleasure derived from the act of appropriation stems from the altogether accidental and "unexpected" quality of the exchange, as if to claim a protected space of moral innocence in the silencing of the homosexual. Sontag, in her essay "On Style," gives the eerie summation: "The argument will never be complete until 'form' or 'style' can be thought of without the banished specter, without a feeling of loss."<sup>35</sup>

However, the celebratory lynching of the queen cannot take place without knowledge. One does not become a "cognoscente" through celebrating random and "unexpected value." On the contrary, the connoisseur is, by definition, an expert in *establishing* value, not *discovering* it. The cognoscente is an authority not to be questioned. His is the voice that nominates "the original," who manifests the presence of the dominant order, controls the apparatus of representation by speaking a signifying code into existence, and plays the role of ideological logos.<sup>36</sup> But then you cannot lynch the "dead," and the appropriation is, of course, benign. Thus the act of gay erasure becomes a valorized salvage effort on the part of the cognoscente appropriator whom Ross then describes as a "camp liberator," who rediscovers "history's waste [read 'the homosexual']," a kind of nineteenth-century archaeologist who, by "liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect [read 'by appropriating gay signifying practices']" enfuses himself with "glamor [read 'gay aura']."<sup>37</sup>

The whole operation becomes a bizarre love affair with the dead queen who, safely contained within the coffin of a distancing metaphorical historicization, can now be loved and cherished as the source of dominant cultural renewal. The act of appropriation is, after all, a source of pleasure, and Ross describes the activity as a "necrophilic economy that underpins the camp sensibility."<sup>38</sup>

But curiously, Ross goes on to say that

If the pleasure generated by [camp's] bad taste presents a challenge to the mechanisms of control and containment that operate in the name of good taste, it is often to be enjoyed *only* at the expense of others, and this is largely because camp's excess of pleasure has very little, finally, to do with the (un)controlled hedonism of the consumer; it is the result of the (hard) *work* of a producer of taste, and "taste" is only possible through exclusion *and* depreciation.<sup>39</sup>

This is a confusing statement. On the one hand, he locates the pleasure of Camp in an act of challenge to the dominant order yet, on the other, this challenge is the result of the hard labor on the part of the producer of taste, the cognoscente, who operates through exclusion. But it is the cognoscente who represents, reinforces, and speaks from the site of power. The production of taste is not a challenge to the dominant order, it *is* the dominant order. Ross's glamorous producer of taste has somehow become both challenger and challenged. Without gay visibility, Ross's bourgeois "camp liberator" has assumed not only the role of dominance, but has also assumed the gay subject position which, through the act of appropriation, appears now as vacant property that can be restored to circulation within the economy of properly authorized signification. Ross is correct. This is hard work. And it *does* operate by exclusion. The bourgeois camp cognoscente "liberates" the homosexual's oppositional signifying practices from their gay identity and substitutes himself as signified. But because the gay man constitutes himself processually, the un-gay is now unwittingly performing the homo-queer. The final effect is the reproduction of the homosexual's aura by the un-gay camp liberator who has been transformed into a drag queen with no other choice but to lipsynch the discourse of the Other. While Ross's camp cognoscente has successfully appropriated the signifying surface, the lyrics were still written by the queen who has now entered representation by producing her visibility on

the back of the un-gay bourgeois subject. It may be the bourgeois subject who sings the aria but, like the terrifying phantom of the opera, it is the queen who taught her how, and who still plays the "organ" accompaniment behind the wall of enforced invisibility in the sewer system of "history's waste."

By providing a detailed description of the actions and motives of the un-gay (Pop) appropriator, Ross has located a position to which the gay agent can read himself back into the discourse. This can be achieved by identifying the social knowledge displayed by Camp agency. As Ross describes: "Pop experience already contains the knowledge that it will soon be outdated, spent, obsolescent, or out of fashion."<sup>40</sup> In other words, the power of Camp lies in its ability to be conscious of its future as an appropriated commodity. Possession of social knowledge is not dependent on access to the apparatus of representation. It is the arrogance of the dominant derived from ownership of the apparatus of representation that creates a belief in a monologic construction of social knowledge. When we recognize that the homosexual is not dead, only rendered invisible by a historicizing metaphor, then we can grant the gay agent the same knowledge as the un-gay appropriator. Operating from under the cloak of invisibility, the homosexual knows his signifying practices will be, *must* be appropriated. As a product of gay agency, it is the process of Camp that selects and chooses which aspects of itself will be subsumed into dominant culture. Gay knowledge can then be introduced and incorporated into the dominant ideology because the blind spot of bourgeois culture is predictable: it *always* appropriates. And it appropriates whatever the agent of Camp chooses to place in its path. The invisible gay agent is at a certain advantage, because whatever is offered to the un-gay will be unquestioningly received as their own invention, taken as a confirmative sign of their right to possess. Like the little cakes that miraculously appeared to Alice in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland epic, it never occurs to the appropriator to ask who was it that wrote the little tag that says, "Eat Me." And like Alice, the appropriator's body uncontrollably changes its shape at the whim of those unseen hands that place irresistible morsels of discovery before it. By inverting the process of appropriation, Camp can be read as a critique of ideology through a parody that is always already appropriated.

### Conclusion

In her 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp," Sontag produced the first Pop version of camp, the first nongay camp. Her reformulation has been replicated in most of the literature since that date. And while her Pop version of camp has been popular in academic circles, the erasure of the homosexual subject from Camp in 1964 has gone largely uncritiqued. The conventional interpretation reads the erasure as a marginal discourse somehow made available to dominant culture as the result of a fragmentation of gay praxis. My interpretation reverses that reading and holds that the fragmentation was an erasure of the subject resulting from a dominant appropriation. For what happened to Camp in the 60s could only be explained as a series of appropriations of the gay subject position. As a result, institutional Camp, in order to mask the appropriation, displays singular characteristics not shared with any other academic discourse, and is used to validate practices of scholarship that would not be acceptable in any other kinds of theoretical and critical projects. This may also account for the remarkable agreement on methodological justifications by contemporary scholars who use this model of Camp for widely divergent, often contradictory, theoretical and political agendas. Camp scholarship, regardless of its specific arguments, tends to agree on the following points:

- 1) Camp was originally a gay discourse hut can, in the present, be applied to any cultural expression that a writer, from any discipline, cares to attach it to. Thus camp is used as an analytical model in such various fields as art history, carnival theory, feminist theory, film and television studies, theater studies, literary theory, Marxist theory, pop culture studies, and even psychoanalytic. Sontag's erasure of the homosexual vacated the subject position so that it became available for general occupation.
- 2) Camp cannot and should not be defined. In fact, attempts to construct a definition are considered incorrect. This maintains the general availability of the gay subject position for dominant appropriation so that the nomination of any cultural phenomenon to camp status is justified solely by the act of nomination itself.
- 3) Because Camp is used for such widely divergent projects and cannot be defined there is no need to subject it to historical analysis because its definition and usage is continually transforming. This is a rare phenom-



enon in academia—an object of study whose theorists claim is exempt from historical analysis. The erasure of the homosexual from Camp discourse in 1964 must not be investigated, thus the erasure is itself erased.

My goal has been to address these points and suggest, to the contrary, that Camp was and still is a solely gay discourse and that it is only as a gay cultural expression that Camp can be understood; Camp has not greatly changed in its definition and use since its inception and is, rather, a remarkably uniform and identifiable phenomenon; and that it is only through historical analysis that we can arrive at an understanding of contemporary Camp.

I have defined Camp as the total body of performative practices used to enact gay identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility. Gay identity is performative, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts marked by the deployment of specific signifying codes, the sum of which I am calling Camp. Because Camp has for its goal the production of gay social visibility, then all gay identity performative expressions are circulated within the signifying system that is Camp, i.e. the social signification of gayness is inseparable and indistinguishable from its processual enactment, Camp.

## THREE

### THE SIGNIFYING INVERT: CAMP AND THE PERFORMANCE OF 19TH-C. SEXOLOGY

“C”amp” was a new word when it first appeared in J. Redding Ware’s 1909 dictionary of Victorian slang, *Passing English of the Victorian Era*. Ware’s book, considered extremely competent for its day, was written both as a companion for and extension of the foremost English slang dictionary of the nineteenth century, John S. Farmer’s *Slang and Its Analogues*, published between 1890 and 1904. Ware was concerned with documenting the jargon of his decade. New slang words came and went so fast (he called it “passing English” to describe its fleeting nature) that many had escaped even Farmer’s comprehensive masterwork and were lost forever. Ware’s project was to produce a contemporary supplement to *Slang and Its Analogues*, documenting only new slang that had emerged since its publication.<sup>1</sup> Because the term “Camp” is not found in Farmer’s dictionary, a possible conclusion is that it was a new word entering the English language only during the first decade of this century.

Ware defined Camp as “Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character.”<sup>2</sup> Those who have previously researched the topic of Camp have tended to replicate an uncritical, simplistic, and now standard interpretation of Ware’s definition in concluding that the word “Camp” has a French etymology.<sup>3</sup> Against this, I will propose an alternative reading of Ware’s definition informed by Thomas A. King’s historical study of the politics of Camp gestures in his essay “Performing ‘Akimbo.’” King persuasively argued that bourgeois identification and interpretation of effem-



inate gestures, especially in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was based upon a logic recognizable for its unique contradictions: first, the gesture must be judged as excessive according to the standards of acceptable and conventional bourgeois male deportment; and second, that the gestural excess signifies a lack of self (and thus lack of membership in the social body).

Accordingly, I read Ware's definition not as suggesting that the word "Camp" is from the French, but that actual and specific gestures have been imported from France. If, as King proposes, specific gestures identified simultaneously by exterior excess (Ware's "exaggerated emphasis") and interior lack (Ware's "exceptional want of character") are constitutive markers of homosexual identity, then the first text reference to Camp in 1909 already encodes a homosexual subject. This coding is noticeable both by its definition based on excess/lack and by its attribution of these gestures to the French: the discourse of English Francophobia included the assumption that homosexuality was a French import.<sup>4</sup>

Ware's definition is noteworthy for its identification of Camp as a system of homosexual gestural production. From 1964 (with the publication of Susan Sontag's seminal essay "Notes on Camp") to the present, Camp has been defined variously as a gay "sensibility," as an operation of taste, as an aesthetic phenomenon implicated in Pop Art, as a mysterious quality inherent in objects, or simply conflated with such strategic operations as irony, satire, travesty, burlesque, parody, or even with kitsch and schlock. This diffusion of meaning is so confusing that many writers throw up their hands in frustration, preferring to define Camp as the term that cannot be defined.<sup>5</sup> Yet the first text reference to Camp, and especially important because it is a definition of an apparently new word, possesses none of the vague speculations that characterize Camp theorizing after 1964.

My goal in this essay is to explore this first definition. Why does the word Camp appear when it does? How did single gestures such as the hand on the hip and the limp wrist gather themselves together into the performance of a recognizable and reproducible homotext that even the general public could read? And why is this system of gestural (re)production credited to a homosexual subject by whom it is deployed expressively? It is important to remember here that a specifically homosexual social identity as well as a homosexual subjectivity came into being only

during the last third of the nineteenth century. Camp emerges historically, then, along with the figuration of this homosexual subject. But what is the relationship between them? In order to answer these questions I need to explore the nineteenth-century sexological narrative of "The Homosexual" and to suggest just how this narrative was engaged to accomplish the inscription of certain subjects as homosexual. This narrative, referred to as "the medical model of homosexuality," has been the subject of much research. And while much has been written about the role of the medical model in the formation of homosexual social identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I will posit a further relationship between the medical model, homosexual identity formation, and Camp.

### The Age of Invention

One of the scientific/official discourses of sexuality which proliferated throughout Europe and America, especially between 1870 and 1900, the "medical model of homosexuality" is the name given to the corpus of Victorian scientific, medical, and sexological tracts that constructed same-sex sexual activity and its performers as research objects.<sup>6</sup> This model is one of the most glaring and fascinating historical discontinuities of the last century. Prior to the medicalization of homosexuality, same-sex sexual acts were judged by a religious discourse. The concept of the "homosexual" did not exist, and deviant sexual acts were evaluated on a case by case basis focusing on contextualized specific incidents. Such acts were seen "as a form of sinful behavior in which anyone might engage."<sup>7</sup> But beginning in the 1880s, as the medical and scientific community assumed primacy in issues of social morality, "the 'medical model of homosexuality' replaced the religious one ... [and] characteriz[ed] homosexuality as the condition of certain identifiable individuals."<sup>8</sup> In fact, the word "homosexual" was invented only in 1869 by the Hungarian physician Karoly Maria Benkert as part of the developing vocabulary in the newly emerging field of sexology.<sup>9</sup>

This discontinuity, that is, the transformation of the concept of sodomy (same-sex sexual activity as constituted by sinful, specific acts and articulated within a religious discourse) into that of homosexuality (same-sex sexual activity conceptualized as the expressive, innate characteristic of a specific type of person — "The Homosexual" — and articu-

lated within a medico-scientific discourse), was first identified by Foucault in his study of power and sexuality, *The History of Sexuality*. In a well-mined passage from *The History of Sexuality*, worth quoting in its entirety, Foucault articulated the discontinuity:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.<sup>10</sup>

The homosexual "type" emerged from the sexological literature, the product of a theoretical project to posit the existence of and to identify the social actor whose body was both the source of and the stage for the performance of homosexual sex acts. By constructing same-sex sexual acts as characteristic/symptomatic of a pathological "type," the medical model "presumed a ... deviance based on sexual inclination rather than specific acts of misconduct."<sup>11</sup> Predisposition toward engagement was enough to warrant medical classification. In other words, homosexual status was determined by the object of one's sexual desire, not the performance of sexual acts.

Though the medical model had meant to defuse the social threat of taboo sex by providing a means to identify the potential offender, instead it invoked the very specter it had meant to contain—it constructed The Homosexual by initiating a new concept of homosexual status divorced from the performance of homosexual acts.<sup>12</sup> For even though The Homosexual-as-type successfully played its role as a properly frightening boogey man for the bourgeoisie, the figuration had a reverse effect upon sodomites: they had been given a name and social status which they could choose to assume. Because the appearance of homosexual social identity occurred in conjunction with the advent of the medical model, "The majority of researchers believe that self-identified gay people are strictly a phenomenon of the last 75-100 years," the result of a reverse praxical response to the sexological figuration of the homosexual type on the part of sodomites.<sup>13</sup>

There is much detailed research explaining why same-sex sexual acts were transposed from sodomy to homosexuality, how this accounts for the Homosexual-as-type emergent in the sexological literature, and what the political context was for the medico-scientific community's appropriation from the church of social jurisdiction over matters of morality that made the medical model viable in the late nineteenth century. The consensus is that the medical model of homosexuality emerged when it did as a byproduct of the commodification of sex under monopoly capitalism, part of sweeping bourgeois reforms that condemned all forms of sexual activity outside of the reproductive function exercised within the institution of marriage. It is not my goal here to replicate past research by offering again the arguments for why the medical model appeared, and would refer the interested reader to the literature.<sup>14</sup> Instead, I want to launch a more specific exploration of medical model texts in order to determine the criteria used to make social identifications of the newly-figured homosexual type in the sexological literature of the day.

#### A Pathology of Fashion

George Chauncey has written that the term "homosexual" was first applied to "certain *identifiable* individuals" [emphasis mine]. He described the medical model as a "reverse discourse," a dominant response by investigators who "were trying to describe, classify, and explain a preexisting

sexual underground whose outline they only vaguely perceived."<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman have explained that the homosexual type emerged in the medical writings because "Americans had been alerted to the phenomenon of homosexuality [because] ... the first signs of a visible, urban homosexual subculture" were appearing.<sup>16</sup> And in the cited passage from the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault thought that sexologists were able to make their identifications because homosexuality was "written on [the] face and body."

Implicit in the literature is the understanding that the medical model arose as a scientific response to visible, material phenomena. That being the case, then what features of a nineteenth-century homosexual subculture made it noticeable to the medical community? The sexual act itself was practiced behind closed doors, yet all the writers quoted share the belief that the process of identification was based on visual data. What exactly were sexologists and others seeing? What kinds of performance, if not explicitly sexual, were being used as the criteria for classification? The clear separation of male and female socializing meant that men, when not at home, spent their time in the company of other men. Two men together would not have signified homosexuality. In fact, Peter Gay believes that gay men were safe from discovery in Victorian culture precisely because same-sex socializing and companionship were the norm.<sup>17</sup> Today we know that the majority of gay men are unrecognizable from their non-gay counterparts. It would have been harder to identify a homosexual in the 1890s than in the 1990s. I will argue that, because of their extreme visibility and because homosexuality was automatically associated with them, the basis of the new typification was derived from observations of transvestites.

Cross-dressers were the public marker signaling the presence of homosexuality.<sup>18</sup> In the nineteenth century, cross-dressing often became the *only* distinguishing feature by which to identify homosexuals. Because of this dependence upon sartorial signifiers, most believed that transvestites constituted the whole social subgroup. This association was firmly fixed as far back as the mid-eighteenth century where "The link between ... homosexuality, effeminacy in men and cross-dressing ... suggests that the distinction between homosexuality and transvestism had not been clearly articulated."<sup>19</sup> Mary McIntosh, in her pioneering study of homosexual

identity, "The Homosexual Role," notes that

the earliest descriptions of homosexuals do not coincide exactly with the modern conception. There is much more stress on effeminacy and in particular on transvestism, to such an extent that there seems to be no distinction at first between transvestism and homosexuality.<sup>20</sup>

The medical model classification of the homosexual type was based, it seems, on observations of a visible minority of the gay subculture whom the investigators took to be the total of the group under study. This equation of homosexuality with gender inversion, or what amounted to a belief that social role playing and private sexual activity were one and the same, was so ingrained that when Havelock Ellis suggested a radical conceptual separation of transvestism from homosexuality in 1910, he was treated as a laughingstock. Twenty-five years after Ellis had conceptualized a homosexuality independent of cross-dressing, reputable scientific writers such as Wilhelm Stekel (1934) challenged him, stating that he was confusing the issues and was absolutely erroneous in even attempting to separate the two.<sup>21</sup> The concept of gender inversion was not displaced until the 1950s and 60s in the scientific community and not until after Stonewall (1969) in the general population.

That the equation of transvestism with homosexuality was the standard interpretation (and assuredly the dominant ideological model) can be proven by noting "that, during the first world war, men came before recruitment boards dressed as women" to prove homosexual status in order to evade active duty.<sup>22</sup> Wearing a dress was the only and required test for determining homosexual status in the eyes of the armed services command.

Transvestism, to early observers of gay life in America, was the primary signifier of homosexual practice, if not conflated with homosexuality itself. In Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History*, a section of which is comprised of reprinted nineteenth-century sexological texts, most of the writers transcode cross-dressing as homosexuality because it constituted the central tenet in their beliefs about the nature of homosexuals. Of interest among these is Charles W. Gardener's 1892 description of a homosexual club in New York where:

Each room contained a table and couple of chairs, for use of cus-



tomers of the vile den. In each room sat a youth, whose face was painted, eyebrows blackened, and whose airs were those of a young girl. Each person talked in a high falsetto voice and called the others by women's names.<sup>23</sup>

This description of signifying practices acted simultaneously as a description of homosexuality for the reader.

Most importantly, within the gay population itself the association of homosexuality and transvestism was carried over from the medical model. Quentin Crisp, in his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant*, recalls that cross-dressing was a badge of identification. He and his friends in drag in the 1920s were homosexual, but the men they had sex with were not. The male partners who did not wear women's clothes or adopt effeminate gestures were considered "real men."<sup>24</sup> He also remembers how the police would arrest them on morals or pandering charges simply for being effeminate and visible on the street.<sup>25</sup> Yet, any "real man" they were with would be ignored by the officers. Like the official medical model texts, public belief and behavior, both within and without the homosexual subculture, demonstrated the same equation of homosexuality with particular modes of performance.

This logic is best illustrated in the records and courtroom transcripts of the 1919 Newport Scandal in Rhode Island. The scandal involved the use of nongay enlisted naval personnel in an entrapment scheme to expose both homosexual servicemen and homosexuals in the civilian population surrounding the Newport navy base. The effeminate and cross-dressing group of gay men who were exposed defined themselves as homosexual. Their partners, if not exhibiting such behavior, were classified as heterosexual by both the gay and nongay publics. At the turn-of-the-century a man considered heterosexual could engage in same-sex sexual acts without taking on a homosexual label or identity: "Men with a strong sense of their ... masculine gender role could easily enter same-sex sexual relations without challenging their heterosexual sense of self."<sup>26</sup> In fact, the naval base administration ordered nongay enlisted men to have sex with homosexuals as part of the entrapment. Neither the nongay enlisted men nor their officers saw heterosexual status challenged by engaging in acts of homosexual oral and anal sex.

During the trial, when asked how he was able to identify a homosex-

ual, a heterosexual investigator explained that "it was common knowledge that if a man was walking along the street in an effeminate manner ... you could form a pretty good opinion of what kind of man he was ... a 'fairy.'"<sup>27</sup> His testimony was then corroborated by a homosexual who, when asked by the court how to make an identification, stated that a homosexual "acted sort of peculiar; walking around with his hands on his hips ... [H]is manner was not masculine.... The expression with the eyes and the gestures."<sup>28</sup> George Chauncey, in his analysis of the transcripts, concluded that the Newport Scandal clarified that

The determining criterion in labelling a man as "straight" or "queer" was not the extent of his homosexual activity, but the gender role he assumed. The only other men who sharply differentiated themselves from other men, labelling themselves as "queer" were those who assumed the sexual and cultural roles ascribed to women; they might have been termed "inverts" in the early [sexological] literature, because they not only expressed homosexual desire but "inverted" (or reversed) their gender role.<sup>29</sup>

The scientific literature which was responsible for isolating and then pathologizing same-sex sexual activity did so, not on the basis of a person's private sexual expressions, but by his public behavior, social conduct, and costume. It was a pathology of fashion and gesture. Even today, as Deborah Heller Feinbloom points out, "the imputation of deviance to the transvestite is made not only on the basis of what he does but also how he looks."<sup>30</sup>

### Charting the Surfaces

Transvestism was transposed as homosexuality because the medical model was based on the theory of "gender inversion" (which was also the name of the specific disease that transvestite/homosexuals suffered from). The term "gender inversion" developed from the work of Karl Ulrichs, a homosexual rights activist in Germany. His 1867 work *Memnon* introduced the concept of homosexuality as a "third sex."<sup>31</sup> He saw the homosexual (whom he called an "urning") as a person in whom the soul of a woman was trapped in the body of a man. Importantly, Ulrichs claimed that this was a congenital condition, not acquired vice, over which its sufferers had no control. Only two years later, based upon Ulrichs's work,

Carl von Westphal wrote the first official paper describing the pathology of the “urning.” In a paraphrase of Ulrichs, he described it as “a form of congenital psychopathology, not acquired vice.”<sup>32</sup> Westphal’s theory was based on only a single case study - a transvestite who had sought him out for therapy—which he interpreted by using Ulrichs’s writings.<sup>33</sup> Out of this initial meeting of transvestism and science, Westphal coined the phrase “contrary sexual feeling” to describe what he thought he was seeing.

By removing homosexuality from the religious discourse of sin and redefining it as an organic condition, Ulrichs’s innovative concept (by way of Westphal) won instant popularity in the medico-scientific community as the subject of same-sex sexual activity received disciplinary reassignment. Sexologists quickly accepted the new concept and, within two decades after Westphal’s study was released, “gender inversion” became the designate for the transvestite/homosexual condition.<sup>34</sup>

The medico-scientific community figured the invert as a type of psychical hermaphrodite whose condition was manifested in a mind/body split. The body was male, but the mind was female. This rift between surface and content resulted in men becoming women “in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings, and behaviour.”<sup>35</sup> Because the theory of gender inversion was based on analyzing the individual invert’s relationship between interiority and its exterior signification (the tension between surface and content), the signifying codes of the performance of inversion - gesture, posture, speech, and costume—were brought under clinical observation and used as diagnostic data. Same-sex sexual activity was automatically implied in diagnosis and was only a secondary symptom. The primary symptom was cross-gender signifying—gesture, posture, speech, costume—and it was an analysis of the degree to which the subject incorporated cross-gender signifying into his everyday life performance that determined the final diagnosis.

By the 1890s, the theory of gender inversion had reached a peak development in the English-speaking world with the publication of the 1892 version of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Ed Cohen has pointed out that Krafft-Ebing’s ideas represented both the latest and the most widespread and popular version of gender inversion theory.<sup>36</sup> In order to explain the medical model’s dependence upon transvestism, I will outline some of the key points in Krafft-Ebing’s theory.

Krafft-Ebing quite clearly articulated the distinction between homosexual status and homosexual sex. As he strongly admonished his readers in 1892:

The determining factor here is the demonstration of perverse feeling for the same sex; not the proof of sexual acts with the same sex. These two phenomena must not be confounded with each other; perversity must not be taken for perversion.<sup>37</sup>

Later he states that “Homosexual acts ... are no proof of antipathic sexuality ... They do not necessarily lead to inverted sexuality, only then when the individual is predisposed.”<sup>38</sup> A heterosexual man, even if engaging in same-sex sexual acts, would not be diagnosed as an invert because the acts “are not coupled with psychical feelings in the sense of homosexual acts.”<sup>39</sup>

Krafft-Ebing distinguished between four types, or degrees, of same-sex sexual activity and homosexuality. The first degree was reserved for heterosexual men who engaged in homosexual sex acts but without taking on the homosexual label. The next three degrees were meant to describe “The Homosexual” proper:<sup>40</sup>

1.) The first degree was reserved for those men who looked normal and behaved according to the rules of conventional and accepted masculine deportment. They took the “active” (insertor’s) role in homosexual sex acts. Krafft-Ebing did not consider these men to be homosexual. Because concepts of homosexuality were mediated by gender inversion theory, a homosexual could only be one who had the mind of a woman as demonstrated by the presence of cross-gender signifying. If a man behaved normally there was no inversion, hence no homosexual status. The masculine man who performed the “active” role in same-sex sex acts was, according to Krafft-Ebing, not an example of perversion, but of perversity. His deeds were not the result of a congenital condition and were therefore disqualified from the medical model. They were singular criminal or sinful incidents and, as such, remained within the earlier religious discourse of sodomy. This explains why it was only effeminate men who were thought of as homosexuals even though their masculine partners (e.g. Quentin Crisp’s “real men”) could engage in homosex without taking on homosexual status.

2.) Krafft-Ebing’s second degree was reserved for men who looked and acted normal, but took the “passive” (insertee’s) role in homosexual sex



acts. The “passive” role in sex, believed to be the natural role of woman, was therefore indicative of an inverted psyche.

3.) The third degree consisted of those men who deployed only the signifying codes of gesture, posture, and speech. These were the men who acted effeminately, but dressed like men.

4.) Homosexuality in the fourth degree was determined by the presence of transvestism and gender masquerade.

Proper diagnosis was of great concern to Krafft-Ebing. Homosexual sex acts were not acceptable proof of homosexual status because, unless you knew for certain whether the patient assumed the “active” or “passive” role, there was no way to determine the presence of a psychic inversion. He cautioned against using patient narratives, claiming that they were too unreliable and subject to distortion. Instead, he suggested that the diagnosis be executed in a scientific and anthropological fashion, that is, by an analysis of synthetic, visually-based data collected solely through observation.<sup>41</sup>

The fourth degree (cross-dressing) diagnosis was the easiest to make because “the physical and psychical characteristics ... are so plentiful that a mistake cannot occur. They are simply men in women’s garb.”<sup>42</sup> The third degree (limited use of cross-gender signifying codes) diagnosis involved subjective evaluations and was therefore more difficult. It involved analysis of a subject’s gestures, postures, speech, and proxemic patterns. Diagnosis of the second degree (assuming the “passive” sodomitical position) was even more difficult due to the complete absence of visual signifiers. A successful second degree diagnosis needed direct evidence and the details of specific sexual practice. Krafft-Ebing’s diagnoses, then, were based on establishing a homosexuality that advanced by degrees according to the number of extrasexual signifying codes that were deployed in performance.

Because it was only the presence of cross-gender signifying codes that could establish the presence of a psychic inversion, only effeminate and cross-dressing men could qualify as homosexuals. Thus a phenomenon like transvestism could be transposed as homosexuality, and explains why Quentin Crisp and his friends were arrested for illegal acts simply by making themselves socially visible. To cross-dress or even to behave effeminately was, in the public’s eye, not a metaphor for homosexuality, but was

understood as homosexuality itself. With this understanding of the role of performance in establishing homosexual labels, it is time to explore more precisely the diagnostic apparatus and its relationship to Camp.

### Wilde as Topos

There is a growing consensus among scholars that the year 1895 is the date at which the figuration of the homosexual type sprang from the pages of the sexological literature and emerged into the praxis of everyday life fuelled by the Oscar Wilde sex scandal trials. The trials appear to be the pivotal, historical moment that provided the major impetus for the recognition of a homosexual social identity by the nongay public and the adoption of that identity by homosexuals themselves. According to Jeffrey Weeks, “The Wilde trials were not only the most dramatic, but also the most significant events, for they created a public image for the homosexual.”<sup>43</sup> The trials established a physical site for a labeling process during which Wilde was constructed as the first public embodiment of what, until then, had appeared only in the pages of case histories.

Weeks recognized that Wilde was brought to trial within a context created by the dependence of the legal system upon the model of the Homosexual-as-type which had been established and propagandized in the literature of sexology since the middle of the century.<sup>44</sup> The power of the trials over definition of homosexual social identity came precisely from this fusion of dominant discourses within an institutional setting which, as Havelock Ellis noted shortly afterwards, provided the definiteness needed to transform the homosexual type from a theoretical construct into a system of physical inscription.<sup>45</sup> The court, by reciting the sexological narrative of the homosexual type within its space of institution and dominance, activated a cultural semiosis in the process of making the inscription on Wilde’s body. “As a consequence,” writes Alan Sinfield,

the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy ... which Wilde was perceived as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image. The parts were there already ... But, at this point, a distinctive possibility cohered, far more clearly, and for far more people, than hitherto.<sup>46</sup>

Quite literally, the trials constructed Wilde as the “first” homosexual [see Appendix figs. 1 and 2].



But naming Wilde as the first Homosexual is not to say that before him there were no other individuals who had somehow become conscious of their difference, conscious of the interface between their behavior and the homosexual type represented in the literature. Why did his trials, then, create such a rupture in social consciousness? The answer can be stated in one word: publicity.<sup>47</sup>

Besides the interplay of sexology and jurisprudence within a definite interactional setting, the trials of Oscar Wilde were the first to be staged



FIGURE 4 Publicity image of the Wilde trials.

as a public spectacle. The recoding and transfiguration of the sodomite into the homosexual accomplished in the trials accompanied a similar transfiguration of the nature of the legal process itself. Both the trials and the sign of homosexual identity took on the nature of an educational exercise, a public moral lesson that differed from the canonical treatment of the sodomite. Foucault sees the role of publicity as making

The meaning ... clear to all; each element ... must speak, repeat the crime, recall the law, show the need for punishment and justify its degree. Posters, placards, signs, symbols must be distributed, so that everyone may learn their significations. The publicity of punishment must not have the physical effect of terror; it must open up a book to be read ... the punishments must be a school rather than a festival; an ever-open book rather than a ceremony.<sup>48</sup>

The publicity upon which the trials depended for their didactic purposes, as Foucault has taught, could not simultaneously be an instrument of terror. The terroristic and prohibitive functions that would have been possible through a display of Wilde's punishment were superseded by the transmission of the narrative upon which cultural education was dependent.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Wilde trials, the goal was the containment of his effeminacy under the Name-of-the-Homosexual, thus their primary function was to enter the new sign into cultural circulation. That the sign of homosexual identity was a new one, and that it was unavoidably molded in the image of Wilde himself, can be shown by the fact that for the several years after the trials the word "Oscar" was synonymous with "Homosexual" and was the public's first label for the newly constructed sign.<sup>50</sup>

If the press constructed the trials as a lesson in morals for the general public, the events served a different educational purpose for those who were engaging in homosex. Rather than discouraging same-sex sexual activity, the publicity produced "an ever-open book," a blueprint for signification of a social identity. For sodomites, witnessing the crucifixion of Wilde provided an "acknowledgment of a likeness, that guide[d] them toward that identity."<sup>51</sup> Havelock Ellis, writing just two years after the trials, believed that

The universal publicity given to the facts of the [Wilde] case by the newspapers may have brought conviction of their perversion to many inverts who were before only vaguely conscious of their

abnormality, and, paradoxical though it may seem, have imparted greater courage to others.<sup>52</sup>

He observed uneasily that

The Oscar Wilde trial, with its wide publicity ... appears to have generally contributed to give definiteness and self-consciousness to the manifestations of homosexuality, and to have aroused inverts to take up a definite attitude. I have been assured in several quarters that this is so and that since that case the manifestations of homosexuality have become more pronounced.<sup>53</sup>

It appears that homosexual social identity emerges after the trials as sodomites and inverts inscribed *themselves* in accordance with the descriptions of effeminacy found in the sexological literature, establishing an agency “to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands.”<sup>54</sup> “Indeed,” as Judith Butler writes, “it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations.”<sup>55</sup> I assert that the self-reflexive performance of the cross-gender signifying codes is what became known as “Camp,” a new word that appeared along with the identity during the years immediately following the trials, a word that was entered into J. Redding Ware’s 1909 slang dictionary and defined as “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis.”

### Camp as Performative Utterance

The Homosexual type, though a stable figure within the sexological literature, still lacked a precise inventory of identifiable signifying codes in 1895. Other than the presence of transvestism, the deployment of the other signifying codes—gesture, posture, speech—were subjectively identified by individual clinicians on a case by case basis. The cultural authority needed to make a homosexual identification rested in the hands of scientists and specialists. Thus while there was knowledge of the Homosexual type, it was still unclear as to what specific performance traits other than cross-dressing could be conclusively read by the lay person in order to make an identification in everyday life. This was the state of the Ho-

mosexual figuration at the time of the Wilde trials, a theoretical outline that the trial prosecutors, armed with Krafft-Ebing’s diagnostic apparatus, were bent on invoking. But operating only with a specialized, interpretable discourse, the prosecutors, though they possessed the space of dominance, simply did not possess the cognitive skills with which to execute a proper ideological inscription of Wilde. In order to accomplish the inscription of Wilde as the first Homosexual, the sexological type needed to undergo a transformation that would allow it to enter cultural knowledge as a typification recognized by all. Thus given this state of sexological knowledge at the time of the trials, and given what happened afterwards (the large-scale social production of the type in everyday life), I would argue that the specific transformation of the Homosexual type accomplished in the trials was one from discourse into performance. As might be explained by Michel de Certeau, the Homosexual type became, in the trials

no longer of the order of discourse. It does not belong to a class of statements (true or false). It is a speech-act ... one performs the act, or it does not happen. Therefore, it does not behave as a legend or narrative... However, faithful speech arises at its place of utterance at the very moment it loses what sustains it. The epiphany of the [Other’s] body is only a necessary mediation that ensures the passage from the statement (an interpretable discourse that is transportable from place to place ...) to utterance (an act that is rooted in the ... saying). The ... utterance of the ... body, once it has replaced the mobile ... statement, is exchanged for the human, mortal mode of utterance.<sup>56</sup>

According to Certeau’s model, the forceful connection of Wilde’s signifying practices, of his personal effeminate gesturary, to the Homosexual type severed the type from its medico-scientific moorings. Though the power to make this connection (the inscription) rested on the authority of the scientific discourse, it simultaneously deconstructed that authority by nominating Wilde’s personal signifying codes as the expected form of behavior for performing the type. In order for the final stabilization and transmission of the new sign, dominant culture needed to produce a speaking Other, an individual homosexual. In forcing Wilde to speak as this Other, the authority for homosexual signifying (previously held in

monopoly by the sexologists) passed from the medico-scientific literature to the body of the performer. And by fixing the codes through the spectacle of publicity, this authority also passed to the public that now shared the knowledge of the codes. Because knowledge of the performative codes was now shared, both homosexuals and the public were no longer dependent upon the authoritative voice of sexology. They were both free to pursue either the sending or receiving of homosexual messages without the mediation of scientific discourse. In other words, for the lay social actor (whether homo or hetero) the Homosexual type had relocated itself from a position within a specialized discourse into that of "commonsense" social knowledge where it became reified in the utterances (performative praxis) of everyday life.

At the point of transition from discourse to utterance, the Homosexual type entered cultural practical consciousness as a performative nexus. For, as Certeau has instructed, the utterance is constituted by an act. If it is not performed, it does not exist. One thing, then, had not changed. And that was the fact that homosexuality needed to be performed. But what *had* changed was the location of the authorization. Where before an individual's homosexuality was determined by sexology's authoritative gaze, "Camp" signals the addition of self-reflexivity to the performances, and marks the transformation of the medical model of homosexuality from a system of inscription to a vehicle of social agency. Krafft-Ebing's third and fourth degrees of homosexuality, those degrees established by the performance of the cross-gender signifying codes, had been transformed into a system of recognizable, reproducible, and citational gesture.<sup>57</sup> This transformation, mediated by Oscar Wilde's body-on-trial, is what was meant by "Camp." In this sense, Wilde's body becomes a gestural topos, the site of the first Homosexual performance, and the "father" of both homosexual identity and Camp. His is the body that taught the public to read and the homosexual to perform the utterance. From the Wilde trials onward, Camp emerges as an identifiable performative phenomenon and the means for constituting a homosexual identity.

#### Coda

My goal in this essay has been to challenge the assumptions upon which much current research on Camp is based. Rather than an indefinable, elu-

sive term, Camp has a precise definition, meaning, and function. Rather than an ahistorical phenomenon, Camp emerges at the intersection of identifiable practices, performances, and discourses within a complicated, historically-specific context. Rather than a popular style or sensibility, Camp is a solely homosexual performance inseparable from the body of the performers. Camp, as I have figured it here, amounts to nothing less than the performance of homosexuality. And homosexuality, as it was configured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a non-sexual performance identified by the deployment of specific cross-gender signifying codes—gesture, posture, speech, and costume. Sexual activity was *not* a determining factor in establishing a homosexual identity; only the performance of the cross-gender codes qualified as markers. The self-reflexive performance of these codes is what I have defined as "Camp." Accordingly, to be a homosexual, that is, to perform the codes, was to Camp. Those who did not Camp were not homosexuals. This was Camp until approximately 1950: the coded performance of homosexual social identity.<sup>58</sup> There was no confusion regarding the meaning, function, or intent of Camp. There is no idea of a gay "sensibility," no descriptions of inanimate objects as Camp, no confusing multiplicity of forms, no links to Pop culture, no sense of an aesthetic phenomenon.

Up until 1950 Camp was clearly the performance of homosexual identity. But by 1964 Sontag was applying the term to such things as tiffany lamps. How did an identity performance, in the space of fifteen years, turn into a piece of furniture? It is not my goal here to theorize such a transformation, and I leave that task to a future essay. But by positioning the body of the effeminate homosexual male as the ground upon which later versions of Camp were constructed, then we have at least an idea of what Camp's later transformations were transformations of. In this way, we can preserve Camp as a solely queer discourse and begin to track a more widespread cultural influence of the entire concept of a discrete homosexual social identity as it extruded from the performer's body and slowly permeated the aesthetic sensibility of the contemporary moment.



## FOUR

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### TOP CAMP/BOTTOM CAMP

Quentin Crisp, in his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant*, remembers his first youthful trip to a gay district in London where he had heard there were homosexuals actually visible on the streets:

I had never believed that I would actually see one. Here they were for all the world to recognize—or almost all the world. A passer-by would have to be very innocent indeed not to catch the meaning of the mannequin walk and the stance in which the hip was only prevented from total dislocation by the hand placed upon it.

The whole set of stylizations that are known as ‘camp’ (a word that I was hearing for the first time) was, in 1926, self-explanatory.<sup>1</sup>

For Crisp, Camp was a self-explanatory word because it had only one unmistakable meaning and function—the production of homosexual visibility through engagement of recognizable and established codes of signification. The sum of these codes, described by him as “a set of stylizations,” constituted Camp, and it was Camp that constituted visibility. Crisp was finally able to see other homosexuals for the first time only because they publicly performed their identity in this way.

It has often been suggested that Camp, in these early years especially, functioned as a badge of identity, a kind of secret language by which homosexuals could recognize each other.<sup>2</sup> The idea of Camp as a private code has been used to differentiate the “new” gay culture (post-Stonewall, after 1969, characterized by the masculinized gay male) from traditional gay culture (pre-Stonewall, in which identity was expressed through Camp). Dennis Altman, in attempting to validate the new, masculinized

culture, does so by hastily rejecting Camp: "Unlike traditional [Camp] gay culture, the new culture publicly affirms rather than conceals our identity and confronts society with gay sexuality."<sup>3</sup> Altman's thinking, typical in much of the literature, seems an extremely strained rationalization of gay assimilationism.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to understand how visible Camp coding conceals identity while gay assimilationist masculinization, in which homosexual behavior conforms to and is indistinguishable from dominant heterosexual standards of deportment, can confront nongay society with gay sexuality. In fact, George Chauncey, in *Gay New York*, relates how it was "the flamboyant stereotype [that] diverted attention from other, more guarded men, and made it relatively easy for them to pass as straight."<sup>5</sup> The early references, especially Quentin Crisp's account, make it clear that it was only through Camp that homosexual visibility was achieved. His first recollection communicates a relief in the discovery that he was not alone, a discovery made possible only through others' deployments of Camp. And, as he relates, the meaning of Camp was not a secret limited to a homosexual community. Only the extremely naive could mistake it as anything else but a public statement of identity. It was, quite simply, self-explanatory.

The tension between the Camp queen and the masculinized gay man is impossible to ignore:

Since the early 1970s the style and image of gay men in North America and Western Europe has undergone a dramatic shift.

Whereas previously the most characteristic practice and most pervasive popular image of the male homosexual were effeminate, over the last twenty years the predominant styles of gay men have become increasingly masculine.<sup>6</sup>

Jamie Gough has argued that this shift in style and image resulted both in and from a change in self concepts of homosexual identity enactment. The gay subcultural communities that began to flourish and take shape beginning in the early 1950s, with their expanded populations, gave homosexuals the opportunity of seeking sexual partners who also identified as homosexual thus breaking the Victorian institution that paired an effeminate homosexual with a "normal," heterosexual male. It became increasingly difficult for a masculine man to engage in sexual activities with an effeminate "queen" and to retain a heterosexual sense of self.

Gough argued that the definition of homosexuality had shifted from a discourse of gender to one of sex, thus eliminating the dependence on dichotomized masculine/feminine gender performances. Though this shift from a gender-based to a sex-based definition of homosexuality makes itself obvious beginning in the 1970s through material performative enactments, there are indications that its originative elements were purely discursive. Where the masculinized gay man might be celebrated for breaking free from the discursive bonds of nineteenth-century sexology and emerging as the Hero of Liberty (thus sexual activity is represented within the gay community as the space of freedom), I would suggest that the shift in homosexual style only evidences a trade-off of discourses of dominance—from gender to sex. And, like the earlier incarnation of the gender invert, the "new" masculinized gay identity had the tracks for its performative parameters laid down in the literature several decades before the appearance and replication of the type. By focusing on the role of Camp during this discourse transition, I want to argue that the difference between the effeminate Camp queen and the masculinized gay man may not be as great as a first or cursory reading suggests.

### Kinsey's Dragnet

The study on male sexuality issued by Alfred Kinsey in 1948 was a major factor in the social redefinition and refiguration of homosexuality. The Kinsey Report indicated that the number of homosexuals was far greater than had been imagined. His figures suggested that as much as thirty-seven per cent of men had engaged in same-sex sexual activity and that ten per cent of American men were actively homosexual at the time.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this it was believed by many authorities that homosexuals constituted only one-tenth of one per cent of the population.<sup>8</sup> The Kinsey Report not only brought about a new knowledge of the prevalence of homosexuality, but effected a refiguration of the homosexual type. Gay men, it was found, could and usually did look and act like heterosexual men. This was a radical development that broke with the previous model in which homosexuals were defined by their cross-gender signifying practices. The study was as surprising a revelation to the gay community as it was to nongay Americans.<sup>9</sup>

The standard interpretation of this data has been that the Kinsey Re-

port recognized that the previous model of gender inversion had mistakenly conflated homosexuality with cross-gender signifying (effeminacy), and that the subculture had now been accurately retabulated. Against this, I would argue that the Kinsey Report did more than execute a census. Instead, Kinsey had actually refigured *The Homosexual*. It was not a simple matter of counting persons who were already there. Rather, Kinsey had expanded the definition of homosexuality by shifting the perceptual frames of the symptomology in such a way that it dramatically increased the population. This is the only explanation that can explain the surprising revelation among the gay population itself upon receiving Kinsey's statistics. Until that date, those who did not Camp were not usually thought of as homosexuals. And this belief, as I have argued, was shared by both gay and nongay alike. If Kinsey had merely counted the bodies that were there, his report may have surprised the nongay public but would certainly have been no revelation to the gay community. What shook up the gay community, too, was the shock of the refiguration, the epistemological jolt, the rewriting of homosexual identity itself.

Kinsey's refiguration was based upon a reframing of the symptomology of gender inversion. We can understand this reframing by referring again to Krafft-Ebing. Krafft-Ebing's model of same-sex sexual activity had four degrees. Only the third and fourth degrees (based on the presence of cross-gender signifying) constituted homosexual identity, and it was the performance of the third and fourth degree symptoms that evolved into Camp. It will be recalled that the second degree was also considered homosexual, but it was rarely, if ever, invoked in diagnosis. The second degree of homosexuality was reserved for those men who signified the masculine in everyday life, who did not deploy cross-gender signifying, but assumed the "passive" role in sex. Krafft-Ebing had thought it was a difficult and tricky diagnosis to make because, with the total absence of visual evidence, it depended on informant narratives; and the informant's own account was decidedly unreliable and subject to distortion, thus making the data extremely questionable. The second degree diagnosis tended to go unused since the data (gathered from direct observation of sexual activity) were impossible to get at.

Kinsey, also, expressed doubts as to the reliability of informant narratives in cases like these.<sup>10</sup> Narratives in which the informant himself would

situate his sexuality according to an identification of the dynamics of particular sexual acts were subject to distortion because what constituted an "active" or "passive" role in sex varied considerably from person to person according to individual understanding.<sup>11</sup> But rather than reject or politely ignore the second degree of homosexuality, Kinsey bypassed the problematics of subject narratives altogether by reframing sexual acts according to the biological sex of the participants: "If the term homosexual is restricted as it should be, the homosexuality or heterosexuality of any activity becomes apparent by determining the sexes of the two individuals involved in the relationship."<sup>12</sup> By jettisoning the notion of "active" and "passive," and instead adopting a standard that determined homosexuality as sexual activity between two persons sharing the same biological sex, Kinsey erased the line separating Krafft-Ebing's first and second degrees from the cross-gendered third and fourth degrees. As a result, the homosexual population was greatly expanded by admitting the far more numerous first degree quasi-homosexuals (as well as the addition of the previously problematic and ignored second degree homosexuals) to homosexual status. Where before the first degree was exempt from definition as homosexual based upon a diagnosis that focused on gender, Kinsey shifted the focus to sex. Cross-gender signifying was no longer to be accepted as a symptom, or at least no longer accepted as a symptom of any importance.

Where Krafft-Ebing had established four degrees of homosexuality, Kinsey substituted a revolutionary rating system of seven degrees that relied on the dependency of homosexuality and heterosexuality as oppositional terms [fig. 5]. At one end of the scale was the exclusively heterosexual (0 rating), at the other was the exclusively homosexual (6 rating), and in the middle were those who performed both equally (3 rating). All other ratings fell in between these depending on the number, frequency, and recurring patterns involved in the performance of specific sexual acts.

Kinsey's methodology was an apparent rejection of the objectivist visual bias of sexology with its dependence on extrasexual theatrics. His aim was to transform the diagnosis from a qualitative analysis of cross-gender signifying to a quantitative analysis of sexual performance. For Kinsey, sex acts were the only reliable data:



Heterosexual	
0	Exclusive heterosexual with no homosexual
1	Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
2	Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
3	Equally heterosexual and homosexual
4	Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
5	Predominantly homosexual, but incidentally heterosexual
6	Exclusively homosexual
Homosexual	

FIGURE 5 Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale.

It would encourage clearer thinking on these matters if persons were not characterized as heterosexual or homosexual, but as individuals who have had certain amounts of heterosexual experience and certain amounts of homosexual experience. Instead of using these terms as substantives which stand for persons, or even as adjectives to describe persons, they may better be used to describe the nature of the overt sexual relations.<sup>13</sup>

Homosexual status was to be determined by the number of the subject's homosexual sex acts and the detection of recurring patterns of frequency. Kinsey opposed essentialist notions of homosexuality and recognized that homosexual identity was founded upon discontinuous acts. His goal was to foreground the discontinuities through a quantifying operation. Of course, in the sense that homosexuality was a performative and discontinuous identity to begin with, then Kinsey's methodology was not all that new. Though he believed he was ridding the diagnostic apparatus of its theoretical dependence upon essentialist notions of innate homosexuality by quantifying the discontinuities, he had, instead, shifted the perceptual frames of the symptomology by abstracting a concept of performance detached from its conventional theatrical *gestalt* to enable the inclusion of the praxis of everyday life as manifested in mundane social acts (i.e., sex).

By basing a homosexual identification in analysis of the temporality (frequency, duration, repetition) of sexual acts, Kinsey was as, or more, reliant on performative phenomena than was the older model of gender inversion. Thus where he had intended to reject the theory of gender inversion, he had retained one of the most important underpinnings of that theory, that is, that the performance of homosexuality would be enacted, as it was with Camp, through restored behavior, through repetitive acts, and thus through discontinuities of the body. One thing had changed: where before the performative discontinuities were read as signifiers located on the surfaces of a single body (Camp), now they were relocated to a field composed of the physical interactions of that body with the immediate environment. Gay identity signifying practices were extending themselves physically through space, but from a source that still remained unchanged—the body of the queen. It is this relocated praxis of identity performance that sparked the transformation of Camp.

### The Cleavage of Camp

Kinsey's refiguration of homosexuality unsettled and destabilized the social knowledge upon which rested both the techniques of homosexual identity construction and the public's ability to read that identity up until 1950. Overnight the homosexual population expanded by one thousand per cent, and less than five per cent of that number could be identified by the traditional signifying system that had previously and successfully contained them. For the public at large a panic ensued. The fear of being surrounded by millions of invisible queers was one of the major factors in the rise of Senator Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1950s when the horror of an imagined invasion by hordes of unseen homosexuals and communists resulted in the infamous government-sponsored, paranoid purges of both.<sup>14</sup> There was a frantic epistemic reshuffling in the medico-scientific community where the theoretical underpinnings of homosexuality were completely undone as gender inversion could no longer be relied on to explain either homosexuality or homosexual presence. As gender inversion theory became outdated, it too was reconfigured and renominated, emerging as what is known today as transsexualism.<sup>15</sup>

Among homosexuals the confusion was no less great. Those who per-

formed their identity through Camp had, until the release of the Kinsey Report, constituted the entirety of the socially visible homosexual population. Suddenly they found themselves as the smallest minority within a vastly expanded, redefined subculture that increasingly saw them as both an obsolescence and a sometimes embarrassing liability in the growing movement for civil rights and social tolerance.<sup>16</sup> It would be convenient at this point to adopt the standard interpretation and to conclude the gradual demise of Camp as it was transformed from a viable identity performance into "the shameful sign of an unreconstructed, self-hating, and even woman-hating, homosexual,"<sup>17</sup> and then replaced with the new "masculinized" (assimilated) gay man. But I have set about to argue a definition of Camp as the production of gay social visibility and, under those terms, I must read against the grain to posit instead an expanding, not contracting, role for Camp. This would be a difficult task except for the existence of a document that offers a guide for an alternative reading - the first contemporary definition of Camp by Christopher Isherwood in his 1954 novel *The World In the Evening*.

As far as most critics of Camp are concerned, Isherwood's definition is the first, or at least the first that is taken seriously.<sup>18</sup> What makes Isherwood's definition so intriguing is that it was the first to make use of the distinction between High and Low Camp. Most writers on Camp have interpreted Isherwood's definition of High and Low Camp as an observational description of two already existing phenomena. Only two critics, the unusually insightful Alan Brien and Pop historian George Melly, have pointed out that it was Isherwood himself who invented the terms.<sup>19</sup> As an invention of Isherwood's, not an observation, the distinction he made between a High and a Low Camp can locate a position from which to read a new definition of Camp as the production of gay social visibility.

Isherwood's definition of High and Low Camp seems an attempt to put some distance between the masculinized gay man and the traditional, cross-gender signifying Camp homosexual:

"...did you ever run across the word 'camp'?"

"I've heard people use it in bars. But I thought ..."

"You thought it meant a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich? Yes, in queer circles, they call *that* camping. It's all very

well in it's place, but it's an utterly debased form ... What I mean by camp is something much more fundamental. You can call the other Low Camp, if you like; then what I'm talking about is High Camp."<sup>20</sup>

Writers have attempted to define High and Low Camp using this passage from Isherwood. Alan Brien read Low Camp as drag and transvestism, while High Camp was somehow a critical term.<sup>21</sup> George Frazier, on the other hand, reversed the distinctions and defined High Camp as drag and transvestism, while Low Camp was noted by the absence of drag and a subtle use of gesture or speech.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of how writers position the two terms, their definitions share one thing in common. That is, that one of the terms refers to drag/transvestism, the other is placed oppositionally to it. What opposes drag/transvestism is unclear, unseen, invisible to the uninitiated.

I suggest that Isherwood's distinction between High and Low Camp, emerging as it does during the period of intense identity reformulation in the 1950s, represents the split between the techniques of identity construction used by traditional Camp homosexuals and the new era masculinized gay man. Low Camp, following Isherwood's definition, still means what it always did: the social performance of homosexuality accomplished by using the institutionalized cross-gender signifying codes of gesture, posture, speech, and costume.

High Camp has always eluded critics. Isherwood himself cannot really explain it except by example:

"Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"I'm not sure. Give me some instances. What about Mozart?"

"Mozart's definitely a camp. Beethoven, on the other hand, isn't."

"Is Flaubert?"

"God no!"

"And neither is Rembrandt?"

"No. Definitely not."

"But El Greco is?"

"Certainly."

"And so is Dostoevski?"

"Of course he is! In fact, he's the founder of the whole school

of modern Psycho-Camp which was later developed by Freud." Charles had a sudden spasm of laughter. "Splendid, Stephen! You've really gotten the idea."

"I don't know if I have or not. It seems such an elastic expression."

"Actually, it isn't at all. But I admit it's terribly hard to define."<sup>23</sup>

A misreading of this definition has, in my opinion, led two generations of Camp theorists down the wrong path. The objectivist bias of existing Camp theory reads High Camp as somehow residing in objects, places, persons, e.g., Mozart is Camp, the ballet is Camp, psychoanalytic is Camp.<sup>24</sup> The agenda of most Camp theory, based on Sontag's precedent handling of this passage from Isherwood, is the establishment of lists of things that can be considered Camp. Begun in 1964 and continued to the present day, the list of objects considered Camp has grown so vast that entire books about Camp consist of nothing more than an inventory.<sup>25</sup>

But if High Camp, as I am arguing, stands in opposition to Low Camp, and Low Camp refers to the traditional performance of homosexual identity, then High Camp cannot be a list of objects. Rather High Camp, as an opposition to Low Camp, refers to the new figuration of homosexual identity and its process of visibility production. Remembering that Kinsey's refiguration of homosexual identity performance was based on relocating homosexual identity from the surfaces of a single body (i.e., gender) to a praxis composed of the physical and perceptual interactions between the homosexual body and its immediate environment (i.e., sex), then Isherwood's definition of High Camp is not an attempt to situate Camp as some innate quality residing in objects. Instead, Isherwood was attempting to give expression to the new relationally-dependent signifying practices of the masculinized gay identity. While it is true that he, too, provides a list of objects and persons considered Camp, those objects, then, represent only one terminus of an interactional exchange. The source of Camp is still the homosexual body which makes itself visible through an individual signifying spatial extension that identifies Camp as the field demarcated by a distinctive display of the classical subject-object relationship.

The displacement of self onto the object, this move into the order of signification that distinguishes High Camp, presents itself as a postmodern decentering of the subject. Thus to engage the process of Camp be-

comes an act of resistance on the part of a constituted subject by collapsing the distinctions between subject and object. This is not, as Gregory Bredbeck reminds us, a simple strategy of inversion, but a displaying of hierarchies of dominance in that the Camp collapse of subject and object is a challenge to the patriarchal dichotomy of masculine-subject and feminine-object.<sup>26</sup>

The exact nature of the resistant threat posed by Camp has been explained by Cynthia Morrill in her analysis of the term "homophobia." She argued that Camp deconstructs difference via the collapse of subject and object and thus sees

Camp as a destabilization of the relations between things ... invest[ed] ... in the disorganization or collapse of the commonly purported differences that separate and thereby define and delimit things, ideas, behaviors, and so forth. Camp disturbs the binary logic of Western culture. Interestingly, the term 'homophobia,' which combines the prefix 'homo' (meaning 'same') with the suffix 'phobia' (meaning an 'irrational or illogical fear'), names a fear of sameness, a fear of that which undermines difference. Thus the term both names and describes the prejudice frequently held against the practice and practitioners of Camp.<sup>27</sup>

The occupation of the site of the abject, that is, a status neither subject nor object, is what High Camp facilitates. It is a calling-to-be, a deconstruction accomplished by the self-reflexive and Camp collapse of subject and object.<sup>28</sup>

As refigured by Kinsey, homosexual presence, now constituted through the deployment of discontinuities of the body (through sexual acts) casts masculinized gay men as "subjects in process ... destabilized by fluctuations in [their] relations with the other, to whom [they] nevertheless remain bound in a kind of homeostasis."<sup>29</sup> In other words, as a discontinuous subjectivity, masculinized gay men slip in and out of the abject giving masculinized gay identity its distinctive feature. For without the collapse of the subject and object, the identity discontinues. Isherwood may have provided a list of objects called "Camp," but they were solely Isherwood's props for signification. Each gay man would, therefore, have his own inventory and Camp would be established in the processual interactions between a speaking subject and a continually transforming and



situational object that can be identified only at the moment that it vanishes in its own collapse, resulting in that quality of elusivity which has become a trademark of Camp.

Esther Newton sensed this in the late 1960s when she argued that: Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a *relationship* between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality. In this sense "camp taste," for instance, is synonymous with homosexual taste. Informants stressed that even between individuals there is very little agreement on what is camp because ... different homosexuals like different things, and because of the spontaneity and individuality of camp, camp taste is always changing.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of Camp as relational was also picked up by Jack Babuscio:

The term 'camp' describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity which express, or are created by, a gay sensibility. Camp is never a thing or a person *per se*, but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, situations *and* gayness.<sup>31</sup>

Both Newton and Babuscio, though they recognize that Camp exists only as an interaction, do not explore the homosexual body as the source of Camp. Rather, each (and this has become the standard for Camp theorizing) focuses on the qualities of the object of Camp in order to discover just how that object is selected for nomination. This is valid theorizing if one holds to essentialist concepts of gay identity. Accordingly, because homosexuality is conceptualized as innate and inborn, then "gayness" pre-exists the Camp interaction and goes uncritiqued, as something taken for granted. Because homosexuality has been reified in an essentialist philosophy, there is no reason to examine the speaking subject as part of the Camp construction. The speaker's position has been naturalized, and because Camp is conceptualized *as* a construction the speaking subject is erased from the analysis of construction as the research turns to focus on the circuits and object terminus of the Camp inscription.

Yet, if Low Camp stands in opposition to High Camp, and this opposition reflects the split between two methods of identity construction, then the speaking subject's homosexuality is not responsible for a mere selection of an object. Rather, it is the interaction, the exchange itself that now processually constitutes homosexual identity. Isherwood did not say that there was Camp and something that was not Camp. There was High and

Low Camp, two forms of the same phenomenon, not two different phenomena. And what binds them together is a shared function and intention: the production of homosexual identity through the deployment of signifying codes meant to manifest homosexual presence. The difference is that where Low Camp signifies on the surfaces of the body of the sender, High Camp displaces the signification to the environmental surfaces within which that body is situated. When we look at the interactional exchange of High Camp from this perspective, what emerges is a reversal of many theories of Camp. The act of identifying an object as Camp does not locate Camp as the quality of an object or activity, but rather that the *act of identification* itself is a displaced signification of self that is meant to establish the speaker's homosexual identity. The act of Camp labeling is meant to identify the *sender*, not the receiver of the message as homosexual, as Camp.

Camp, then, despite the relocation of signifying surfaces, remained basically unchanged in many regards. It was still the process for enacting homosexual identity, for making that identity visible. The question that might be asked, though, is why and how did Camp relocate from the body of the performer to the interactional field surrounding/defined by that body? And, if homosexual identity had been previously enacted solely through the gender-base of Camp, then wouldn't Camp be obsolete for an identity constituted by the performance of sexual acts?

#### Camp as Gesture Schema

In order to understand the model of Camp I am proposing, it is necessary to understand the transformed role of physical sexual acts in gay identity construction after Kinsey. For if Kinsey's refiguration moved the diagnosis from a qualitative analysis of cross-gender signifying to a quantitative analysis of sex acts, then wouldn't this simply invalidate the earlier model of Camp based as it was solely on the presence of cross-gender signifying, and especially so since I have proven that sex acts played no part in the process of Low Camp? Once again, I will need to return to Krafft-Ehing in order to supply an answer.

It will be recalled that homosexual status was given an individual if he deployed the cross-gender signifying codes of gesture, posture, speech, or costume. Yet specific sexual acts were also part of this signifying nexus.

The second degree homosexual was given homosexual status *only* by virtue of performing sex in a certain way (i.e., the “passive” role). I have discussed previously that this diagnosis was rarely invoked due to the high degree of error involved in making the pronouncement. Yet, despite its general nonuse as such, some sexual activity was, from the beginning, recognized as a signifying practice that constituted homosexual identity. In fact, once the “passive” role in sex is recuperated as Camp, which is the correct move according to the gender inversion theories that organized Camp performance, then approximately fifty per cent of homosexual sex acts qualified as Camp because one of the partners in any given homosexual act would be conceptualized as mediating his sexual performance through a cross-gender signification (insertee).

When Kinsey rejected the concept of “active” and “passive” sexual roles, redefining *both* partners as homosexual, he transformed sexual performance into the primary signifier of identity for all cases. At the same time this was neither a rejection of nor substitution for an old style diagnosis based on the presence of cross-gender signifiers because sex acts had always been a symptom, though dormant, in gender inversion diagnosis. Rather Kinsey added to, not subtracted from, the identity signifying codes by developing a previously unused, though already existent, symptom and elevating it to primary status. After Kinsey, everything multiplied, and not just the demographics; there was an increase in the inventory of signifying codes and there were now multiple ways of constituting identity. As for Camp, it did not wither up and die. Instead it reproduced itself: there were now two kinds of Camp, High and Low. If we see the expansion of Camp as tied to the expansion of the signifying code inventory, then I may be able to explain the actual physical expansion of Camp itself as it extended metaphorically through space and away from the body of the performer.

By refocusing on sex acts as the primary signifier of identity, Kinsey opened up and expanded one of the Camp codes—that of posture. Where before an individual could assume the signifying pose as an autonomous act, he now depended upon the relationship of his body to a point existing outside, or off of, that body (e.g. the sexual partner). This was especially true for the formerly “active” (hetero) participant. In the “active” participant’s case, Kinsey achieved a successful renomination only by establish-

ing the pose as a line that ran through the interactional field between two points of reference. This was an important connection. The “passive” partner had always been Camp and could continue to signify through the autonomous pose. But the “active” partner needed to be connected to the Camp pose in order to claim homosexual status. By naming the “active” partner as homosexual, Kinsey had framed the act in such a way that the masculinized gay man could now claim identity through a connection forged between his body and an exterior point that could only be described as “Camp.” In other words, the “passive” partner, now transformed into a postural object of Camp, granted homosexual status to the other by virtue of the interactional field generated between them.

The refiguration that ostensibly emerged from Kinsey sent a wave throughout the Camp signifying code inventory; the opening up of the postural code seems to have been repeated for the others. The gestural code, for example, expanded in the same way, that is, the Camp gesture now consisted of a line bisecting the interactional field and joining point A, the speaking subject, to point B, the object of Camp. Whereas an object, activity, person, etc. might be described as Camp, that identification is made only to set up the signifying relationship between a particular subject and a particular object within a specific context of limited duration.

An operation like the High Camp gesture was impossible in 1890, but had emerged as a feasible semiotic after 1950. What was different in 1950 was the prior existence of Low Camp. I suggest that High Camp gesture (exterior signification of a displaced interiority) is possible only because it originates in and is mediated through Low Camp. I will explain this in two ways. The first is through a description of the High Camp sign, the second is through the concept of the image schema.

The relationship of High to Low Camp is one of metaphorical figuration and extension. Thus the establishment of a gay identity through a displaced signifier (whether it is a manufactured object, the body of the sexual partner, etc.) can be understood as the metaphorical extension through space of Low Camp. Extruding from the Sign of Wilde, the High Camp gesture is an extension of that sign into yet another order of signification. As Low Camp itself was produced by moving Wilde’s transgressive reinscription of bourgeois masculinity from a first order (denotation) to a second order (connotation) signification [see Appendix fig. 2], so

High Camp takes the Sign of Wilde from a second to a third order signification, hence the terms “high” and “low” as metaphors that locate a Camp gesture within a specific signifying chain. Barthes, in his early work *Mythologies*, theorized the possibility of third order signifying chains that could empty ideology of meaning by transforming ideological (connotative) signs into third order signifiers.<sup>32</sup> I will argue that High Camp is just such a third order signifying chain in which the Low Camp gesture, or the Sign of Wilde is, in its entirety, transformed into the signifier of the High Camp sign.<sup>33</sup>

It will be recalled that connotation, or second order signification, is a model within which the denotative signifier and denotative signified join together to form the connotative signifier [see Appendix fig. 1]. In a third order signifying chain, the connotative signifier and connotative signified join together to form the third order signifier [see Appendix fig. 3]. The third order signifier, then, is the connotative sign, or homosexual sexual identity [see Appendix fig. 4]. Because the High Camp extrusion takes the Low Camp sign as its signifier, the third order signifier has already installed within it both a subject *and* an object; further, a subject and object whose distinctions collapse as they are harnessed for a unitary function within a third order signification.<sup>34</sup> This means that the object within the High Camp sign does not produce the homosexual signification, nor does the speaking subject’s nomination of that object as Camp. Rather, it is the processual signifying relationship between the speaking subject and the object that, in its entirety, comprises the *signifier* of The Name-of-the-Homosexual. As a third order signification, any attempt to reduce the signifier to either the speaking subject or the object will destroy the unity which makes the High Camp gesture possible in the first place.

The collapsed and hence irreducible subject-object relationship of the third order signifier identifies High Camp as what Mark Johnson has called “an image-schematic gestalt”:

What makes this an identifiable image-schematic gestalt is its repeatable pattern—a pattern that can therefore contribute to the regularity, coherence, and comprehensibility of our experience and understanding. To say that a gestalt is “experientially basic,” then, is to say that it constitutes a recurring level of organized unity for an organism acting in its environment. Gestalts, in the sense I am using

the term, are not unanalyzable givens or atomistic structures. They can be “analyzed” since they have parts and dimensions. But, any such attempted reduction will destroy the *unity* (the meaningful organization) that made the structure meaningful in the first place.<sup>35</sup>

The identification of the irreducible signifying gestalt of High Camp is important here because, according to Johnson, the signifying gestalt is the internal structure of the image schema.<sup>36</sup> The presence of the gestalt in High Camp identifies it as such a schema, and it is as the image schematic metaphorical projection of Low Camp that we can understand High Camp.

Johnson has explained the image schema:

Our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movement, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interaction with objects. It is never merely a matter of abstract conceptualization and propositional judgements ... human bodily movement, manipulation of objects, and perceptual interactions involve recurring patterns without which our experience would be chaotic and incomprehensible. I call these patterns “image schemata,” because they function primarily as abstract structures of images ... For although a given image schema may emerge first as a structure of bodily interactions, it can be figuratively developed and extended as a structure around which meaning is organized at more abstract levels of cognition.<sup>37</sup>

In Johnson’s theory, the image schema emerges as a meaningful structure first at the level of bodily movements that are organized into recurrent and repetitive patterns and shapes that guide ongoing activity.<sup>38</sup> These repetitive patterns of bodily movement that organize everyday life activity are the performative signifying codes of Low Camp. As a cultural institution for situating the homosexual “in the world,” so to speak, the gesture scheme of Low Camp provides the figurative source upon which all subsequent constitutions of gay identity have been constructed as metaphorical projections, and it is the subsequent metaphorical extensions of Low Camp that I am calling High Camp. High Camp, as an embodied schema, therefore

involves *our whole being*—our bodily capacities and skills, our values, our moods and attitudes, our entire cultural tradition, the way



in which we are bound up with a linguistic community, our aesthetic sensibilities, and so forth. In short, our understanding is our mode of "being in the world." It is the way we are meaningfully situated in our world through our bodily interactions, our cultural institutions, our linguistic tradition, and our historical context. Our more abstract reflective acts of understanding ... are simply an extension of our understanding in this more basic sense of "having a world."<sup>39</sup>

Once image schemata have been identified as metaphorical projections in this sense of embodied, culturally embedded patterns of understanding, it becomes clear why the schema—in this case, High Camp—is an irreducible structure. As a structure of embodied understanding, the image schema is

*not propositional*, in that [it is] not [an] abstract subject-predicate structure ... [e.g., "The Tiffany lamp is Camp"; or "Mozart is a camp"] ... that specif[ies] truth conditions. [It] exist[s], rather, in a continuous, analog fashion in our understanding. And, while we may describe features of [its] structure propositionally using finitary representations, we thereby lose our ability to explain [its] ... operations and transformations.<sup>40</sup>

Johnson's concept of metaphor, then, is not the same as held by literary scholars. While Johnson's concept of the image schema contains within it the conventional meaning of metaphor as a property of language housed within sentence structure, he gives metaphor a greatly expanded role in accounting for the nature of individual human understanding. Metaphor, in this expanded sense, is the way in which nonpropositional structures emerge from bodily experience to organize meaning at abstract levels of cognition.<sup>41</sup> Metaphors within sentence structure, in this case the metaphors of "high" and "low," do not produce the image schema. Rather, the choice of particular metaphors in the sentence are reflective of the image schema in which they are embedded. High and low, as terms of Camp, then, provide a rich source for identifying the image schemata in which they are installed.

The key to understanding the metaphorical projection of Camp as an image schema (High Camp) lies in the mechanics of the assumption of The Name-of-the-Homosexual after 1950. Kinsey believed he was ridding

the discourse of the notion of "active" and "passive" by defining both partners in a sexual act as homosexual. But outside of sexual performance, the "active" participant, the masculinized gay man, had no homosexual identity. The "passive" participant, on the other hand, had the cultural institution of Camp to draw on as a self-reflexive signifying system for situating himself in the world; and it was Camp that manifested the visible social identity of the homosexual. The masculinized, "active" participant had nothing. And, as I have described, the masculinized gay man could only achieve homosexual identity in a direct physical relationship with the formerly "passive," or Camp, homosexual who was transformed into the signifier of the partner's sexual identity. The masculinized gay man, from the first instance, constituted identity only by setting up (i.e., posing, positioning, "camping") the object in a dependent signifying relationship. This dependent signifying is High Camp, different from, though dependent on, the physical gesture scheme of Low Camp. High and Low, as terms of Camp, do not refer to the relative worth of each. Rather, the terms high and low are metaphorical projections of the old "active" and "passive" sexual roles. In the gay community the terms "active" and "passive" are no longer used. They have been replaced with "top" and "bottom." Thus the set of distinctions based upon sexual practice—active/passive, top/bottom—is the context in which to understand High and Low Camp. High and Low Camp, then, each represent one of two modes for constituting subjectivity, and it is from the metaphorical projection of material sexual practices into everyday life that Camp emerges.

#### **Sovereign Sign: The Body of the Queen**

In his seminal 1981 essay "Homosexual Signs," Harold Beaver argued for homosexuality as a culturally and semiotically distinct mode of behavior. For Beaver, signs, not essences, were the source of homosexuality. He identified Camp (for which the practices of drag/transvestism and of the effeminate gesture were exemplary) as this semiotic. Thomas Yingling, in *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, develops Beaver's concept of a homosexual cultural semiotic, but with a more interesting and complicated angle. Yingling also notes that: "The gay absorption into signs, meanings, interpretations ... is related to the fact that for the homosexual the 'problem of homosexuality' is in fact the problem of signs."<sup>42</sup> While he accepts

and works from the idea of homosexuality as a cultural semiotic, he thinks Beaver's dependence on Camp is theoretically inadequate. Yet, this is not a disagreement. In fact, in the face of much critical opposition, Yingling recuperates the Camp queen as an important site for theorizing a gay semiotic:

The "typicality" of the person identified [the Camp queen] in this example requires a brief comment; "queens," of course, are no more or less representative of homosexuality—in number or style—than other types that might be offered for investigation, and there is certainly reason, given the stereotyping of gays as effeminate men, to resist using such a figure to establish a central point about gay semiotics. In fact, the iconography of homosexual self-representation has almost aggressively swerved from this "type" in the past two decades in urban America, as writers such as Dennis Altman and Charles [sic] Bronski have commented upon. But the figure of the queen (and the style that accompanies it in language and manner) is one of the inescapable legacies of gay culture in the West, and part of the recent rejection of it by that culture would seem to be a reiteration of dominant ideologies. Surely effeminacy is not in any sense the natural condition or expression of homosexuality, nor vacuous conversation its only verbal quality, but the presence and importance of such phenomena within gay culture historically and at present should not be denied in the pressure to normalize its visibility.<sup>43</sup>

The Camp queen, according to Yingling, can certainly be read as a homosexual semiotic, but he thinks that Camp is too limited, that it cannot account for the expressions of the masculinized gay man, for example. Thus while he accepts Camp as a legitimate site of research, that site is along with or equal to some other site that can accommodate non-Camp gay cultural expressions. Yingling, a literary scholar, then locates what he thinks is a non-Camp gay semiotic in text by engaging a materialist reading of Hart Crane.

Yingling's semiotic analysis and materialist reading of Crane articulates a new theoretical approach to homosexuality in literature that moves textual homosexuality from a study of content (gay themes, subjects, characters, referents, etc.) to a study based in identifying a queer semiotic as

it emerges in the text. A materialist analysis, according to Yingling, yields the entire text as a signifier of the author's sexual identity. It does not matter whether there is any direct mention of homosexuality in the contents of the text. Rather, it is an identifiable gay cultural semiotic shaping the text that allows the work to be read as homosexual, as a homotext.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the fact that both Beaver and Yingling theorize this homosexual cultural semiotic, they cannot quite put their fingers on its internal structure. Yingling, for instance, locates what he correctly calls the homosexual semiotic in Hart Crane's texts. Yet these seemingly stand as independent examples organized under several topoi that appear to disconnect through a dominating focus on the semantic, and comes perilously close to the type of thematic analysis that he argues against as a method for homotext interpretation. While he has constructed one of the more inclusive models through a thorough topological organization that intertexts the author's biographical data, he has not yet produced a model that will explain how each of these separate topoi and their examples can be theorized as the workings of a single sign. And, even if he could, it would be doubtful that he would call it Camp. Because of the objectivist visual bias that dominates Camp theorizing, Camp is viewed as either a physical, gestural performance (Low Camp) or it is seen as the collection of objects appropriated by Pop culture that are mistakenly defined as High Camp. And thus where Yingling champions a materialist and constructionist reading, he, too, is hampered by the same bias that actually characterizes essentialist gay theorizing. I do not disagree with Yingling. Rather, without a serious study of historical Camp, the image-schematic gestalt goes unrecognized, and there is no way to make the connection between Camp and the cultural semiotic he sets out to discover.

Yingling's description of the gay cultural semiotic in analysis of the relationship between author and text is, it seems to me, a description of the third order signifier of High Camp. But without the concept of the image-schematic gestalt to explain the relationship between the speaking subject and the object, Yingling identifies the homosexual text as the signifier of the utterance (author), and cannot get at the dependent relationship between object and utterance that allows both to be read as the *composite* signifier of homosexual social identity. This is the result of the tendency in gay theory to read the Camp queen as fundamentally different

from the masculinized gay man, thus erasing the connection that would make these theories fall into place. The Camp queen is artifice, a signifying invert, while the masculinized gay man is simply acting "normal," naturalized, thus set against/differentiated/disconnected from the other. This kind of theorizing constructs effeminate and masculinized gay identities as discreet territories whose boundaries are erected through exclusion of each other, while at the same time ignoring the dependency of terms resulting from such a dialectic relationship. One critic, Jamie Gough, has been able to see the distorting effect upon theorization that this practice encourages:

Existing writing on the masculinization of the gay scene ... rest[s] on superficial explanations of the phenomenon of masculinization, and that an approach which locates masculinization in the materially-based organization of gender and gay sexual relations can provide the basis for a more realistic, but also more critical response.<sup>45</sup>

The theory of Camp that I am outlining here offers a potential corrective to this by reading masculinized gay identity as the metaphorical projection of homosex (via Low Camp), while simultaneously taking into account the dependent relationship of the masculinized gay identity with the body of the queen. By not only recuperating the Camp queen, but by figuring all gay semiotic as either the body of the queen or its metaphorical extension, then I can name the gay cultural semiotic that Yingling and Beaver were outlining. It is Camp.

That Yingling's gay semiotic is what I am calling High Camp can be demonstrated in analysis of a theatrical spectacle that I attended for several years in Chicago during the 1990s. A gender-bending theatrical troupe known as The Husseyfire Revue staged regular performances throughout the year. The Revue presented crudely produced variety shows that were billed as Camp Theater. The audience was composed of self-identified "queers" who consistently described the show as "Camp". When I first saw the Revue I could not see anything specifically on the stage that would qualify as Camp. I sensed that this was indeed Camp, but, for the life of me, I could not locate any specific signification that would allow a positive identification. After the shows I would ask different audience members what The Husseyfire Revue did precisely that was Camp. No-

body could say, but all reiterated that it *was* Camp. But one particular respondent spun on his heels to face me, and said, "Darling, it's the whole thing that's Camp, the event, I mean."

That insightful respondent was right. Nothing on the stage was Camp. Camp was being generated in a dependent relationship between the audience and the stage performance. The entire show was performing the same semiotic role described by Yingling for the written text. In other words, there was nothing in the details of the show that was specifically homosexual. It was the entire performance that had been transformed into an object of Camp that received its nomination from the audience (as speaking subject) in order to establish a queer community identity. It was not the show that was Camp, it was *attendance* at the show that was. Each audience member confirmed an individual queer identity by collectively nominating the performance as Camp, thus displacing a signification of self to the stage. That the show was indeed an object of Camp can be further posited because it was manipulated by the audience as such. One of the remarkable trademarks of The Husseyfire Revue performances was that the division between audience and performers steadily deteriorated as the performance progressed. It was commonplace for performances to end in massive food fights between the actors and the audience. And it was never surprising if the performers themselves somehow ended up in the audience seats while the audience members found themselves on the stage performing in a skit for the Husseyfire Revue actors. More importantly, these occurrences of subject-object collapse were never scripted.

The Husseyfire Revue is a wonderful embodied and performed example of the collapse of utterance and object that, together, form a third order signifier of homosexual social identity. Neither the audience nor the performers can separately be identified as Camp; only the event as a whole receives the nomination. This is the phenomenon Yingling was describing as regards Hart Crane's texts. That is, nothing specifically in the text can be identified as homosexual; it is the text as a whole, in relation to the author, that displays the semiotic. Yingling's textual semiotic and the Husseyfire Revue both display identical transformations of the sign; and the Husseyfire Revue can be positively identified as Camp; therefore I conclude that what Beaver and Yingling call the gay cultural semiotic is what I am calling Camp.



### Truth and Consequence

Because High Camp works through a third order signification and framing of everyday life experience and practical activity structured as an image-schematic gestalt, it is not propositional. As Mark Johnson reminds us, it is not an abstract subject-predicate structure that specifies truth conditions (e.g., "the Tiffany lamp is Camp"). Therefore, the role of the truth statement in Camp discourse—any articulated nomination—will not be a description of the sign, but can only indicate the construction of the signifier. As a description of the signifier, a subject-predicate structure can be performing two very different functions. First, as an utterance it can be used to activate the semiosis by setting up the relationship between utterance and object that will constitute the signifying gestalt. Second, it can be used to reduce the signifier to its object, thus rendering the queer subject invisible and thereby breaking down the sign. In each case the propositional statement receives identical articulation in speech, but is inadequate to identify the sign.

For instance, the Pop (nongay) appropriation of Camp works by reducing the signifier to its object and then identifying camp as an innate quality of that object. The appropriation uses an abstract subject-predicate structure (e.g., "The Tiffany lamp is camp") that *must* be rendered in speech as a truth statement in order to complete itself. The dominant culture appropriation of Camp discourse depends for its success on the transformation of the image-schematic gestalt into a propositional statement. Therefore, the subject-predicate structure will *always* be present in forms of appropriated camp. It is a red flag that alerts the critic to the possible presence of Not-Camp. Thus the presence of a propositional statement can be no more than a guide for interpreting the sign, but is not the sign itself.

Because the propositional statement is not a description of the sign, it does not have to be present in order to make an identification of Camp. The gay semiotic identified by Yingling in certain literary works is never called Camp, yet it behaves according to the properties of a third order signifying chain. It is the activity of the sign, then, that identifies his gay cultural semiotic as Camp. What this means is that Camp does not need to declare itself as Camp in order to be Camp. If it displays the third order sign and lacks a declaration, then we can make a positive identification. But if there is a truth statement, then it may be Camp or not. If it is Camp

it will produce a homosexual social signification. If not, then we are dealing with an un-queer appropriated form. In no case can we make an identification of Camp solely because a propositional statement is present. Ironically, and more often than not, the presence of the propositional statement indicates that an appropriation has occurred. Instead, we are looking for a specific semiotic recognized by the presence of a signifying gestalt.

In making identifications of Camp in everyday life, I am guided, first, by the definition of Camp as the production of gay social visibility; and second, by the concept of Camp as a third order sign structured as an image-schematic gestalt. My search for Camp does not begin with analysis and interpretation of those expressions already described as Camp, but rather, with those expressions already described as "homosexual/gay/queer." For if Camp is the production of gay social visibility, then it should be present any time we encounter a successful homosexual signification. Camp would then be confirmed by the presence of a third order signifying gestalt, or what Beaver and Yingling call "the gay cultural semiotic." This means that *all* gay identity expressions are circulated through the signifying system of Camp. In order to demonstrate this model, let me engage a Camp reading of an everyday life, routine gay cultural expression: gay bars.

### Reading the Bars

A Camp interpretation of gay bars is not just an arbitrary choice. A theory of everyday life practice would have to account for the bars. As Dennis Altman explains: "For homosexuals, gay bars ... play the role performed for other groups by family and church,"<sup>46</sup> and as Christine Riddiough writes:

The bars have been and remain, even now, the focal point of the gay and lesbian community. They are the most stable institutions in a frequently unstable world. As such they shape the culture of gay life, even as they are shaped and changed themselves.<sup>47</sup>

As a major gay cultural institution, the bars should, according to my theory, present a primary example of Camp. The presence of Camp in the bars would not be expressive of gay identity. Instead, Camp, as a process for enacting gay identity, should actually be generating that identity within

the physical space of the bar. The central role of the bar in gay culture, then, is not as a meeting place for homosexuals; rather it is a site where homosexual identities are constructed.<sup>48</sup>

Language, as I noted before, is an important source of evidence for theorizing a signifying system. As regards the term "gay bar," the word "bar" is functioning as a metaphorical extension of "gay": a bar is not homosexual, buildings do not have sexualities. Yet, somehow, the homosexual identities of its occupants have been displaced to the space itself. What happens in the gay bar on a continuing basis is what happens on special nights at the Husseyfire Revue. In other words, nothing about the physical structure of the bar is gay. Homosexuality is established in the dependent relationship between occupants and structure.

In this example, the gay bar (as a physical structure) is performing the same semiotic role as does a Husseyfire performance or a Hart Crane text; it is turned into an object of Camp. It is not the bar that is gay, it is *attendance* at the bar that is. But this leads to a much more provocative argument, that is, if the space itself is not gay but is able to execute a homosexual signification through the occupants' displacements of self to the walls of the physical plant, then it is because the occupants can not achieve such signification on their own. In the gay bar, homosexual identity is constructed only in the relationship between occupant and space. It means, quite literally, that it is the occupation of the space that constitutes the identity.

For those who hold an essentialist model of gay identity, this would be incomprehensible. The conventional, and essentialist, interpretation of the gay bar is that it is a space to be occupied by an individual who possesses an innate gay identity. The bar, then, simply designates a space for homosexuals, and the word "gay" is read as an adjective of the space, not its metaphorical source. Against this, I would argue that if the bar designates a space for homosexuals, then it also designates what is outside of that space as Not-Gay.<sup>49</sup> Thus to leave the gay space is to enter a nongay space, nongay precisely because it either does not support, allow, or facilitate a homosexual signification. Gay identity discontinues upon entry to the nongay space, and is embodied upon entry to the gay space.

The dependence upon the physical space to play the role of signifying

surface identifies the gay bar as an object of Camp that, together with the occupant (as speaking subject), forms a composite signifier of gay identity. Neither can produce the signification by itself. This is the display of the third order signifier that is the structure of the image-schematic gestalt, a joining of the body to its own figurative extension. In other words, what identifies the space as gay is its homosexual occupants, but what identifies its occupants as gay is their occupation of the space. Thus an identification of the bar as "gay" is not a propositional statement identifying the sign, but only the signifier. The process at work here, the process that produces the successful homosexual signification, is Camp.

My interpretation of the institution of the gay bar as Camp is the logical outcome of pushing a radical constructionist theory of gay identity. As I mentioned earlier, the flaw in constructionist theories is that, despite their innovations, they are based upon a reified concept of homosexuality that, at some point in their formulations, becomes apparent because The Homosexual must be invoked as a source for the constructions themselves. But if homosexual identity is a social construction, then that identity cannot preexist the construction. It must necessarily be emergent in any given context. Harold Beaver was able to theorize a gay cultural semiotic only by recognizing that all homosexual signification is emergent, or what Yingling calls a "semiotics of emergency," in that the semiotic (Camp) simultaneously produces an identity signification *in* and *by* a specific context, space, or practice.<sup>50</sup> As a semiotics of emergency, each signification within a specific context constitutes, according to Yingling, a crisis, that is, a space of decision and intention, or what Barthes would call "writing the Self." For if the reification is disclosed, then gay identity becomes truly discontinuous, meaning that the identity is engaged and disengaged upon entry into certain spaces, in the execution of specific gesture, or with the manipulation of particular objects.

#### Reading High and Low

In conclusion, I want to summarize both High and Low Camp and to stabilize their definitions for purposes of practical observation. Low Camp (the Sign of Wilde) is the easiest to get a grip on. Low Camp, again, is the social performance of gay social identity accomplished through perform-

ance of specific signifying codes—gesture, posture, speech, and/or costume. It is not mandatory that these be cross-gender codes, or that the social actor be deemed effeminate or comic. Rather, the observer needs to take a step back from the homophobic interpretations that have continued to both limit and skew Camp analysis, and learn to read Low Camp in those instances where and when the actor produces social visibility via these signifying codes. While certain practices are and can still be read legitimately as Camp—such as drag, the effeminate gesture, the mincing walk, the banter of the queen—because they produce an obvious gay social presence, a definition of Low Camp is certainly not constrained or limited by these traditional examples. They still have their place. But Low Camp, as I have presented it thus far, is much more expansive. Within the contemporary moment, these codes would be better thought of as constituting a field of action, a praxis, in which an infinite number of combinations are possible, and not limited to stereotypical behavior.

For instance, costume and sartorial codes have been primary markers of gay and queer identities for most of the century. I think immediately of the use of the handkerchief by masculinized gay men in the 1970s which consisted of a complicated and detailed semiotic for the communication of quite specific sexualities through the display of a hanky tucked into the back pocket of jeans and whose meaning was determined by both its color and its location in the either the left or right pocket.<sup>51</sup> These handkerchiefs communicated not only the gay identity of the bearer, but also which specific sexual acts one would be willing to participate in and exactly what one's desired role was to be in the exchange. Because homosexual presence, in this case, was manifested through the deployment of a dress code, the 1970s use of the handkerchief was most certainly an example of Low Camp. It is this use of sartorial signifying, not effeminacy, that is the identifiable feature of Low Camp. It encompasses not only drag but all of the other costume and dress codes as well. It is what links the hypermasculinity of the leatherman to the hyperfeminacy of the drag queen and also to the clone, the sweater queen, and today's queer political activist (identified by the predictable shaved or cropped head, goatee, body piercings, leather jacket, combat boots). All these achieve their effect through Low Camp. The 1970s disco group The Village People, because of their display of gay identities through costume

codes, is perhaps one of the best of examples of Low Camp performance in recent decades.

Though none are so pervasive as the sartorial, one can track the other codes into contemporary life as well. Within this model of Low Camp, many more expressions may be included. Within the postural codes, for example, there is the stance displayed and the look given from one man to another to signal sexual interest and availability whether in a gay bar or a public street (i.e., "cruising"). It might also include the display of a "buff" body, a body shaped by working out in the gym (which in the 1990s had turned into a major gay identity performance) and which is then further enhanced by the use of costume to expose the postural sculpting. This gay obsession with manipulating the shape of the body through gym workouts, in fact the entire movement of gay men to the gyms as well as their individual performances within these spaces, can be construed as a manifestation of Low Camp, and links today's masculinized gay man to yesteryear's effeminate dandy. This connection has been, at least on some level, recognized by observers of contemporary gay life who have coined the phrase "gym dandies" to describe these gay physical fitness fanatics. And, again, it is the process of Low Camp that enables the connection to be made.

Even the Camp speech codes, which have been conceptually limited to the lisping, effeminate speech of the queen can be seen in an expanded way. That very basic speech act known as "coming out," that is, the public proclamation of one's gay identity expressed through the statement "I am gay," becomes a foundational act of Low Camp in that it produces homosexual social visibility through one of the traditional Camp codes.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary queer critics, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in particular, who have been reexploring speech act theory have refocused on "certain utterances that do not merely describe, but actually perform the actions they name ... [such as] 'I thee wed'; 'I apologize'; 'I dare you.'"<sup>53</sup> Under speech act theory, the act of "coming out," (performed through the statement "I am gay") does not reference an essential homosexual self, but, rather constructs and materializes that self through the performative utterance. The utterance "I am gay" emerges not so much as an autobiographical reference but as a queer materialization whose challenge lies precisely in the fact that it is not simply a historical description, but a manifestation of homosexual presence radically embodied in a space pre-



sumed to be the domain of the un-queer, that of the speaking subject. When viewed as a gay materialization rather than a self-reference, the act of "coming out" shows itself as a Wildean play of surfaces, "an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance."<sup>54</sup> Thus to perform this very basic first person singular utterance, "I am gay," is to enter into the signifying system of Camp.

Low Camp, then, is the process at work any time that the actor is able to produce a successful homosexual signification through the codes of posture, gesture, speech, or costume. Whether or not the quality of effeminacy is communicated through deployment of the codes is irrelevant. What is of importance here is that some kind of homosexual social identity—whether effeminate, masculinized, underground alternative, or bourgeois assimilationist—is constructed and made visible by engaging the signifying codes. It is why I wrote earlier that *all* gay identity performative expressions are circulated within the signifying system that is known as Camp. Without the process of Camp, the identity disconnects and discontinues.

Manifestations of High Camp may not be as easily recognized as such. As I have discussed earlier, High Camp produces a homosexual signification through entry into and occupation of certain physical spaces, with the manipulation of particular objects, or in relation to another as in sexual acts. As regards the occupation of queer space, I have discussed the role of High Camp in gay bars and in acts of attendance at theatrical events. But it can also be evinced in a range of activities that take place within what are perceived to be "gay" activities or "gay" spaces, especially noticeable when there has been a temporary transformation of a mundane or "straight" space into a "gay" space by virtue of the activities of the participants. I think immediately of such examples as gay sports events (gay baseball teams, bowling leagues, rodeos), political activism (whether it is an ACT UP protest or a fundraiser for a gay caucus of a major party), social events (ranging from drag balls to the ubiquitous gay brunch), rituals (gay pride parades) or even those arenas of gay raunch (sex clubs, steam baths). This process of spatial transformation in order to produce gay social visibility solely through occupation of a space or attendance at an event is nothing less than the process of Camp.

It is in the manipulation of objects, and perhaps more so in these cases than in any mentioned thus far, that problems in interpretation arise. When the gay social actor establishes identity only through the handling of objects, there has been an overriding tendency to interpret only the objects themselves as the sole repository and vehicle of Camp. These objects, visually divorced and spatially separated from the body of the agent, are most often subjected to a visually-biased objectivist inscription that results in the erasure of the queer subject, thus severing an important connection. This has been the trademark of the Pop culture appropriation of Camp (i.e., Sontag et. al.). The homotext constructed by the joining of utterance and object goes unrecognized thus relegating the now isolated object (e.g., the old Tiffany lamp) to matters of "style."



My goal in this essay has been the exploration and weaving together of several ideas about Camp. In the 60s and 70s, Camp was defined as a *relationship* between persons, things, and gayness. In the 80s and 90s, Camp was identified as a distinctive collapse of subject and object. I have attempted here to combine these narratives by identifying the dynamics of that relationship as the subject-object collapse of Camp. Further, that this relationship constitutes the gay cultural semiotic also theorized during those decades. In producing a semiotic model of Camp, I have sought to explain the process whereby gay male identities become socially visible, how homosexual presence is manifested, and how that visibility/presence is a form of embodied knowledge. By expanding a definition of Camp beyond a stereotypical fixation with comic effeminacy and drag, I have tried to close the gap between concepts of effeminate and masculinized gay identities. And finally, I have taken into account the material sexual practices that comprise the foundation of an identity based on sexual orientation. I do not see this essay as a final statement, but rather as an exploratory proposition, a framework to generate new understandings of Camp as a gay cultural semiotic.

## FIVE

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### RETHINKING *PARIS IS BURNING*: PERFORMING SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY IN HARLEM DRAG BALLS

#### I

I remember when Jennie Livingston's documentary on drag balls in Harlem, *Paris Is Burning*, was released in 1991. My first viewing experience was exhilarating, exciting, and even revelatory. One image in particular caught my attention and has continued to fascinate me—the entrance at the beginning of the film of Pepper Labeija, Mother of the House of Labeija. This was a big, big queen the likes of which one rarely encounters. And by “big” I mean that Pepper filled the ballroom with her presence. Other writers on the film tended to view ball walking as activity occasioned by the inability of the queens to access social power.<sup>1</sup> But instead I saw in Pepper Labeija a queen who took her power *to* the balls, and in so doing bequeathed that power to all inside. When a drag queen is called “divine” it is precisely this power to authorize the proceedings around her that is being honored, marked, and recognized. And it is no accident that Livingston opens the film with Pepper's spectacular entrance. The function of Pepper's entrance in the film is the same as that in the ball—it authorizes the ball, it authorizes the film, and at the same time it authorizes the spectator who enters into the ballroom in the wake of divinity.

Miss Pepper was giving us truly royal body, a body that authorized. My view differs from the one that dominates many critiques of the film and of Harlem drag ball culture (writings which will be examined



throughout this essay), in that I didn't see the ball as an effect of oppression but rather as the discursive space opened up by the enunciations of the queen, a space of probable empowerment. This body, that is, the body of the queen, of the Mother of the House, is not a metaphor but a necessity. Her body is the material site for the intersection and reorganization of the various discourses of gender, race, class, and queerness whose articulation constitutes the ball. Here, within the event frame of the ball, she makes her appearance as a self-reflexive play with identities, with instruments of dominance turned against themselves, and the unstable site of a postcolonial hybridization "which demystifies all essentialist glorifications."<sup>2</sup> If, as Kobena Mercer has quipped, the formula of race/class/gender is a mantra,<sup>3</sup> then Pepper Labeija is its mandala. What I mean by this is that I saw displays of power in the ballroom performances depicted in *Paris Is Burning*.

During the three years following the release of the film, *Paris Is Burning* and the ballroom performances became a fashionable research site and the subject of several critical essays. I eagerly read each one. But with rare and partial exceptions the authors didn't seem to share my view. Where I saw displays of power, others were seeing powerlessness; where I saw change and transformation manifested through the agency of the meaningful gesture, others were seeing deluded automatons hypnotically following the siren call of consumer capitalism; where I saw complex race and gender identities constructed as oppositional critiques, others were seeing childlike drag queens playing a game of mock fashion show through which they enacted their own oppression; and all of these conclusions reached by theorizing a mythic, universal, and paradigmatic figure called "The Transvestite." Was my interpretation of the ballroom performances so totally off or were these other writers engaging a subtle heterocentric interpretation of drag balls based on reducing a complex cultural phenomenon to the level of a fetishistic parlor game—something akin to "how many transvestites can you find hidden in the drawing?"

It seemed to me that these writers on voguing were deploying the concept of "The Transvestite" because they either could not or would not accept the possibility of alternative gender constructions.<sup>4</sup> Thus the radical critique embodied in the dance form was put under erasure, hidden and obscured in the act of theorizing the lives of real people against this mon-

strous, mythic "Transvestite" who never existed in the first place except in crackpot academic theory based upon the insane concoctions of nineteenth-century sexology. It would be the equivalent of trying to theorize the lives of contemporary women under the Victorian paradigm of "The Fallen Woman."

Bruce Lincoln has demonstrated how cultural taxonomic/epistemological anomalies are neither inherently reinscriptive or subversive.<sup>5</sup> According to Lincoln, reinscription or subversion is the result of the reader's own interpretive strategies. A taxonomic anomaly (e.g., the drag queen) can be interpreted in two different ways, each supporting a vastly different conclusion: the anomaly can be read within the parameters of the dominant epistemology to effect a reinscription, or it can be read as a new term that foregrounds the limitations of that same epistemology to effect a subversion. The various interpretations of *Paris Is Burning* and drag ball culture written under the shadow of the "Transvestite" metaphor shared a number of features in common, and clearly followed a route of reinscription.<sup>6</sup> I want to describe this reinscriptive interpretation emergent in writings about the film, and then follow this with examples from the literature. The interpretive strategy has two parts:

1.) All identity configurations that did not fit into the schema of universal binary gender were reincorporated into that system via the concept of "The Transvestite." This figuration was overlaid on the performances and everything was mediated through it; whatever didn't fit this model or might contradict it was simply disregarded. The material specificity of the performances was denied in favor of securing and protecting bourgeois epistemology.

2.) Once the figure of "The Transvestite" had been deployed, the representational apparatus delivered up user-friendly institutionalized tropes for readymade interpretation: The Joke, a pathetic object of scorn and ridicule; The Victim, who though powerless is still blamed for her own victimization; The Killer, that deranged semi-human boogey(wo)man who despite her monstrosity is easily vanquished by invoking heterosexuality through narrative closure; and The Drag Mort, The Dead Transvestite, whose lifeless body is the final resting place and representational goal to which the other tropes aspire.<sup>7</sup>

Martin Worman in his history of the drag balls described twenty-eight



competitive categories at the balls that seemed to be fairly consistent. Livingston's film, though it doesn't cover all possible categories, actually describes seventeen of these. And of these seventeen only eight categories feature drag queens. In other words, less than half of Livingston's presented categories can be covered by an interpretation of drag and transvestism. bell hooks, in her essay "Is Paris Burning?," treats every performance in the ballroom as an example of female impersonation. There is no mention of the many categories of competition that do not feature drag, such as "Executive Realness" or "Banjee Boy." Peggy Phelan, in "The Golden Apple," actually recognizes the existence of these other categories but decides simply to do away with any discussion of them because they don't fit within her transvestite-centered interpretation of the balls: "While the performances are also aimed at other idealized images—such as male business executives and military men—I am concerned here primarily with drag."<sup>8</sup> These colonizing elisions displace the material performance and substitute the act of theorizing in its place.

Dorian Corey, the elder spokesqueen within the film, reminds us that the old-style balls of the 1960s only had one category, and it was a drag category.<sup>9</sup> Phelan's and hooks's theories might well apply to the earlier drag ball forms. But Jackie Goldsby points out that: "Once the hall expanded the categories available for competition, its critique of identity politics and consumer culture deepened."<sup>10</sup> This is an important point because the critique embodied in the balls is constituted precisely by and spread throughout these various categories. Thus in order to find the critique the ball must be read in its entirety. It is the processional ordering of the categories that shapes the context and fixes the meaning of any particular drag category. There is no way to explore this if over half of the categories are ignored in analysis. The concept of "The Transvestite," when used as the central point for interpretation, erases from analysis those performances that are needed to make sense of the ball while simultaneously sterilizing the residue through the strategy of containment.

According to Bakhtin, a great deal of academic theorizing on the subject of performance is sterile precisely because it cannot make a link to the lived experience of the subjects:

The performed act . . . is split into an objective content/sense and a subjective process of performance. Out of the first fragment one

creates a single systemic unity of culture that is really splendid in its stringent clarity. Out of the second fragment, if it is not discarded as completely useless . . . one can at best extract and accept a certain aesthetic and theoretical something . . . But neither in the first world nor in the second is there room for the actual . . . performance.<sup>11</sup>

The actual performances here have been displaced by the concept of "The Transvestite." This is an example of the pitfalls facing performance theorists who approach cultural phenomena with *a priori* theoretical constructs. The agents of the performance, in this case the hallroom walkers, become tools to explain a theory rather than the theory used to explain the performance. In this detachment from materiality, the theorist cuts off the performers from their own reality as social agents and recasts them as subjects of theory.

It would be tempting to argue that the kind of theorizing that hooks and Phelan engage in effectively disempowers the queer agent. But there is no queer agent in their theories to disempower in the first place. And, in the same way, I am not sure that hooks's and Phelan's interpretations are even about drag balls in Harlem. What they *are* concerned with is the transvestite subject of theory, and this particular subject of theory is always already powerless. Thus the condition of powerlessness and victimization that they attribute to their transvestites is only a tropic description of their own illusory theoretical subject. As I will argue, this kind of theorizing à la Travestie has not so much to say about really real drag queens as it is a "reflection of the critic's values and expectations, a feature that should be cautionary for any critic of . . . gay identity."<sup>12</sup>

What I want to do in the rest of this essay is to reexamine the drag balls in *Paris Is Burning*. I want to get away from a black-gay-transvestite-centered interpretation. Instead I want to look at the details of the performances in a way that takes into account the cultural and material specificity of the discursive formations articulated on the ballroom floor. To do that I will reorient the analysis around the figure of The Mother of the House. The division of the performers into Houses, each headed by a Mother is, I think, extremely important to consider if an analysis of voguing is to take into account the discursive formation in which the balls participate.

In order to effect this discourse analysis, I will ask the reader's patience

as I present a dense interdisciplinary argument based not only in some of the intersections formed by the confluence of several disciplines, but also in the more arduous enterprise of reading different disciplines against each other. In Sections I-IV, I make a preliminary identification of the discourse enunciated in the balls. I address the various analytical methods used by critics of *Paris* and the drag balls, demonstrating that these are less than useful for arriving at a model of the balls as sites of resistant activity and empowerment. I argue that occularcentric analyses using drag and/or the sign of blackness as central points for interpretation are more often than not misleading in terms of discourse analysis. In Sections V-VI, I move away from a critique of the literature, and engage an analysis of the Harlem drag ball as a distinct Africanism within American culture. When viewed as an Africanism, the drag ball provides a site for further interrogation and facilitates the discovery of a politicized language encoded within its performances.

## II

One of the problems I saw with the writing on the film was an almost acritical acceptance of the referent as the key with which to decode the performances. For examples, Essex Hemphill, in his essay "To Be Real," describes the performers as "children," grouped into "houses of fashion" . . . playing out the rituals of a fashion show.<sup>13</sup> Peggy Phelan calls the performers "models" who "belong to houses, which, under the seemingly thin bond of fashion and style, knit members together into the fabric of family. Their family names are taken . . . from the stars of the fashion industry—St. Laurent, Chanel, Armani."<sup>14</sup> And even Jackie Goldsby states that one of the ways a House identifies itself is by "Adopting the name of a famous haute couture corporation."<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of the Houses comes, I think, from a too literal understanding of *Vogue Magazine* as the referent of "voguing." In *Paris Is Burning* Livingston gives us the names of many Houses. And of these, only two bear the names of corporate fashion houses. Dorian Corey explains that the name of a house is taken from the Mother, not from a house of fashion.<sup>16</sup> If a particular Mother actually takes her own name from a fashion house that is another story altogether, but it does not alter the fact that her children take *her* name. We are seeing

what would best be described as the assumption of The-Name-of-The-Mother, or the queering of the patriarch by putting an evening gown on Lacan's Big Daddy. To report erroneously that House names are corporate parodies is to obscure both this critique and the discursive formation that the halls articulate.

In order to investigate the discursive formation of the balls I will need to look at their level of enunciation. According to Foucault, the enunciative level of discourse can not be equated with the referents of the statement, which in this case are the House/fashion system and the Mother/nuclear family. Rather, the enunciative level of discourse is constituted by the relation between the House and the Mother as sites of differentiation and the statements (the performances) which reveal their presence.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the drag balls, the referents—the fashion system and the nuclear family—are not what will determine the discursive formation. Rather the discursive formation can be determined "by neutralizing the moment of enunciation and the coordinates that individualize it," taking stock of the general form of the statement, and subjecting it to a polysemic analysis that can look at "interwoven or alternating, different meanings operating on the same enunciative base."<sup>18</sup> Once the fashion system and the nuclear family referents have been displaced we can look for identical statements that appear in other fields of use. The specific discursive formation will emerge as the domain shared by these statements. So where do we look for these?

Judith Butler, in "Gender Is Burning," thought that the most significant critique offered by drag ball culture was the division into Houses, each with their Mother and children, and that this resignification of family creates the discursive space from which the balls emerge.<sup>19</sup> Butler, in my opinion, gets it half right, that is, I agree with her that the discursive space of the balls is created by this House structure, but not as the result of the resignification of the American family.<sup>20</sup> Now Butler, too, calls to task those critics of voguing who work through a transvestite-centered interpretive model in which drag is seen as a parody of women because this "makes male homosexuality *about* women."<sup>21</sup> These critics displace the Queer and render Woman as the subject of drag discourse. But this reinscription of the heterosexual imperative is exactly what Butler herself accomplishes when she argues that the voguing Houses are parodies of the nuclear fam-

ily. This, too, displaces queer specificity and renders the heterosexual family as the subject of the Houses. Surprisingly, she thinks this resignification “is doubtless a cultural reelaboration of kinship [from those] outside the privilege of heterosexual family.”<sup>22</sup> This is another instance of reading drag as characterized by perpetual lack, and it is this same theoretical condition of lack that undergirds those interpretations of drag that she criticizes elsewhere in the same essay. As Butler thinks the radical critique of gender offered by drag can only be recuperated by establishing the centrality of a specifically queer subject, then I would add that the radical critique offered by the voguing House can only be recuperated with the same maneuver. Using Foucault’s method of the archaeology, we can cut ball culture loose from both its fashion system and heterosexual family referents in order to effect a discursive analysis. Freed from the tyranny of the referent, the excavation is centered instead upon interrogation of the enunciative field with the goal of figuring more precisely the identity of the Mothers.

According to voguing historian Martin Worman both the House structure and the expansion of the ball into multiple categories began to emerge simultaneously in the same year—1960. This is the same year that a House structure accompanied by a categorized performance form began to emerge in New York within a different social arena. This other arena is the Afro-Caribbean religion of Santeria brought over by Cuban exiles following Castro’s revolution of 1959.<sup>23</sup> Both Santeria and drag ball culture share the same organizational system.<sup>24</sup> Santeria practitioners organize themselves into Houses each with its Mother (and/or Father) who has sole authority over her children.<sup>25</sup> Like the voguing Houses, the various Santeria Houses operate autonomously in everyday life, but during ritual functions (or balls in the case of voguing) may gather in different combinations.

Now this House is not the site for a resignification of heterosexual family. The title of “Mother” or “Father” indicates priesthood, not a parodic version of biological parenthood. An individual does not join a House to compensate for an expulsion from or a lack of heterosexual family. Rather the Santeria House operates alongside of, not in opposition to, the natural family: “The members of a *casa de santo*—the house of an elder—are expected to help and protect each other, in the same way they would help and protect their real families.”<sup>26</sup> Thus rather than compen-

sating a lack, the children add to their responsibilities. They now have two different family organizations with which to contend. If anything we’re dealing with excess here but certainly not lack.

The question that could be raised is: that’s fine for explaining Santeria House organization, but aren’t those poor, deprived drag queens in Harlem joining a voguing House precisely because they’ve been rejected by their natural families? Yes, there will always be individuals who join a voguing House (or a Santeria House or a parish or an Elks Lodge) to fill a need for belonging and to compensate for natural family rejection. But there are just as many or more who do not. Martin Worman noted the same doubling of family membership in his study of the House of D’èrai in New Jersey. Most of the drag queens in that House maintained relationships with their natural, heterosexual families. Like the biological family members of a Santeria practitioner who come and watch their relative’s ritual performances, the natural parents and siblings of some D’èrai drag queens came to watch their loved ones walk in a ball. In other words, membership in a House is not a barometer for assessment of the individual’s relationship with his heterosexual family. One family does not necessarily replace the other. That is because these two family structures occupy different discursive formations, that is, they are not related to each other and do not exist in the same space.

The House structure of Santeria is one of the key features of many African religions. It is also found in other New World African religions such as *vodoun* (Haiti) and *candomble* (Brazil). It is spread throughout West Africa. What I am arguing is that the House structure of the drag ballroom culture occupies the same discursive formation as the House structure of Santeria and these other African religions. I am not saying that voguing is a form of Santeria, nor that Santeria is a form of voguing. Rather these two performance practices share the same enunciative base. The specific discursive formation that these point to is at once both and neither of these two forms. That this House structure begins to manifest itself within drag ball culture in the 1960s, the same decade in which the number of Santeria practitioners increases by several thousand per cent, does not mean to imply either that drag balls borrowed from the practices of the religion. Rather, we are seeing the introduction and spread of a single discourse instantiated and articulated in both Santeria and the drag balls.



In the case of Santeria we know something of its discursive formation so that the value in identifying the Harlem drag ball culture as sharing in this might prove valuable in decoding the performances depicted in *Paris Is Burning*. For one thing, this is a specifically African discourse. It belongs to an epistemology and expresses an ontology quite different from that of Euro-American cultures. Our Western methods of analysis are not usually adequate to recuperate this formation or its critiques. It falls through the cracks of our knowledge.<sup>27</sup> This is what is happening when Peggy Phelan, for instance, understands *Mother of the House* to be some parodic performance of the All-American Mom. This is the kind of epistemological problem for which the archaeology can be beneficial. Other than the sharing of a single discursive formation there is no way to link the drag balls to the material practices of Santeria. But that is not the goal of the archaeology. The purpose of the archaeology is to identify and track the dispersal of a discourse, and the enunciations of a discourse may or may not be able to be accounted for with a chronological history of causes and effects. A discourse appears, disappears, reappears somewhere else; it skips in and out of history. The archaeology is intended to track these movements, and it provides valuable analytical data.

For example, Essex Hemphill has complained of the lack of historical contextualization of the balls depicted in *Paris Is Burning*, and reminds us that these balls have a history originating in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s that should be taken into account.<sup>28</sup> Yet there is an even earlier history than this. The first mention of specifically black gay drag balls is from 1893 in Washington, DC and in New Orleans.<sup>29</sup> Most interesting is that this century-old account links these drag balls to voodoo rituals. In fact, knowledge of these balls on the part of the authorities was gained only incidentally when police discovered them during raids meant to crackdown on and eliminate voodoo ritual practices and not in raids on homosexual activities. By tracking discursive formations rather than focus on a linear and chronological account, I would suggest that those nineteenth-century drag balls are part of the same discourse as the balls documented in *Paris Is Burning*, but those of the Harlem Renaissance are not. It means that the balls of the 1920s may be, but probably are not, relevant to a history of the balls of the 1980s: they are part of a different discursive formation and represent a different cultural phenomenon.

In order to advance this claim we need to move beyond a theoretical privileging of the visual which the phenomena of drag and the sign of blackness usually facilitate and instead examine the enunciative level of the respective ballroom discourses. The enunciative level, again, is constituted by the relation between sites of differentiation which provide individualizing coordinates and the material performances that reveal the presence of those sites. As pointed out by George Chauncey, the balls of the Harlem renaissance provided sites of differentiation based upon a division of the physical space—the ballroom floor and the balcony.<sup>30</sup> The balls depicted in *Paris*, however, utilize completely different sites of differentiation—the House and the Mother.

Based on analysis of their sites of differentiation, the 1920s balls and the 1980s balls reveal a marked discursive difference. In the 1920s balls the division was between performers and spectators, each occupying their own physical location. Indeed it was the physical placement of the bodies either on the floor or in the balcony that largely defined one's ballroom status. This spatial division marked an equal status between spectator and performer. And more importantly, the "performances" themselves were conceptualized as the total of the actions on the floor executed by cross-dressed individuals. In effect, there was only one performance—the ongoing milling about and group dancing of the drag queens. In the 1980s balls the balcony/floor distinction disappears as does the spectator's equal status. Instead, the differentiations have all relocated to the floor, expressed through serial performances that are highly differentiated from each other and whose performers have been rigidly hierarchized according to membership in a particular House, individual status within the House, and the history of the individual's past ballroom performances. This is further elaborated within the concept of the ballroom competition "category" which overlays a matrix of race, class, gender, sex, and age distinctions upon the already dense set of House markers. The complete subordination of the 1980s balls to the agon indicates two completely different cultural phenomena. What the two share in common is the city location in Harlem, the Afro race identifications of most of the participants, and the attention given to acts of drag. But, as I have argued, the facts of geography, race, and costume, and because they are shared in common by the 1920s and 1980s balls, cannot account for the differences. The 1920s

balls, concerned with locating those present as either performers (on the floor) or spectators (in the balcony), and the 1980s balls, concerned with locating those present as members of a specific social arrangement (the House) and their individual status on the floor (descent from the Mother), seem to be quite different cultural phenomena. I have posited that this change was the result of the instantiation of an African discourse in the drag balls circa 1960. The contrast between the two enunciative levels provides an example of how a particular discourse, in this case an African religious one, moves discontinuously through history and can not be detected by conventional historical analysis.

Because I am arguing that the drag hall performances of *Paris Is Burning* and certain African ritual practices are discursively identical statements, then the relationships between the ritual practices and their referents in these African religions might be able to shed some new light on the relationships between voguing and its referents. This claim is not immediately apparent unless one sifts through data coming from several disparate fields of research whose paths do not often cross. In the next section of this essay I want to lay the groundwork for that analysis in a discussion of homosexuality and its relationship to the discursive formation opened up by the House and the Mother.

### III

She is a male-to-female transsexual. She is called the Mother of the House. The House is comprised of mostly younger gay men who call themselves the "children" and over whom the Mother has authority.

On a first reading, this sounds like a description of a Voguing House. But what I have just described is a Santeria House that operates in a major North American city. What is striking about this particular case is that the entire House could translate itself into a voguing economy with its membership, internal hierarchy, and social function intact. Granted this is not a typical Santeria House but neither is it an aberration.

One of the more noted features of African religions that display both a House structure and rituals that utilize possession-trance is the routine appearance in some cases of transvestite-homosexuals amongst the mem-

bers.<sup>31</sup> I am not saying that Santeria and the other religions of the Yoruba diaspora are gay religions. What I am saying is that it is not at all unusual to find significant numbers of homosexuals integrated into various Houses. The actual number of homosexuals and gay men found in a House will vary greatly according to geography and the local traditions of specific religions. For example, Peter Fry has suggested that homosexuals may account for up to eighty per cent of the practitioners of Candomble in northern Brazil, while there is an inverse ratio among practitioners in the southern urban centers.<sup>32</sup> So while these religions are not gay religions per se, there seems to be no dogmatic bias expressed towards homosexual practitioners by nongay practitioners.

Despite the unmistakable presence of gay men in many of the Houses, there seems to be no direct relationship between homosexuality and religious practice. Peter Fry found that Candomble practitioners—straight or gay—thought that the prevalence of homosexuals in the cults was purely serendipitous. They held that one's sexual practices are a private matter of no concern to any others in the religion.<sup>33</sup> As one Candomble priest put it: "I am a *bicha* [effeminate homosexual], everyone knows that I'm a *bicha* and I have never denied that I am a *bicha*. At the same time I'm a *pai de santo* [priest] . . . When I hold ritual these things are left aside."<sup>34</sup> This belief was echoed by the transsexual Santeria priestess whose house was described at the beginning of this section. She, too, stated that her sexual and gender identity were not relevant to either her religious role or ritual practices.<sup>35</sup> If there are large numbers of homosexuals drawn to these religions then it is not because they are gay religions. Rather these religions construct a space, through their ritual practices, in which heterosexism and homophobia are nonexistent. The ability to claim and occupy a non-homophobic space would be the obvious draw, and marks the houses of these religions as places of homosexual/gay refuge.<sup>36</sup>

But what exactly constitutes a space where homophobia and heterosexism are not only absent but nonexistent? In order to investigate what this space is it would be helpful to mark first what it is not. And in order to do that I need to look at the construction of spiritual authority within these religions. Unlike most Western religions, the religions of the Yoruba diaspora are remarkable in that there is no central authority. There is no supreme priest over all priests, no ruling council that dictates belief for

all followers. Rather, spiritual authority is diffuse, spread out among the numerous and autonomous priests and priestesses, and constituted by the sum of its parts. The nonheterosexist discursive space constituted through ritual practices is, then, not a space of tolerance. Tolerance by definition implies permission, and permission must be granted by an authority that views the objects of its beneficence as Other to itself. Thus a space which "tolerates" homosexuals must be founded upon an ascendant heterosexuality. But in these religions, as noted above, priests are both hetero- and homosexual. The everyday life sexual orientation of the officiants is dropped from consideration during ritual practice and it is the aggregate engagement of ritual that constitutes spiritual authority. Sexual orientation at the point that spiritual authority is exercised through ritual practice can not enter into the discourse nor can it be used to consolidate power and establish authority. Quite simply, heterosexuality here does not assume a privileged status from which to display the quality of tolerance.

What we are seeing here might best be described as a massive discontinuity of the concept of sexual orientation itself at the point of engagement with ritual practice. Up until that point, even in the various Houses during non-ritual activities, the practitioners possess identities usually heavily invested in occupying a sexual orientation. There is no denying that many of the heterosexual practitioners are homophobes in everyday life. But even the most virulent among them must disinvest themselves of the concept of sexual orientation just as do the homosexual-oriented priests and followers in order to hold ritual. Those private beliefs have no vehicle of articulation as regards ritual practice. Given that "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are dependent terms within a Western epistemic binary opposition, then the disconnection of homosexuality from ritual practice must of necessity produce an identical dissolution of heterosexuality by voiding the epistemological frame that stabilizes the concepts.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the disinvestiture of sexual orientation characterizing engagement of ritual practice marks the point of entry into a disjunctive discursive formation. The production of a non-heterosexist space emerges then as a byproduct effect of a discourse in which the homo/hetero binary is nonexistent.

If, as the practitioners of these religions assert, that sexually-oriented identity is "left behind" during ritual, and if, as Monique Wittig claims,

that sexual orientation is a central organizing principle in Western cultures,<sup>38</sup> then we are seeing the constitution of positions of non-Western subjectivity in ritual that are clearly constructed solely through the engagement of specific practices.<sup>39</sup> Foucault argues that it is this kind of discontinuity that signals the presence of a distinct discursive formation:

this system is not established by the synthetic activity of a consciousness identical with itself, dumb and anterior to all speech, but by the specificity of a discursive practice. I shall abandon any attempt to see discourse as a phenomenon of expression . . . instead, I shall look for a field of regularity for various positions of subjectivity. Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but . . . a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed.<sup>40</sup>

If I accept the reconceptualization urged by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, that is, if I do not conflate discourse with "the language used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but [rather understand] discourse itself as a practice,"<sup>41</sup> then I can do two things: first, I can recognize the practices of both Santeria and voodoo as being discourses in their own right; and second, by looking at the way the same specific subjectivities are embodied in their respective performances, then I may be able to argue that both represent different points of dispersion of a single African discourse. Because this discourse originated in West Africa, in cultures that do not deploy a concept of sexual orientation,<sup>42</sup> then the subjectivities constructed through its practices (e.g., Santeria rituals and drag balls) can not be embodied while retaining many Western primary identifications of which sexual orientation is but one. That is why, upon engagement of the ritual practices of the discourse, practitioners must trade in their Western subjectivity for an African one. This does not necessarily imply either a conscious choice or a voluntary one. It can often be supplied by the discourse at the level of practices where meaning and subjectivity are constituted in the relation of performative statements to each other.

One example of this discontinuous leap from a Western to an African subjectivity is the case of Norma Rosen.<sup>43</sup> Rosen, a white American, was initiated as Iya Olokun, a priestess of the Bini deity (*orisa*) Olokun in



Benin. She was/is able to assume successfully the African subject position constituted by ritual practice (via possession-trance) and her status as a priestess is recognized and honored by the Bini. Rosen's case offers a striking example of how primary Western identifications come apart through engagement of this discourse because both her nationality (American) and race (white) also disconnected at the moment of possession when she was perceived, not as citizen Rosen, but as the (black African) deity itself. This kind of radical and transient subjectivity flies in the face of American identity politics, an arena where identities, especially ones based on race, are expected to be stable. What mattered to the Bini was not her nationality or her whiteness but whether she was able to embody successfully a Bini subject position specifically identified with Olokun while in possession-trance. Western concepts of race, sexuality, and nationality did not have a place in the rituals. Rosen's case also demonstrates why the sign of blackness is inadequate as the basis for an interpretation of this ritual discourse. What identifies the subjectivities constituted in ritual as African is not based on the visual but on a cultural semiotic identified and deployed by practices, performances, and movement. These subjectivities are discontinuous and situational, not expressive or essentialist.

What I think we are seeing in the case of the drag balls is the actuation of a West African (probably Yoruba) religious discourse that exists as a set of practices deployed in a series of perpetual discontinuities. This discourse lacks a proper "place," a proper and distinct location within Western epistemologies, because the West can not conceptualize a discontinuous subject, a subject that is not identical to itself, that very same subject who is positioned in ritual practice. In the New World, anyway, it is an invisible discourse that runs parallel to terms of dominance and apprehended only in its performances, in its embodiments. That it runs parallel and remains largely invisible can be noted in the fact that a conservative census counts Santeria practitioners alone in the tens of millions.<sup>44</sup> This constitutes Santeria as perhaps the only major American religion whose existence can not be perceived. The parallel track of this discourse suggests that it may simply be unassimilable because the subjectivities constituted by its practices are based on concepts of identity that can not be anchored within a Western epistemology.

These ideas have an immense impact upon any theorizing on voguing

and the drag balls. Remembering that I have already dismissed such visually-biased phenomena as drag and the sign of blackness as the basis for interpretation of the balls, then one more critique of previous writings remains—one which concerns the relationship of the individual performer's everyday life discourses and the very different discourse embodied in the balls.

#### IV

bell hooks was perplexed by what she insightfully saw as two competing, disconnected cinematic narratives in *Paris Is Burning*, "One displaying the pageantry of the drag ball and the other reflecting on the lives of participants and the value of fantasy."<sup>45</sup> I suggest that this split is between the Western discourses used to construct subjectivity in the performer's everyday life and the African-based subjectivities embodied on the ballroom floor. Yet, hooks thinks that "the sustained focus on elaborate displays at balls diffused the power of the more serious critical narrative."<sup>46</sup> On what basis does hooks assign hierarchical value? I would voice a reverse disappointment in the film—that the sustained focus on personal narratives diffused the power of the at least equally serious ball performances that carry the African critique. In fact, at no time does the film ever show us a complete performance of a ball, a competitive category, not even a complete performance by an individual. And even the performance bites we *do* receive are presented for the most part with heavily-edited, decontextualized, and never-ending voice-overs derived from private interviews with unidentified informants who aren't even talking about the balls or ballroom performance. The African discourse practiced on the ballroom floor is shattered, fragmented, and rendered invisible by the continuous interjection of alien(ated) Western discourses communicated by informant narratives. By collapsing the distinctions between the interviews and the performances, Livingston constructs the interviews as stable texts that supply intrinsic meaning to the performances.

Faced with a choice between analyzing a non-Western discourse articulated only through movement and a more familiar Western discourse rendered by spoken and written texts, is it any wonder then that critics trained in academic literary analysis have centered their interpretations



so intently on Venus Xtravaganza, the pathetic dumb blonde-colored-(boy)girl-fallen woman-drag queen who by the end of the film is transformed into a rotting corpse stuffed under a bed in, of course, the appropriately sleazy New York version of the Bates Motel. Venus, especially because she dies (thereby furnishing a linear narrative and a text committed to closure), is actually the secure central point for interpretation by literary critics. Venus is no longer interpreted as a legendary performer and master of an alternative discourse, she is no longer even a drag queen. She has become "The Transvestite," that fanciful construct meant to contain the Other, secure bourgeois epistemology, and which is represented through the trope of the Victim/Joke who carries about her the stench of death, the death we know she is destined for and that we need in order to construct her body as a stable and readable text. Her demise is a narrative maneuver that demands the trope of the Dead Transvestite be leveraged for an interpretation.

That this is the use Livingston intended for her can be clearly seen when Venus utters her infamous statement that she wants to be a spoiled, rich, white girl. This single line, the line which *every* writer on *Paris Is Burning* has fixated on, is placed almost "dead" center in the film and delivered as a disembodied voice over black and white still photos of her performances, the only black and white segment in the entire film. This cinematic strategy erases the ball critique by rendering static the performances while simultaneously substituting Venus's narrative in its place. The spectator is then led to believe that race/gender polarization is the central concern of the performers and that the ball exists as a simple expression of this concern. Roland Barthes has described not only the "death effect" constructed by the black and white still photo, but that this effect places the subject "outside of ritual."<sup>47</sup> This is precisely the function of the photos of Venus—to remove her from the ritual discourse of the ballroom floor. Venus's neutralization then allows Livingston's gesture of reincorporation to be (mis)read as the performer's desire for reincorporation and thus transforms the ball into a placatory site for eternally-lacking subjects begging for acceptance and not the space of empowerment that I argue it is.

When the balls are read as the expression of its performers' desires, the resulting analyses are extremely skewed. We can see this in a pre-

dictable sequence of interpretive maneuvers displayed by the critical writing on Paris. First, there is the retreat to the trope of the Dead Transvestite which shifts the focus away from the ballroom performances and onto Venus Xtravaganza whose lifeless body has been delivered readymade (or maybe readydead) to the spectator as the site for a seamless interpretation. Second, hoisted up by its blood-stained petticoats, her corpse is tropically reanimated and deployed as *the* exemplary ballroom performer. Third, and finally, the ballroom discourse is then read as the expression of Venus's fantasies of being a spoiled, rich, white girl. Her private fantasies, which have nothing to do with her ball performances, are overlaid on the entire phenomenon of the drag ball which is then interpreted through reference to the psychic life of a single performer, the one performer who cannot respond and whose life offers no data which would invalidate the transvestite interpretive tropes.

Foucault argues against such reductionism and reminds us that the subject of the statement [performance] should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation—either in substance, or in function. He is not in fact the cause, origin, or starting-point of the phenomenon of the . . . articulation of the sentence . . . It is a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals . . . If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called "statement," it is not therefore because, one day, someone happened to speak them or put them into some concrete form . . . it is because the position of the subject can be assigned. To describe a formulation *qua* statement does not consist in analysing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.<sup>48</sup>

This practice-centered model of discourse bears striking similarities to Richard Schechner's idea of "restored behavior," that is, a set of practices that exist separate from the performers who "do" them, but that once deployed constitute a specific subjectivity for the performer by virtue of the performer's engagement of the practices.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of the drag ball, the African discourse it articulates and the subjectivities it constitutes are not under the control of an individual per-



former like Venus. Venus's control may be limited to single choice: to engage or not to engage the discourse.<sup>50</sup> Once engaged, the sequence and relationship of the statements to each other on the ballroom floor provides her with a predetermined and embodied subjectivity. When the ball concludes, its Cinderella-like subjectivity discontinues as the performers are reinterpellated back into the dominant discourses from which they spoke before the ball.<sup>51</sup> It is a discontinuous and disjunctive phenomenon in which the performer must leap between two different discourses running parallel to each other. In other words, Venus's statement that she fantasizes about being a spoiled, rich, white girl, while it has some bearing on *why* she might engage the discourse, has no bearing upon the specific subjectivity she can embody during the course of the ball. Her fantasies expressed during interviews and her ballroom performances each belong to separate discourses that exist in disjunction. Livingston masks this remarkable discontinuity by overlaying the informant interviews on the performances. But it is only a cinematic illusion.

Do Venus's fantasies then have any bearing on the interpretation of drag ball performance? The answer would have to be (at least within the terms of a Foucaultian discourse analysis) very little, or possibly even none. We can not recuperate the discursive formation of the balls by referencing the fantasies of any single performer. What Venus says about herself in everyday life cannot be conflated with what she articulates on the ballroom floor. The discourse embodied in the balls is bigger than Venus, and bigger than any of its performers considered singly. This formation emerges only at the level of practices, and only when its statements (performances) are analyzed in relation to each other and in their material and temporal specificity. The embodied, Africa-centric positions constituted on the floor will not yield themselves to a Western psychoanalytic reading which cannot conceive of a subject that is not identical to itself. If we want to come to an Africa-centric understanding of voguing, then we need to cut our interpretations loose from Western epistemological coordinates. Santeria practitioners conceive of the world as "a dance. Its meaning lies in constant movement."<sup>52</sup> The drag balls, which share this same discourse, should be approached in the same way, through its embodiments, its performances, and its walks across the floor, not by studying the corpses of the deceased.

Finally, I want to look at the drag balls again, but in terms of the subject positions constructed in performance. What exactly is being articulated in the balls by the manipulation of various images of gender, sexuality, race, and class? Is it subversion or reinscription of terms of dominance? Or is it possible that something altogether different is happening?

## V

The West African religious discourse that the drag balls enunciate can be identified by key characteristics: a definite presence of cross-dressed and effeminate homosexuals and gay men; a social organization based on the House model; performers who occupy a low social status; and rituals that utilize possession-trance.<sup>53</sup> That the drag ball has met the first three criteria is undeniable. The conspicuous presence of low status cross-dressed homosexuals and gay men has been the single-minded focus of all the writing generated by *Paris Is Burning*. Likewise there is no debate as to whether or not the ball walkers organize themselves into Houses whose social structure is clearly an Africanism.<sup>54</sup> If my discourse identification is correct, then the mimetic performances of individuals at the balls would have to represent some form of possession-trance, and one that is clearly African in origin. If looked at through the discourse of possession-trance, then it might be possible to move the interpretation of drag balls into a different political register.

The idea of possession-trance, and specifically the African varieties, immediately conjures up definite imagery for Americans.<sup>55</sup> However I would remind the reader that the stock image of a totally dissociated trance medium, foaming at the mouth, eyes rolled back in their sockets, and convulsing uncontrollably to the sound of the drums is a Western representation painstakingly developed over the last few centuries. This imagery—shaped by church dogma, ethnocentrism, and Hollywood—is manufactured within the institutions of both racism and Orientalism/Primitivism, and then projected onto Africa.<sup>56</sup> While it is true that *some* forms of possession-trance approximate the stereotype, many forms are unremarkable and less exciting. In its more mundane manifestations it often goes unnoticed, and more so when divorced from a social context which encourages a Primitivist reading. While we have come a long way in our



understanding of African ritual practices, the phenomenon of possession-trance remains opaque. Possession-trance still labors under Western assumptions and remains one of the last bastions and most enduring representations of the Exotic Other. The issue is not whether American communities are repositories of African ritual and possession-trance performances. Rather our lack of understanding of what constitutes possession constructs a fragmented and incomplete picture.

Possession-trance performances are so widespread throughout Africa and assume so many different forms that it is hard to understand how the single term "possession-trance" has come to describe such diverse and varied phenomena. Importantly, it should be noted that "possession" is an umbrella term covering performances which display both "real" trance (during which the medium is totally dissociated and has no apparent control over or memory of his/her actions) and "assumed" trance (during which the medium controls and remembers his/her actions). The acceptance of "assumed" trance as a legitimate form of possession is a new development though. Until just recently the central point for interpretation, analysis, and testing in/by the West has been to measure the degree of "dissociation" displayed by the medium in what amounts to a Western scientific quest for the "genuine" trance, the Authentic Primitive.<sup>57</sup> This approach was based on

two highly dubious assumptions. The first of these was that a medium had to be *either* in a state of possession, a genuine trance, *or* in a condition of normal everyday awareness . . . the second false assumption . . . was that if "possession" was in some sense and in some degree an "act" consciously performed, it followed that the whole thing was therefore fraudulent.<sup>58</sup>

Andrew Strathern has suggested that while there is certainly an ethnographic interest in looking at the degree of dissociation manifested by an individual medium during a particular trance, there is no way to accurately measure and test the data. He thinks that this line of inquiry is ultimately unproductive.<sup>59</sup> In other words, while there is a curiosity in determining the presence and degree of dissociation experienced by a medium, that data are not what will determine if a particular performance qualifies as possession-trance. Whether "mediums are acting a part, rather than being genuinely unconscious of what they are doing . . . is very much

one of degree."<sup>60</sup> We recognize that dissociation is only one feature among several displayed by possession performances, and it will be present to differing degrees or may even be nonexistent.<sup>61</sup> Each form of possession-trance establishes its own critical standards for evaluating the performance of its mediums. It is not the role of the Euro-American investigator to provide a singular definition of "genuineness" and "the true." In a move that replaces dissociation with a consideration of efficacy as the primary focus, Strathern thinks that "We may have to be content with the stated aims of the actors."<sup>62</sup>

If spirit medium dissociation is not the common link between the different phenomena that fall under the label of "possession-trance," then what kind of performance are we talking about? I argue that what we have been labeling as "possession-trance" is a mode of performance that, in Africa anyway, constitutes a recognizable genre with a unique characterization technique. In this context, dissociation appears not as the defining feature of the genre, but only one among several of its presentational tactics which trance mediums can deploy or not depending on the cultural intentions and goals of particular forms. Instead we need to look at the genre complex of possession-trance performances in its entirety, and not base an identification on a Euro-American mystification of a single characteristic. While no form of possession-trance will display every possible feature, we have come to expect the appearance of a trait cluster when confronted with any specific instance of this performance tradition. Important social markers include the already-discussed association with homosexuality and cross-dressing, the low social status of the performers, and a social organization based on the House unit. These, together with characterization strategies and presentational tactics shared by both drag balls and African possession rituals, make my argument plausible.

The spirits that possess mediums in trance rituals are abstractions, that is, they are not individuals and do not represent a "personhood." In contemporary possession rituals the spirits are stereotypes, emblems, and cartoons that signify sociocultural categories of things and objects. They may represent natural forces such as wind or thunder, specific pathologies such as leprosy or syphilis, or human qualities such as honor and truth. A subgenre is possession by spirits that signify either manufactured objects or social and cultural human "types": "These range from



symbols like aeroplanes and military tanks to such abstract qualities as 'Europeanness' and 'whiteness.'<sup>63</sup> Human types can include local figures such as the Muslim Pilgrim and The Butcher found in the Bori cult among the Hausa of Nigeria; or colonial/foreign types such as the spirits of The French Military Officer, The Medical Doctor, and The Missionary of the Hauka cult among the Songhay of Niger; The Jewish Merchant among the Chopi of Mozambique; and perhaps even The White Tourist and The European Husband/Wife team described in some Yoruba masking performances in Nigeria.<sup>64</sup> The relationship between the everyday social status of the mediums and the types they are possessed by is as varied as the spirits themselves. Mediums play up, down, and sideways: they may be possessed by spirits signifying hegemonic or oppressive figures, types who are held to be socially inferior, or by objects or types of equal status and of any gender.

Within a particular possession-trance form, it is a choreographed collection/assemblage of these highly codified personifications that are paraded before the audience. These include any combination of local types, foreign/colonial types, and anthropomorphized human values and elements of the natural world. One of the dominant features of possession-trance performances is that, despite the number and variety of descending spirits within a single event, they are remarkably formal and controlled in the sequence of their appearance. Indeed,

there is no collective ecstasy, no mass madness, no trance produced by individuals coming together and being possessed by one and the same "collective soul." What there is, is an ordered set of individual trances, each of which has its own distinctive character and its own place in an overall network of personal relations . . .

The gods do not descend haphazardly but in fixed order—the order of the musical leitmotiv.<sup>65</sup>

The spirits, precisely because of their emblematic personifications and serial presentation, are therefore categorical. What the drag balls call "Categories" are the formal equivalent of what in Santeria are known as the *orishas* (the spirit pantheon). In fact, in "Elements of Vogue," Marcos Becker and Jose Gatti proposed a one-to-one correspondence between various *orishas* and specific drag ball competition categories.

The formality of the categories and their orderly sequence of presen-

tation is repeated in a lower octave by the individual trance performances. Regardless of the degree of dissociation (if any), regardless of the line of the body (angular or serpentine), regardless of the movement quality (controlled or convulsive), each category (each spirit) has a highly circumscribed signification: "Usually it involves dressing in unfamiliar, often striking and colourful attire . . . and the assumption, often with notable histrionic skill, of a pattern of behaviour accepted as appropriate to the spirit supposed to be present."<sup>66</sup> The mediums, far from being "out of control," manifest possession in every instance through gesture, posture, and movements that are always minimalized and more controlled than those used in everyday life. Nor are these dramatizations open to negotiation. Each medium is trained and rehearsed: he or she "learns the speech patterns and behaviour of the spirit believed responsible for his possession-trance, . . . its songs, rhythms, dances, and distinctive bodily movements. These, in fact, generate the 'rules' for his/her trance performances."<sup>67</sup>

Because of the shared social markers, presentational strategies, and characterization techniques, I would assert that the Harlem drag balls of *Paris Is Burning* are clearly some form of this performance tradition. This becomes more evident when we look at the drag ball in its entirety, taking into account *all* the categories and not just those in which black males present themselves as socially dominant white women. Any attempt at a partial analysis will obscure and fragment the presentational frames and lead to both misidentification of form and misinterpretation of intentions and goals. By looking at only one kind of characterization, the images of whiteness depicted on the ballroom floor appear unavoidably as the fantasy projections of individual psyches. But when all the categories are taken into account then we can see multiple vectors laying themselves out with a sophisticated precision that went previously unseen. As in the parent forms from Africa, the drag balls are offering a highly formal presentation of both local and foreign/Other human types as well as personifications of human and nonhuman qualities and values. The performers play "up" (in the category of Corporate Executive), they play "down" (in the Banjee categories), they play "across" (in the Military category), and they personify abstract qualities (in the category of Opulence). They can become the Other by engaging in cross-gender, cross-race, and cross-class significations, or they can remain identical to aspects of them-



selves through same-race, same-gender, or same-class typing. Any interpretation of the drag balls that does not take into account the total category inventory as well as the abilities of the ball walkers to engage any or all of the possible movement vectors cannot possibly hope to approach the phenomenon on its own terms (as a distinct Africanism within American culture). By identifying the drag balls as an Africanism located within the discourse of possession-trance, then a vital rereading can be facilitated. By taking into account *all* the ball categories, *all* possible vectors of direction, then something unexpected happens. Rather than the unfolding of a Eurocentric linear narrative (always onward and upward), the ball categories are tracing social directions in such a way (up/down, front/back, to/fro) as to construct a four-dimensional space, a performed cosmology, an embodied social geography.

Which brings me back to the earlier question: if dissociation is not what unites so many different performance forms under the label of “possession-trance”, then what does? In the previous section of this essay I described the leap between disjunctive, parallel discourses made by a performer like Venus Xtravaganza that resulted in her production of that which cannot be registered in a Western epistemology—a discontinuous identity. Possession-trance describes a model of the Self as performative, improvisational, and discontinuous, one that displaces the Western model of the Self as unique and continuous in the identity of its actions across time and place.<sup>68</sup> What the West labels as possession-trance are all those forms of performance in Africa which have as their goal the production of discontinuous identity. It is important to note here that when a medium manifests this Other-Self, it is not a state of dissociation that identifies it as possession-trance, but that both the medium and the audience perceive the descending spirit as another entity distinct from and independent of the medium. It is not therefore “acting” in the Euro-American sense. As Dorian Corey admonishes in *Paris*, to walk in a ball category is not simply parodic role-playing in an attempt to foist a social illusion: “no, it’s actually being able to *be* this,” to successfully occupy/usurp an Other social place. What identifies the drag ball as a form of possession-trance is not the measurement of dissociation, but the cluster of distinctive generic traits pertaining to presentational strategies and performance epistemology.<sup>69</sup>

In conclusion, I want to address the ritual construction of alternative social space, the cultural and political challenges posed by possession-trance, and what that means for an understanding of the Harlem drag balls, especially the controversial performances of whiteness.

## VI

*Paris Is Burning* wasn’t the public’s first introduction to the dance forms of the Harlem drag balls. In 1990, a year before Livingston’s film was released, Madonna presented her version of voguing in the music video of her hit song, “Vogue.” Those who were familiar with drag ballroom voguing were generally uncomfortable with Madonna’s rendition (commodification) of the dance. Superficially at least it looked like voguing, but there was something slightly off about it. Rather than an accurate demonstration of a black American dance form, it had been made somehow “white.” The precise differences in performance were hard to pinpoint. According to the street wisdom of the time, the differences were attributed to tempo—Madonna was dancing too slow. I would argue, though, that the differences were more fundamental. Madonna’s version of vogue came off as “white” due to a Eurocentric worldview. This didn’t come out in the tempo as much as it was expressed in the utterance of a command around which she organized her performance: “Strike a pose.” And it should come as no surprise that this command was accompanied by black and white still images.

Ballroom performers do not “pose” on the floor. In the language of the voguing Houses, one does not *pose at* a ball, one *walks in* a ball. The difference here is between posing and walking, stasis and movement, marking a place and marking a space. This is the same difference that we have seen every time that drag ballroom performance is translated into a Euro-epistemology. Just as Livingston and her critics relied on the black and white still photo to stabilize and contain their subject, so too did Madonna. Once the subject has been stabilized and posed, the ephemeral African discourse embodied on the ballroom floor, based as it is on movement, fragments itself for translation into an alien epistemology. The problem here is not just one of cross-cultural translation, but the fact that critics have been seemingly unaware that they have been engaged in the



act of translation at all. This unreflecting use of interpretive codes, by regarding them as simple acts of perception, is the trademark of the visual bias of the West. Thus we are confronted with critical interpretations of *Paris Is Burning* and the balls that are both Euro-American (in the way that the translations organize themselves around static visuals) and Eurocentric (in the unreflexivity of the translational act).<sup>70</sup>

The differences here come down to understanding the drag ball as “place” or “space.” According to Michel de Certeau the difference between them is that

The law of the “proper” rules in the place: . . . the elements [are] each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location. . . it implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction . . . Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it . . . In contradistinction to the place, it has none of the univocity or stability of a “proper.”<sup>71</sup>

As opposed to Madonna’s vogue which was organized around the *utterance of a command* for stability and place (“Strike a pose”), the drag balls, in true African fashion, operate under *the enunciation of an obligation* (accruing to House membership) to walk, to engage a direction, to shape a space. The act of walking is central to the ball. The vectors of direction that construct the ball’s transformational social intersections are products of these walks. This linking of acts and footsteps, this opening of meanings and directions, effects an “emptying-out and wearing-away” of the signified; it liberates spaces to be occupied.<sup>72</sup> It is this occupation of an Other social place (via the liberation of space) that is, in this case, the real meaning of “possession.”

The various images of gender, race, and class that are mimetically inhabited by House members and paraded on the ballroom floor constitute themselves as space, as a praxis, in which to embody a social geography, perform a cosmology. The ritual performance of a cosmology in which the elements are personified abstractions is a mode of knowledge that is distinctly African. In fact, it appears to span the sub-Saharan continent as a master motif in the organization of African knowledge.<sup>73</sup> In her study of African rituals of cosmology, *Iron, Gender, and Power*, Eugenia Herbert demonstrated how cosmologies are ritually embodied when there is the

need “to explain what power is and how it operates.”<sup>74</sup>

The ritual construction of a cosmology is based on extending “the body microcosm... to organize macrocosmic space” via two primary tactics.<sup>75</sup> The first “follows largely from the ideology of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphizing the world is part of the attempt to . . . mak[e] it rationally comprehensible in the light of human experience.”<sup>76</sup> The second is the achievement of oppositional balance between extremes of power. The embodiments and personifications of social abstractions in the cosmology are always presented as binaries. In the case of the drag balls, the binaries are fixed according to the status criteria of the specific society (American) in which the balls are staged, that is, the rights of access to power held by those who qualify according to race, class, and gender. While it may be true that some categories in the balls enact images of white, upper class women these are never in isolation. Within an African cosmology there would be no enactments of “whiteness” without those of “blackness”; no embodiments of Woman without those of Man; no signification of the upper class without those of working class. This is why categories like “Banjee Boy” and “Military” are so central to the ball, and why it is vital to consider these kinds of personifications against the drag categories. It is precisely these oppositional binaries that plot the trajectories through the ball’s geographic space that one must traverse in order to understand the flow of power and tap it for transformational ends. The segmentation of the ball into competition categories is at once a cause and an effect of the cosmogonic operation as surely as is the pantheon of the *orishas* in Santeria ritual.

When looked at as ritual cosmology, as embodied social geography, then the performances of cross-race, cross-class, and cross-gender are not fantasy enactments. To the contrary, the balls—and specifically because the performances are organized around social binaries—constitute a pragmatic assessment of life. The balls are not a glyph of where the performers want to go, but a realization of where they are. The images of whiteness here do not represent an imagined world; they are more like features of a landscape. If the enactments on the ballroom floor were *only* of women, *only* of whiteness, *only* of the upper class, then the balls might be construed as a delusional ignorance of the social. Critics who argue that the ball walkers are engaged in self-oppressing fantasies can only make such

an argument by focusing on only one kind of mimetic performance (black men embodying white women) to the exclusion of all others. They drop from consideration more than sixty per cent of the performances and then reframe the balls as sites for the production of ignorance. But as I have argued, these interpretations are products of translation (more a description of the critic's performance than of the ball walkers').

In order to understand what is happening in the balls, I want to address two pivotal issues brought up by Peggy Phelan in her interpretation of the film. First, Phelan does understand that there is a play of binaries on the ballroom floor. But she interprets the drag performances as indicating "a performative space in which the binary is broken down."<sup>77</sup> As I have pointed out, in an African ritual cosmology the binaries are not broken down, they are assiduously maintained. Maintenance of social binaries is mandatory for establishing the termini used to plot trajectories of movement. Second, Phelan conceptualizes whiteness as "unmarked," that it signifies a power of domination that masks itself "and therefore escapes political surveillance" in order to guard its codes of signification against usurpation.<sup>78</sup> But where she believes that the ball walkers are engaged in a linear narrative, a movement from marked visibility (blackness) to the privilege of the unmarked and hidden source of power (whiteness), the purpose of the ritual cosmology is precisely opposite—to mark that which is not normally seen. When we look at all the ball categories, realizing that the binaries are fully maintained, then the political challenge posed by the balls begins to emerge.

Rituals of cosmology in Africa function as a school, a place of learning. Indeed, Herbert equates such rituals as the sub-Saharan African equivalent of the Alexandrine library.<sup>79</sup> Where the means of power and domination are unmarked, cosmological performance seeks to break down the privilege of invisibility behind which power is wielded. It is not that performers want to pass from a marked to an unmarked status. What the balls do is to mark whiteness, to embody it, to study it—not to become identical to it but to know it. This is why possession-trance mediums are almost uniformly of low social status. It is those of low social status who have the motivation to seek transformation and to unmask and expose the unseen channels governing the flow of social and material resources. Henry Drewal, in his studies of the performance of whiteness by West

Africans in their worship of the spirit Mami Wata, has convincingly demonstrated that the devotees and mediums do not want to *be* Euro-white in their daily lives.<sup>80</sup> Instead whiteness is ritually embodied as a means to knowledge of the Other. By marking whiteness, by making its effects visible and material, mediums reshape, resymbolize, and re-present whiteness in order to control and exploit its effects by taking "possession" of its codes of signification.<sup>81</sup>

The cosmogonic operation of the drag balls becomes coherent though only when read through the discourse of possession-trance. It does so in two ways: first, its genre markers extend beyond the event frame of the ball to include the social organization of the House and the Mother; second, it provides a model for discontinuity. Reading the balls without taking these factors into consideration would be equivalent to basing a theory of the balls on a synecdochal reading of *The Transvestite*. There would be no way to explain the balls as a means to empowerment. While the invocation of a cosmology (and this includes the drag ball) is always an explanation of what power is and how it operates, it is the discourse of possession-trance that plots its course as it moves from body to body.

Power, as embodied in the cosmology, is never seen as a static state, but rather is "the means by which desired transformations are accomplished."<sup>82</sup> Anthony Giddens defines power and domination likewise as the ability to establish and produce codes of signification. He goes on to explain that the exercise of power

depends on the mobilization of two distinguishable types of resource. Allocative resources refer to capabilities—or, more accurately, to forms of transformative capacity—generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena. Authoritative resources refer to types of transformative capacity over persons or actors. . . . The transformational character of resources is logically equivalent to, as well as inherently bound up with the instantiation of, that of codes and normative sanctions.<sup>83</sup>

Both types of resource need to be ordered. In the case of the drag balls, we can see how it is that the Mothers of the Houses are indeed nodes of power.

Power is neither deployed on the drag ballroom floor nor in the Houses considered singly. It is the two working in tandem that facilitates its exercise. Authoritative resources, that is, transformative capacities over

persons and actors, are deployed in the ball; while allocative resources, that is, command over goods and material phenomena, are deployed in the Houses. It is the Mother of the House who performs the suturing and thus becomes the primary site of enunciative differentiation for the mimetic performances in the balls. The knowledge produced by the drag balls is validated precisely through the Mother's establishment of a social network (the House) centered around her mastery of mimesis/possession (the usurpation of Other codes of signification). This is why, at the beginning of this essay, I stated that the body of the Mother was the necessary material site of the intersection and reorganization of the discourses whose articulation constitutes the ball. Her body is the channel between ball and House that "precariously contains[s the ] explosion of the transgressive moment that allows for and indeed creates the 'mimetic slippage' whereby reproduction jumps to metamorphosis."<sup>84</sup> Without mimetic slippage (via the Mother and into the House), the transgressive personifications of the drag balls would be safely contained within the event frame and have no impact. The Mothers are, quite literally, the living proof that power can be drawn from mimesis.

The transgressive power of the balls lies in the ability of the Houses to reinterpellate subjects, and which is demonstrated by the children in their assumption of The-Name-of-The-Mother. The Mother's power is not to be taken lightly for this is not just an act of renomination. In possession-trance performance, the mimetic enactments are always understood to constitute the presence of an entity or being which is distinct from and independent of the medium. Because these enactments are situational, they provide the means of discontinuity. At the point of achievement of discontinuity (what drag ball culture calls "realness"), the transgression of mimesis becomes the transformational moment and is marked by the performer's interpellation as subject by the Mother. Indeed, a ball walker does not assume The-Name-of-The-Mother until *after* "snatching a trophy" at a ball. This is identical to what happens in Santeria: one becomes a child of the *orisha* (*omo-orisha*) only after manifesting the spirit through possession-trance. Reinterpellation in these cases marks the performer as having crossed over into perpetual liminality to occupy a space between," in which it is far from easy to say who is the imitator and who is the imitated, which is copy and which is original."<sup>85</sup>



The way that *Paris Is Burning* and the critical writing on the film have figured the drag balls offers a deadly proof positive of Horkheimer and Adorno's major thesis in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* "that civilization (meaning Western civilization—the civilization of Capital) has replaced mimetic behavior proper by organized control of mimesis:"<sup>86</sup> "Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed . . . the severity with which the rulers prevented their own followers and the subjugated masses from reverting to mimetic modes of existence . . . has been the condition for civilization."<sup>87</sup> The Unique Individual of the Enlightenment, the subject that is identical to itself, that desiring subject whose actions are continuous across time and space, is the product of mimetic repression.

Under regimes of mimetic repression, power is always and precisely the ability to instantiate (and cause to be [re]produced) codes of signification and normative sanctions. It is the interpellation of subjects into their "proper place" in society. The measure of power is the success of its assignments, that is, that subjects perform the codes assigned to them. "What is essential to grasp here," says Michael Taussig,

is the strangely naive and ultimately perplexing point that appearance is power and this is a function of the fact that appearance can acquire density and substance. . . . Epistemologies of science bound to the notion that truth always lies behind (mere) appearance sadly miss this otherwise obvious point.<sup>88</sup>

The real threat of the drag balls and of all forms of possession-trance is that, first, by discontinuous embodiments, the density and substance of appearances behind which power is wielded instantly accrues to the performers; and second, that the Mothers, as nodes of power, are able to pass this substance through the containing wall of the event frame and into everyday life in the Houses. They are, in the strictest sense, possession mediums.

The usurpation and performance of codes of signification not properly their own is the usurpation of dominant authority. It can pose a serious threat to the exercise of power. Among the Songhay of Niger, there are cults who are possessed by the Hauka. The Hauka are spirits of colonialism who manifest themselves as various figures of authority—military officers,



colonial administrators, medical doctors, and missionaries. In possession-trance performances these spirits are understood as entities distinct from the trance mediums. When White Colonial Official possesses a medium, it is actually the official who is present, not simply a characterization issuing from the medium-as-author. Thus the commands given by this spirit are received as valid authority. The French administration in 1920s Niger recognized these spirits as a dangerous threat and attempted to dissolve the cult. The threat was that the Hauka mediums were draining colonial authority by means of mimesis. In a panic-missive circulated in the colonial government the reason given for suppression of the cult was that it "copies our administration and wants to supplant our authority."<sup>89</sup> It is perhaps not surprising to learn that this mimetic usurpation of authority eventually led to the collapse of the colonial government and the independence of the nation.

What is at stake in the Harlem drag balls is exactly this issue of authority. It is not an issue of what signifying codes are used to perform race, class, and gender, but who exactly has the right to engage them. Without a continuous identity that performs its properly assigned codes, it becomes hard to tell who is ruler and who is ruled. The term "realness," as used in the balls, does not signify an image quality; rather the "real" is that which is authorized. Western civilization depends on the predictability of bodies in order to maintain itself. When challenged, it brings the combined weight of its apparatuses of mimetic repression to bear on the challengers of authority. Mimetic repression has a motto, and one which we have heard before. It is a command to proper interpellation, a command to assume one's "place," a command for stability and the univocity of continuous identity: "Strike a Pose!" As knowledge of the drag balls surfaced in the mainstream a warning siren went off, and a concerted effort was made to defuse the ontological threat. Documentation of the phenomenon (e.g., Livingston), renditions of its forms (e.g., Madonna), and critical essays (e.g., hooks and Phelan) seemed united in their goal of mimetic repression. That is why, throughout this essay, I have treated the film and the critical writing about the film as a unitary phenomenon. What this coalition of mass media and institutional power have told us is not so much about the drag balls, but how the apparatuses of mimetic repression operate.

I have attempted in this essay to argue that entire discourses may constitute themselves as Africanisms that organize complexes of material phenomena at the level of deep structure. I want to suggest also that there are intersections between African-American and Queer communities that offer potential new sites for research. If, as argued by others, both race and sexual orientation are effects produced by mimetic repression,<sup>90</sup> then possession-trance offers a common model of resistance and opens new debates about the radical potential of mimesis and drag. Why the discourse of possession-trance entered American culture in different sites (Santeria and the drag balls) and at the same historical moment is another issue, and I leave that answer to a future essay. What is certain is that we make choices and judgements in the way that we read cultural phenomena. The difference between my interpretation and those of other critics is that I chose to read for epistemological subversion rather than reinscription. By identifying social agency and resistance through an analysis of performance process located between agents and involving the recrossing of particular citational terrains, I have hoped to show how performances are always a use or negotiation of the relations among agents and, as such, are available to analysis in ways that individual desire, often construed as an unchallengeable bottom line, has not.<sup>91</sup>

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## CELEBRITY JACK: THE INTERNET AND THE DEATH OF CAMP

I think most of you can recall Harry Harlow's rhesus monkey experiments in the 60s. Harlow substituted a cloth monkey doll for an actual monkey mama and found that the infant bonded with the surrogate as if it was the real thing. His experiments demonstrated the importance and depth of initial imprinting experiences. Interestingly, the conclusion of Harlow's experiments in 1968 coincided, almost to the day, with the opening of *Boys in the Band* on the New York stage.

The idea of initial imprinting has ramifications for considering some past and current gay identity performances. What the effeminate and normative versions of gay male identity have in common is that they are both the result of this process. For most of the last century, this process of imprinting initial experiences in gay men has been a doubled one. Sexual practices and preferences are imprinted during the first formative sexual experiences. But the way that gay men choose to inhabit, embody, and perform social identities is from the imprinting of whatever cultural representations of gay men are available at any given time in history. And I'm sure we all know men whose social identity performance is the opposite of the role and behaviour they adopt in the bedroom. The oxymoronic butch queen, for example, is the result of a non-sutured identity formation coming from two separate imprinting processes—one for establishing sexual practice and the other for constructing social identity performance.

Until and for the several years after Stonewall, there was only one gay social representation available for those wanting to enact a public sexual identity—the effeminate homosexual male. While the existence of the nor-



mative gay male was known in both the gay and the scientific communities, such knowledge had not yet achieved wide cultural circulation. In those days, it was common for gay youth to assume an effeminate posture as part of the process of coming out. Effeminate social enactments provided a foundation from which to signify difference and to build an adult sexual identity:

many ... men embraced the style of the fairies before rejecting it: becoming a fairy was the first step many men took in the process of making sense of their apparent sexual and gender difference and reconstructing an image of themselves. A disproportionate number of the most flamboyant fairies, by most accounts, were young men.<sup>1</sup>

In almost all cases, the fem performance would be discontinued by the age of twenty-five. It was transitional.

Certainly Gay Liberation Front politics of the late 60s and early 70s used the social visibility accruing to the effeminate male as the tool for promoting the new concept of "coming out." GLF urged gay men to flaunt it, camp it up, and be outrageous in their public deportment. That is because in order to achieve the goal of social visibility they had to activate the one cultural representation of gay men available at the time. Drag and Camp were "to call into question the entire structure of our society. It was simultaneously the symbol of gay liberation and an actual political strategy."<sup>2</sup> Public performance of gay identity became the centerpiece of liberationist strategy.<sup>3</sup> We forget that just two generations ago, confrontational effeminacy was a form of political activism.<sup>4</sup>

The first foray into a public masculinized gay social identity occurred in the early mid-70s with the clones. While this was a masculine identity (often mistakenly labeled as "hyper-masculine"), it was not a normative one. It was a specifically and identifiably gay male masculinity. As such, it fell into the category of "Camp" as I have previously argued it, that is, Camp as the production of gay male social visibility. Certainly nobody ever mistakenly identified clones as straight men. Thomas Piontek, for one, has offered a prime example of clone masculinity in the performances of the disco group The Village People, described by him as "supermacho."<sup>5</sup> Yet, there was nothing really macho about them at all. They were giant queens in drag. Whatever perform-

ance of masculinity they were attempting to enact, it was as gay as a Harlem drag ball.

It is my belief that clone performance was based on or borrowed from that of the bull dagger dyke, and that it was lesbians who taught gay men to be masculine. That was how a non-normative masculinity entered into the signifying repertoire that up until then had consisted solely of the fem monomage. This idea of a specifically gay male masculinity as a lesbian inheritance has, to my knowledge, not been suggested before. However, a study of butch lesbian dress codes in the years immediately leading up to the advent of the clones shows that the look (black leather motorcycle jacket, plaid flannel shirt, levis, key ring, boots) was firmly established by bull daggers just prior to its adoption by gay men. In any case, clone masculinity is important to consider as it shows the possibility for the enactment of a separate gay rather than straight or normative signifying mode under the classification "masculine." Keeping this in mind, I turn now to the term "straight-acting" that is used in self-description on internet gay meeting sites.

Tim Bergling engages an extended discussion of the term "straight-acting" throughout his book *Sissyphobia*. But I think he takes it too literally. What most fail to realize is that the term "straight-acting" is an internet term.<sup>6</sup> It was adopted to describe virtual identity, not social identity, and was directly related to internet technology and capabilities that existed in the early days of the web. For many years, gay internet meeting sites could only facilitate text profiles. You couldn't post photos. The term "straight-acting" evolved to describe oneself in lieu of photos. It did not mean "masculine" but rather "non-effeminate" and used to give someone a general impression of your social demeanour. It was, like the clones, a gay masculinity contrasted against a gay effeminacy.

That this was so can be noted that it was commonplace to engage in a put-down of the effeminate gay male, using exaggerated and outrageously stereotyped descriptions that could occupy as much as or more than 50% of the profile text. This was the construction of what I call the "virtual queen." So central is the body of the effeminate gay male to gay identity in general that, even with the disappearance of the fem in real life, one had to be called into existence through text to supply the missing coordinate. I use the past tense here because the term "straight-acting," along with the virtual queen, has been disappearing from internet use in the

CLONE



last few years, replaced now by the much more normatively sinister term “masculine.” But the prolific presence of internet profile self-descriptions composed of put-downs of effeminate men “suggests the extent to which they saw themselves as part of a continuum linking to the public stereotype.”<sup>7</sup> The queen, though a vanishing breed, still forms an important anchor in establishing gay identity either through identification or most often through differentiation.

“Straight-acting” has a more nuanced definition than simply a measure of assumed masculinity. What it denotes is that the person using the term in self-description has developed a gay sexuality divorced from gay community. Straight-acting can be defined as “non-socialized gay.” Of course, Camp and effeminacy would take a beating on the internet amongst the non-socialized crowd. Camp and effeminacy are learned behaviours, they emerge from a community setting, and are skills honed through rehearsal and critical reception.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there is an issue of private versus public identity. It has been noted that, in many cases, there is no real difference between effeminate and masculinized gay men in terms of behaviour except in regard to social context. The hostility projected toward the Camp queens is based on the fact that they perform publicly rather than within the security of home or gay-specific social contexts.<sup>9</sup>

An additional irony is that “visibility was the precondition for the establishment of lesbian and gay communities.”<sup>10</sup> As I have identified Camp as the production of gay social visibility, then it was precisely Camp that undergirded the formation of those first viable post-Stonewall gay communities. The hostility projected toward Camp enactments by non-socialized homosexuals constitutes, then, a fear or rejection of community (i.e., camp) and a resurrection of the closet. The fact that this celebration of the closet takes place within a cyber “community” of sorts makes contemporary anti-Camp sentiment extremely problematic. An online community of closeted men attacking out gay men is something that would have been impossible and incomprehensible prior to the advent of IT.

There is a group of gay men, usually under the age of twenty-eight, who were raised on the internet devoid of physical contact with other gay boys/men. In terms of the imprinting process that I wrote of earlier, the internet has had bizarre effects on gay identity performance and sexual

practices. Beginning as early as ten years old, these boys’ connection to other gay men consists of online activity in the form of browsing, chatting, and masturbating for each other on camera. Influenced by the techno coupled with a celebrity-centered public life and access to visual images of every kind of kink imaginable results in an unfiltered knowledge of sex before practice even begins. It has destroyed the community-orientation of gayness as well as the personal experiential base from which sexual knowledge was traditionally gained in increments. ★

Nowadays, easy internet access to unlimited porn presents young boys with images of every sexual act imaginable. Sites like X-Tube offer up a never-ending flow of video clips of one or two minutes duration. These videos are not produced by professional studios but are amateur contributions made by the average Joe. Thus, to the inexperienced, the images are read as examples of everyday life practice, i.e. the way people do it. They become educational materials in the hands of boys and closeted adult men. These images are not sorted or contextualized and are presented as equivalent. There is no differentiation between masturbation and fisting. Besides the traditional porn staples of masturbation, oral and anal sex, there are equal quantities of images of leathersex, fisting, watersports, sounding, e-stim, bukkake, autofellatio, dominant-subordinate role playing, and a menagerie of fetishes.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the proliferation of fetish videos on the internet has caused a collapse of distinctions between various sexual acts, and “fetish” has become simply synonymous with “preference.”

For these boys, sex exists first as a series of projected images. When they finally start having sex, their models for practice are the mediated images they have grown up with, have been imprinted with. Thus they stage their own actions within an imagined media framework acting as the fulfilment of the online images that provided their sexual initiation. Sex is conducted as if a camera was present. Many gay kids nowadays have absolutely no qualms about going online and masturbating for others on camera, even if they are virgins and hold conservative sexual values. Being sexual on camera is just a routine thing for them. Teenage masturbation has been transformed into a media event (“I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille”).

This affects sexual behavior in surprising ways. On-camera masturbation becomes the template for action. It is quite common that sex with



another ends in a recreation of the early teen cam experiences. The partners will pull away from each other for the money shot and transform each other into visual props for solo masturbation. Foreplay is lacking and the average length of a sexual session is ten minutes, if even that.<sup>12</sup> Sexual technique, something that must be learned from others, is extremely retarded.

One of the most remarkable examples of the slippage between video image and sexual performance is clearly evident in oral sex. The porn convention shows oral sex as a form of foreplay. During the money shot (ejaculation) the insertor pulls out and then concludes the act by masturbating onto the face of the partner. This practice goes by the contemporary slang term of receiving a "facial." The dominance of the facial in sex videos has taught a new generation that this is precisely what is meant by "oral" sex. In effect, what passes for oral sex nowadays is just another form of masturbation. The online indoctrination to and imprinting of behaviour has led to the substitution of a porn-specific filmic convention for an everyday life practice. The imprinting effect is so overwhelming that younger men believe that receiving a facial actually produces an orgasmic sensation as their partner's autoerotic climactic pleasure is intellectually transferred to them and interpreted as their own. The vast majority of online solicitations for oral sex are generally couched in a request to receive a facial.

There is no longer a double imprinting taking place. Sexual practice and sexual identity performance, previously two separate learning processes, have either merged into one or, in many cases, the social identity performance does not exist at all and has been subsumed within the sexual act. And all of this takes place in virtual space, there is no social signification of an identity. And without social signification, Camp cannot exist. Sexual practice is no longer the determinant in adopting a gay identity. An unusually high percentage of online cruisers are men who solicit other men for sex while simultaneously and emphatically pointing out that they are not gay. In fact, one can see solicitations that read "straight guy looking for another straight guy for sex, no gay guys." If *homosex* is not what makes one gay, then what is? In these cases, it is apparent that "gay" refers now only to public identity and performance, not to sexual activity.

In a pre-Stonewall era, the models for youth imitation were not explicitly sexual. What was copied were, as now, visual images. And what

was visible were camp queens in public contexts. A public performance of gayness preceded actual gay sex. Thus, as mentioned earlier, many young gay men passed through a stage of effeminacy on the journey to community and eventual partnering. With today's techno saturation, the first images of homosexuality a young person encounters are pornographic sexual acts accessed through a home computer. Porn, not social behavior, becomes the initiatory role model.

In an era where social signification of gayness is no longer required, it would be convenient to make the sweeping statement that Camp is no longer relevant. Daniel Harris, writing in 1996, concluded that "Camp cannot survive our ultimate and inevitable release from the social burden of our homosexuality. Oppression and camp are inextricably linked, and the waning of one necessitates the death of the other."<sup>13</sup> Harris, like many others before him, prematurely proclaimed the death of Camp.<sup>14</sup> Most of these funerals took place between the late 80s and mid-90s. Yet, this was precisely the period when traditional Camp was experiencing a spectacular revival.

Camp, used as a tool for political action by GLF in the late 60s and early 70s was called into service again by organizations such as AIDS ACT UP and Queer Nation in the fight against AIDS in the 80s and 90s.<sup>15</sup> And its function in these later manifestations remained identical with its earlier deployment by GLF—the production of gay social visibility. While it may be true that the need to produce a public signification of gayness on the part of individuals had greatly diminished, Camp was still there within the gay collective signifying vocabulary. Activists

were able to turn already existing techniques of genderfuck drag [and camp], used to contest oppressive discourses of gender, to the new use of negotiating the oppressive discourses surrounding AIDS.... those strategies already existed within the collective memories (the performance repertoire) of gay men.<sup>16</sup>

There will be times that Camp must be resurrected to achieve certain political and personal agendas that call for the public display of identity.

Under the influence of the internet we are seeing the divorce of *homosex* from gay social identity. It is not only Camp that is dying, but also the category "gay" itself. For if one can participate in *homosex* without taking on a gay identity, then the reverse is also true, i.e. one does not

have to be homosexual in order to perform a public gay identity. What matters in public Camp performance is that there is a social signification of gayness that may or not be correlate with the social actor's own sexual orientation or identity.

A truly fascinating example of this is a peculiar, though spectacularly fantastic and nostalgic, version of transgay where butch dykes appear in public as effeminate gay male youth, perhaps the best Camp I have seen in decades. After being out of the country for many years, I recall sitting in an upscale bar in California that seemed inundated with extremely and classically effeminate young gay men. I was surprised to see this, especially as that particular social performance had all but died out. My companions pointed out that these were not boys but were actually lesbians performing the role of femboys.<sup>17</sup> The performances were so skilful that I was reading the dykes as gay boys. It appears that not only did the dykes teach gay men how to be masculine (i.e., clones), but ironically it is now the dykes who are preserving the gay male heritage of effeminacy. Perhaps it will be the butch dykes who will teach male homosexuals how to be "oh so gay" again.

Along the same lines, the most recent example of Camp performance is the current summer program on the Logo channel cable television—*Ru Paul's Drag U*. *Drag U* features gay drag queens doing makeovers on biological females. These are not at all the same as the makeovers that programs like *Oprah* have engaged in. The women of *Drag U* are transformed into actual drag queens, boldly Camp and proudly signifying. This separation of Camp from the individual's social sexual identity capitalizes on the lack/disappearance of gay boy performers in everyday life. Camp here reveals gayness as a discourse, a set of vacant sites that can be filled by any person regardless of their actual sexual orientation or identity.

So is Camp actually dead? No, but Camp performance and its relation to individuals' gay identities has been altered. My definition of Camp as the social signification of gayness remains unchanged. What has changed is the *need* for such social signification. It remains within collective memory, able to be activated for either political or entertainment purposes. Camp today, divorced from personal identity, is an institution invoked in framed events that are packaged, ritualized, mediated, and often politi-

cized. Political protest, drag shows, pride parades, gay marriage ceremonies, and television reality shows seem to be what remains of Camp. What its future manifestations will be remains unseen, but it will still be some time before the R.I.P. headstone is erected.



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**IN DEFENSE OF GAY/PERFORMANCE**

THOMAS A. KING AND MOE MEYER

**W**here many queer theorists have written about “the body” (but either do not seem to have one themselves or know what do with the one they’ve got), we emphasize the specificity, materiality, and sociality of the bodies and relations of gay men, aiming toward what J. Scott Chipman called “a kinesthetic basis for redefining and sustaining a politics of queer performative acts and activisms.” A genealogy of gay performances might insist that the materiality of bodies, pleasures, and identities cannot be dissociated from gestural and enunciative tactics, the occupation and negotiation of particular social and performance spaces, and the production of pleasures and pains within relations of dominance.

Concerned since the early 1990s about an increasing elision of the two terms “queer” and “LGBTI” (or its variants, an elision that has divested both terms of their analytical specificity and potential, essentializing “queer” as belonging to LGBTI persons, on the one hand, while denying LGBTI persons their historical specificity, on the other) and about the increasing domination of performance studies by linguistic theories of performativity (and the inevitable confusion of the two terms “performance” and “performativity” in much scholarship since then), we have turned here to a different project. Our work, originally for a proposed collection to be titled *Memory, Practice, Pleasure: Gay Performances*, was an initial attempt to reopen a discussion of specific gay male performance practices, as these have been grounded in and intersected with materialities of space and location, technique and technology, access to everyday and aesthetic performance resources, and other markers of personhood such as race,

ethnicity, and class. We considered such questions as: How might we chart the performances both celebrated and demonized as integral, even defining aspects of gay men's everyday and radical practices? What history do gay men (re)produce and (re)enact through their performances both on the stage and in everyday life? How will gay men and queers desire themselves, and each other, in the 21st century? Remembering the past and anticipating the future of gayness—the enmeshing of memory, practice, and pleasure for gay men—are crucial aspects of all gay performances; the performance of gayness always includes the reflexive negotiation of temporalities and spatialities irreducible to (but lived by) individuals, a practical knowledge put into action by individual and collective agents. Although any performance can only be appreciated in the immediate situation that generates it and the traces it leaves for future performances, performance is never reducible to the straw figure of a naive presence ignorant of its own performativity or a “context” easily bounded by a stage proscenium, auditorium, or ritual space or the face-to-face interactions of social actors. To make this assumption is to ignore the ordinary knowledge of agents.

Tracing intersections of memory, practice, and pleasure may provide for gay men what Joseph Roach has called “genealogies of performance ... [that] document the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations.”<sup>1</sup> We take a performance-centered approach to gay identity. We are interested in what Margaret Thompson Drewal has called the “acquired, in-body techniques” that agents use to present themselves in specific times and spaces, to negotiate interactions with others, and to create opportunities for improvisation and revision.<sup>2</sup> Acquired, in-body techniques are the means whereby agents use performance to create the space and the means of the next performance. The specificity of a performance is not made intelligible by a determinable “context” (as critics of “performance” might assume that performers believe) but by the performers' genealogical inquiries into the very embodied techniques and practical knowledge that they employ in the process of taking action. Gayness understood as performance, then, is the set of embodied and experiential knowledges, techniques, institutions, and discourses marking and constraining, but also enabling, the material and historical agency whereby gay men (whether “self-identified”

or socially marked as such) have restored or revised the traces of other gay men.<sup>3</sup> We might consider, for example, the cultural phenomenon of camp as a social agency based on remembering and citing the bodies of gay forebears (in Meyer's “The Signifying Invert”). Acquired in-body techniques, as the means of improvising with and negotiating the very discourses that constitute and constrain our embodied experiences, are both the vehicle of any performance and the condition of the possibility of the next one.

Studies of such specific gay and queer practices as fetishism, sado-masochism, drag, and camp have typically attempted to achieve what Patrice Pavis has called “a taxonomy of codes” investing the media of the performance with a realness beyond its manipulation by performers.<sup>4</sup> These kinds of analysis work by ignoring the performers and then refocusing on “the object residue that remains after the queer agent has been rendered invisible,” as Meyer has described the “camp trace” (in “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp”). Instead we look at how interpretive agents (performers) set up and negotiate codes through the manipulation of practices, spaces, languages, and objects in interaction with others. Pavis's warning about a fetishism of the code is useful here:

It would be more worthwhile not to search for a taxonomy of codes first of all, but to observe how each performance makes and conceals its own codes, how they develop through the play, how shifts are effected from explicit codes (or conventions) to implicit ones. Instead of considering the code as a system “hidden” within the performance that needs to be brought to light through analysis, it would be fairer to talk about a *process of setting up a code* through its mediator, for it is the interpreter, whether critic or actor, who decides to read a given aspect of the performance according to a freely selected code. The code, thus conceived, is more a method of analysis than a property of the object analyzed.<sup>5</sup>

This is not a disembodied, rationalist, or objectivist process. Rather, the embodied agent negotiates body/space that remembers previous negotiations. Body/space precedes and is at once the media, scene, and effect of these negotiations. As King has suggested elsewhere, the materiality and historicity of objects, positions, and places are likewise effects of prior negotiations and uses, and not properties that “belong” to individual agents



or that “inhere” in objects, bodies, or locations. Assuming that the ways gay men have theorized (“on the ground”), talked about, and traded information about sexual techniques and pleasures has been a primary vehicle for facilitating pleasures and enabling gay identifications, King has suggested that gay men’s history consists in the negotiation, restoration, preservation, or transformation of the techniques acquired and spaces opened up by prior performances.<sup>6</sup> It is vital that queer (and) performance theorists, scholars, critics, and artists demonstrate that performance practices are embedded in material histories. As the contributors to Meyer’s 1994 anthology *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* showed, queer performance practices are important negotiations of and interventions in material practices. In his essay “Rethinking *Paris is Burning*,” Meyer positions Foucault’s insistence that discourses be analyzed in their material specificity as practices as a foundational gesture of performance criticism. Confrontations of specific gay and queer bodies and public spaces are missing from many theoretical accounts. We need to provide detailed contextual and processual descriptions that can form the ground upon which to theorize; such descriptions might show how local knowledge determines what constitutes, for example, a gay drag or camp performance in terms of space. Only through the occupation of a (concrete or virtual) space can one make oneself out as/and gay. In this sense, an occupation of space—a performance—precedes and constitutes what might seem an essential relation between social identities and spaces (gay bars, gay men’s play-spaces, gay “ghettoes,” and so on). The practice of space precedes identification, then. Theorizing in the absence of strict attention to the specificity and materiality of agents’ performances can make “queer performativity” less than useful as the basis for evaluating the effects (personal, collective, political) of specific gay performances. As performance theorists, a key goal is to use theory to explain and enable performance and not, as is too often the case, to use (colonize) performance as a way to illustrate theoretical constructs.

Our emphasis on the genealogies of performing bodies may be contrasted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s location of the constellation shame/performativity as the “first” and “permanent” “structuring fact of [queer] identity.”<sup>7</sup> By the mid-90s, as concepts of queer performativity derived from (post)structural linguistics, speech-act theory, and deconstruc-

tive reading practices enabled the assimilation of both gay and lesbian studies and performance studies to the established disciplines of the academy, attention to the queer subject of shame and trauma displaced analyses of gay and lesbian performance emphasizing social actors’ reflexive engagement and critical repetition of the embodied techniques of gender and sexuality, such as the account of camp parody offered by *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. As Sedgwick put it, “shame/performativity may get us a lot further with the cluster of phenomena generally called ‘camp’ than the notion of parody will, and more too than will any opposition between ‘depth’ and ‘surface.’”<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the queer subject rather than on gay performers may have allowed the universalization of LGBTI studies and its readier assimilation to the residual humanistic ethics of the academy. But Sedgwick failed to interrogate the distinction between the shaming of the individual subject, on the one hand, and the stigmatization of social groups, on the other. Interestingly, social critics have long rejected the idea that subcultures are formed primarily as responses to stigma. Although Sedgwick went on (ironically in this context) to argue that Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis “has been all but fully recuperated in new alibis for the repression hypothesis”<sup>9</sup>—as if aware that her own use of “shame” might be read in terms of repression—one might ask why Sedgwick chose the psychologizing term “shaming” over a more overtly social and political term such as “normalization.” To locate camp as a contestation of *normalization* rather than an effect of shaming is to emphasize that institutionalized discourses work on and through the surfaces of the body (the flesh and its pains and pleasures) to produce “the soul” (the psyche) as Foucault argued so powerfully in *Discipline and Punish*. This is not to deny the experiential reality of shame for many queer subjects but insist that phenomenological and psychological analyses of shame cannot fully interrogate the social mechanisms that produce gay bodies, identifications, and pleasures, nor provide a method for understanding queer agents’ abilities to perform their bodies otherwise. It is not invariably the case that collective shaming works, or that individuals operate within performance networks because they have been “shamed.” Camp may as readily be a response to the failure of normalization, an opportunizing of the surplus brought about by normalization’s own inefficiency. But more significantly camp is a recovery and redeployment of



other discourses, other histories of the body, its imitative capacities, and its *pleasures* that normalization asks us to disavow. As the late Randy Esslinger (Chicago drag performer Gurlette Hussey) noted, campy queens and activists were able to turn already existing techniques of genderfuck drag, used to contest oppressive discourses of gender, to the new use of negotiating the oppressive discourses surrounding AIDS. That those strategies already existed within the collective memories (the performance repertoire) of gay men poses the question of whether collective performance techniques *precede, in the flow of performances*, strategies of normalization.

In modern western societies, normalization has proceeded through the production of “depth,” the investing of social actors with inwardly turned lives (what Foucault called the soul) both concealing and spurring the constitution of individuality “as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Camp is an enunciation of the history of these maneuvers—resistance and counterresistance—remembered in and re-activated through bodies.<sup>11</sup> It *will be* parodic play with the binary of depth (truth/knowledge) and surface (sites of inscription) where parody is understood as “repetition with critical distance.”<sup>12</sup> As a critic invested in textuality, it made sense for Sedgwick to claim that the opposition between surface and depth is a false (that is, ideological) one. We agree. But this is not to say that it is not a forceful, powerful binarism that agents must negotiate in their everyday practices. Performance networks or collectives are not simply made up of shamed individuals. They are embodied spaces with histories, techniques, and trajectories that allow each performer to become, through the performative iteration of those techniques (but always parodying/revising them as he repeats them), different from himself, that is, different from what he would be in *another space*.

Recognizing the inadequacy of many cultural and literary theories that do not, and indeed cannot, take into the account the diversity of gay sexual practices and identities, we would replace theorizing on social “types” with analyses of social agents whose actions and embodiments manifest themselves in specific times and places. We theorize embodied experience as the scene of negotiation between those networks of discourses and institutions that interpellate us as subjects (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, straight) and our capacity to enter critically

into and revise those relations. One way of reading through this essay, then, is as a participant in a debate over a number of critically opposed terms and the differing methodologies they suggest: subjectivity and agency, textuality and performance, gay and queer, and most centrally, gay performance and queer performativity.

### Performance and Performativity

A glance at the literature on “queer performativity” might suggest to the young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or intersex person that trendy academics have invented, through the sheer exercise of critical language, the entire *modus operandi* of contemporary queers. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker’s initial observation, in their discussion introducing the 1995 collection *Performance and Performativity*, that there had been of late a “convergence” between “performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance” is very telling, especially given the fact that their volume emerged, as they themselves noted, at “what has been, historically, a conference on English literature.”<sup>13</sup> Performativity, they suggested, had been “pushed ... onto center stage.”<sup>14</sup> But whose stage? That this pushing had in fact been an appropriation of theories of performance into English studies was itself not the major problem.<sup>15</sup> But what is missing here is the study of performance in everyday life, central to the field of Performance Studies—what Margaret Thompson Drewal has summarized as “the ongoing, contested, critical activity of constructing social reality.” This erasure has a number of consequences for the ways that supporters and critics alike of “performativity” have engaged its questions.

The field of Performance Studies emerged at the intersection of an enormous body of literature coming from theater, anthropology, sociology, ritual and folklore studies, linguistics, ethnomusicology, structuralism and poststructuralism, to name a few. But in coopting *some* of these performance theories, scholars of performativity have neglected that body of research coming from the social sciences that has given Performance Studies (when done well) a biting and critical edge. What has been lost in the translation of “performance” into “performativity” is the centrality of field research, ethnographic practice, the integration of non-western forms of knowledge into our academic studies, and the realignment (or



even collapse) of traditional disciplinary boundaries resulting from experiential research. Indeed, Performance Studies has been characterized as the interstice between theory and practice. By ignoring the vast and already existent research on performance that comes from the social sciences and through practical fieldwork, some very fundamental concepts of "performance" have been lost. This is not too surprising. Those trained in academic literary analysis usually have no knowledge of the work coming from the anthropology side of Performance Studies. That ignorance is perceived only as a gap, a hole, a shortcoming in the study of performance to be filled with more theory.

The irony here is that Performance Studies, as a discipline, developed as a corrective to the gaps in performance knowledge caused by this same academic dependence on theory. In a recent translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (a work, by the way, that has not yet made its impact upon performance theorizing), the Russian critic voiced his disappointment with the seemingly incompatible relationship of material performance and critical theorizing upon it:

The performed act ... is split into an objective content/sense and a subjective process of performance. Out of the first fragment one creates a single systemic unity of culture that is really splendid in its stringent clarity. Out of the second fragment, if it is not discarded as completely useless ... one can at best extract and accept a certain aesthetic and theoretical something ... But neither in the first world nor in the second is there room for the actual ... performance.<sup>16</sup>

"Performance" is translated into "performativity" as the result of western academic theorizing upon it; it is performance whose materiality has been squeezed out in the very act of theorizing it. Performativity is based on a study of that very "object residue" of performance that remains when the knowledgeability of agents has been cast aside, when it has been, in Bakhtin's word, "sterilized."

The denigration of performance vis-a-vis performativity is based on an assumption that bounded performances enacted by identifiable agents reinscribe a humanistic subject who is alleged to hold a power to effect change through intentional acts or utterances. The distinction assumes that agents/performers understand that there is a homologous relation

between performances and intentions, and one can admit that both theater studies and sociological studies have traditionally been invested in what might be called the intentionality of agents or author/artists who themselves become knowable to critics through the identification of their intentions. The critic constructs *knowable* agents/authors who are themselves not necessarily *knowledgeable*. The absence of agents' knowledgeability underwrites the critic's expertise. There was something of this in Sedgwick's claiming responsibility for the term "queer performativity," as if crediting herself with the Austinian power to name a particular agency into being.<sup>17</sup> But "queer performativity" has not unseated this enterprise. Today's critics rely on this assumption of an intentional but unknowing or unseeing agent all the more to underwrite their own analyses of discourses from a position considered unavailable to agents in everyday life. Indeed, one must ask whether performativity critics require this assumption as that which they can continually write against, thereby legitimating their own work.

In these terms, we would like to avoid the dominant literary/philosophic approach to performativity following from the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin. Austin's definition of an explicit performative, as Timothy Gould summarizes, requires that "the act that is accomplished in the words (for instance, offering to bet, bequeathing, baptizing, marrying, advising, daring you, resigning) is not an act occurring otherwise than in the words themselves."<sup>18</sup> This has been attractive for an analysis of queer performativity which has wanted to insist that queerness has no being outside of the words that construct it and, conversely, is diffused throughout all utterances as the bent relation of signifier to referent. But the linguistic model here is insufficient. For queerness has its being not just in words but in the accumulated historicity and forces of bodies and institutions. Butler's intriguing account of drag as the performative allegorization of heterosexual melancholy, for example,<sup>19</sup> tells us nothing about why it should be most frequently *working class gay men* who do it (despite a plethora of recent films and television shows presenting gay men as eagerly making over straight women as drag queens in exchange for fame and year's supply of eyeliner). Nor does it go any way toward an analysis of the different kinds of gay male drag—illusionistic or glamour drag, camp drag, genderfuck, scare drag, faerie drag—or between varieties of



gay drag and the forms of crossdressing that are not primarily performed by gay men, or that present themselves as distinct from the category “gay male,” such as commercial or “tourist” drag, or transvestism/erotic crossdressing. Lesbian drag, dressing butch, passing, kinking, and transgender performance are some other, equally specific practices with their own genealogies. None are identical to, or analytically substitutable for, the others.

But is this a shortcoming of Austin’s writing on performatives, or is this gap the result of a misreading of Austin? Austin himself never gave his performatives the exclusive powers of materialization that some versions of queer performativity have assumed. In fact, Austin was explicit and emphatic on this point. According to him, the performative utterance was always part of a larger schema: “There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.”<sup>20</sup> Performatives, as described by Austin, were utterances included as *part of a procedure*. This procedure is what is defined (in Performance Studies) as a *performance*. When Butler denigrated “performance” as “a reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer,”<sup>21</sup> she missed the connection between an Austinian “procedure” and a “performance.” In fact, Austin’s third lecture is devoted precisely to the constraints that performances exercise upon performative utterances and that must be submitted to if those utterances are to be efficacious. Yet Butler played off performativity against performance as if the two were incompatible. Butler’s dictum that “The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake” is an impossibility.<sup>22</sup> For the performative is already and always a part of a larger performance, one in which individual and collective performers anticipate, elicit, and respond to performativity as the occasion of intending and choosing in the here-and-now. Indeed the only reduction possible would be to reduce performance (procedure) to performativity (the subcode of the utterance). And we would add that: *the reduction of performance to performativity would be a mistake.*

One of the problems is that Austin’s work is obsolete. Austin’s theory of performatives, as Timothy Gould has explained, was part of a very specific academic debate between grammarians and couched in terms relevant to issues and concepts of the 1950s. At the time that he was lecturing,

performance still had its definition of a bounded event separate from everyday life. We can see that Austin was trying to describe the status of language within the frame of performance. But since that time, his ideas were picked up and developed primarily in the field of folklore that resulted in the context-oriented studies of the early 1970s by Roger Abraham, Dan Ben-Amos, Richard Bauman, Kenneth Goldstein, and others. At the same time, sociologists like Erving Goffman and performance ethnographers like Richard Schechner were dissolving the separation of the bounded performance from everyday life and demonstrating that everyday life itself was composed of contingently framed events (where the constitution of a “frame” was a key element of the performance). The assumptions that Austin worked from have been theorized out of existence. If we don’t hear these ideas coming from those working in the field of “performance,” it is because they were absorbed and surpassed thirty years ago.

Sedgwick, both in her Introduction to *Performativity and Performance* and in her essay on Henry James, began to move in the direction we take here when she noticed the absence, in Austin’s analysis, of a witness to the act of utterance—a third person whose necessary presence transforms the individual act of utterance into the performance *scene* of utterance. But what Sedgwick here “added” to Austin was a longstanding concern of ethnographic performance criticism (as well as a familiar task of theatre historians working from semiological, contextual, or reception methodologies). Reading Sedgwick state, in the mid-90s, that what was missing from performativity studies was a consideration of context and audiences sounds like a reinvention of the wheel.<sup>23</sup> “Performativity” seemed to us the result of theorizing based on inadequate and out-moded concepts of performance. In fact, in every instance, the word “performance” can be substituted for “performativity” without any change of meaning (although with a change in politics) for a performance scholar.

The word “performative” is problematic in other ways as well. Austin himself wasn’t sure about using it, and suggested that “operative” would work equally well.<sup>24</sup> Let us take a look at the construction of the word. “Performative” is an adjective formed from a verb - “to perform.” Its noun form is “performance.” But when Sedgwick coins the term “performativity,” that is, transforming the verb into a noun by way of an adjective, then

“performativity,” as object, supplants and usurps the role of the already existent noun “performance.” It appears that performativity critics go back to the sources of Performance Studies and reinvent the discipline under another name, but this time purged of its field methods (that is, purged of all its pesky non-western epistemological components that make it otherwise impossible to recuperate to Ivy League textuality). That this is indeed a substitution rather than an elaboration of ideas and personnel can be noted in the ways that “performativity” is presented as a corrective to alleged unsurpassable limitations somehow inherent in a concept of “performance.”

Yet these limitations seem to adhere more to performativity critics’ assumptions about performance, especially when the concept of performance that is being “corrected” is a vintage 1950s model that doesn’t get very good mileage to begin with. The Austinian “performative” only works when performance is viewed as a bounded event separate from the everyday, that is, with a concept of performance that can be contrasted to phenomena that are seen as Not-performance. In other words, as an adjective, it must differentiate the object being described as somehow different from others of the same class. For example, in order to have “performative utterances” or “performative acts” implies that there must be utterances and acts that are not performative. And this, at least within the study of performance, would be an impossibility—for *all* utterances and *all* acts constitute themselves as performances. It is for this reason that the idea of the “performative” was abandoned by Performance Studies. It is an idea that served its purpose but became irrelevant when the boundaries separating the theatrical from the practice of everyday life were dismantled.

This is not to say that, as an adjective at least, the word “performative” has no applications, but that its contemporary uses are extremely circumscribed. It’s only legitimate use is in description of static objects that display distinguishing characteristics not usually belonging to other objects in the same class such as texts, works of art, etc. But even in these cases, “performative” only serves to mark the object residue of a performance, that is, the *traces of performances*.<sup>25</sup> For example, a canvas by Jackson Pollock could be described as a “performative painting.” But the specific painting is in actuality no more a performance than any other painting. What the adjective describes then is the self-reflexive performance of the

action painter in the studio (the performance that precedes the object residue). Or one might describe a text as performative, even though the material object is no more a performance than any other bundle of papers. In this case, what is being marked is the past performance of the writer engaged in creative (unorthodox) typography such as in Concrete Poetry; or it might foreshadow the engagement of the reader as in a scratch-and-sniff book. But in either case it is not the text that performs, but rather that it holds the traces of a past performance or at least offers a potential to engage a material performance based on an encounter with the object. Using the adjective to describe anything other than static objects only works to obscure the contemporary and expansive concept of performance as wielded in Performance Studies. To talk about “performative acts” and “performative utterances” is equivalent to and as cryptic as the concept of a “performative performance.”

“Performative” actually describes static objects (linguistic or otherwise) which are themselves the traces of performances and/or the marking of sites for future performances. By taking the object residue of material performances as the central point for interpretation, performativity is able to engage a study of performance that has been neatly sanitized, sterilized, whitened, and cleansed of all that makes Performance Studies both so exciting and threatening, namely the knowledgeability of agents/performers. Indeed, since performativity situates agents as lacking knowledgeability, they are completely unnecessary for consideration. This, of course, conveniently releases the performativity critic from the time-consuming and messy task of field research. We wonder: is it fear of the field that leads so many performativity critics to dismiss performance?<sup>26</sup> When it comes right down to it, how many scholars really *want* to get down and dirty? It’s just so much easier to theorize drag by looking at photographs of drag queens, and much more convenient to theorize queerness by reading old novels.

The sudden “discovery” of performativity (that is, the morbid fascination with the object residue of performance) chokingly restricts the field of inquiry. By situating “performativity” at the center of the field of inquiry, Sedgwick and Parker (following Derrida and Butler) narrowed the sorts of questions a performance analysis can ask to “a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through



complex citational processes.<sup>27</sup> At times, moreover, the repeated demonstration of the impossibility of the humanist subject (that atomic individual able to create itself as if out of nothing and to match effects to intentions) betrays a nostalgia for that subject. It is no coincidence in this regard that most performativity critics (as opposed to performance theorists) tend to come from the fields of philosophy, humanistic studies, and English rather than anthropology, sociology, or even theater. Performativity critics lag substantially behind the agents they describe, agents who are themselves invariably *in media res*, their self conceptualizations fluid precisely because they will not assume the critic's privileged vantage point of expertise. By claiming a merely "theatrical" performance as obsolete, "queer performativity," ironically, remains trapped within the platonic distrust of a (gay) theatricality that can never, in fact, be successfully bounded or policed.

Since Sedgwick and Parker follow Butler, it will be helpful to turn to her for a moment. In "Critically Queer" and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler construed performance as bounded, framed acts self-consciously staged for a spectator and thus, she argued, inadequate to the analysis of the "reiteration of norms" (performativity) that precedes and operates despite agents' practices; hence her famous slogan "The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake."<sup>28</sup> Locating the coercive nature of the (monolithic) Symbolic prior to the entrances of agents' into specific social interactions, Butler has diverted academic inquiry (as have her followers) from an analysis of those mundane activities through which agents rebuild or negotiate social structuration, activities that have long since been treated by performance theorists. Butler has insisted that

there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act," singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power.<sup>29</sup>

She formulates here a very narrow arena of inquiry—the philosophic concern with being in its various guises (subjectivity, individuality, autonomy). Within that parameter, Butler is only able to formulate her question in a single (and artificial) way: if it is not individual subjects who act out of their own will/power, then there must be something else that acts on or through them, something that voices or inscribes them. The conclusion

that there is no subject that acts continues to operate within the field of disciplinary inquiry into the powers and possibility of the Cartesian subject. A sociological or ethnographic perspective, by contrast, might argue that individuals do not act from an atomic, self-originating, or authorial will/power because they act within performance collectivities, in distinct spaces, and with acquired techniques that they use to revise, reshape, negotiate, and transform social life.<sup>30</sup>

Butler's "reiterated acting" then, *obviously* can not belong to a "power, construed as a subject." It belongs to a performance *practice, technique, or space* (either institutionalized or delegitimated). For the performance scholar to recognize that a performance practice, technique, or space is "a nexus of power or discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power," is to repeat or mime the knowledgeable ability of agents themselves as they negotiate those practices, techniques, and spaces. Butler claims that "Where there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will."<sup>31</sup> This is an interesting and useful claim only to those who have never felt any disparity or discomfort in claiming and speaking as "I," a helpful analysis only if one really believed that individuals operate qua individuals and not within social relations or by locating themselves within specific performance spaces or scenes. This abstract "discourse" that precedes the agent's enunciation is in fact concrete, knowable, and contestable; it constructs itself as *belonging somewhere*, as a set of accessible techniques localized in body/space. Indeed, this was Foucault's argument in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* where his model of discourse was the troublesome, often overlooked and misinterpreted concept that discourses are only called into being through practices, techniques, and spaces.<sup>32</sup>

When Schechner famously described performance as "restored behavior," he insisted—as Drewal and others have elaborated more recently—that the performance behavior "restored" is never the same; each performance, however traditional or normative, revises previous performances.<sup>33</sup> The "subject" constituted retrospectively by performance (for example, by the varieties of sexual play or gendered representation) will not be identical to that posited by previous performances (although we suspect that this is not a concern of agents themselves). When Butler ar-



gues that the performative reiteration of norms necessarily fails to achieve its hegemonic effects because iteration is always different from itself, she leaves us (deliberately) unclear about who is *doing* the iterating, writing as if it is only the reader/analyst who is capable of seeing and deploying the social actor's (sub- or unconscious) failure to repeat herself exactly across time. But if performers are always different from themselves, this is because the social actor's difference belongs to a larger performance within which the individual has chosen one trajectory of behavior. There is no structure of performativity that agents exploit, but rather other *performances* that they reproduce or revise.

Analyses of performance might focus on what Anthony Giddens has described as the duality of agency and structuration. He argues that agents are knowledgeable about their reflexive realization of social structure through their everyday activities although they may not be able to put that knowledge into words. Giddens distinguishes between "discursive" and "practical" consciousness, on the one hand, and the unconscious on the other. Motivations that agents may not be able to put into words are not necessarily unconscious but rather nondiscursive. Practical consciousness consists in knowing the rules and tactics whereby everyday life is constituted and reconstituted, and is thus the locus of continuity of the social.<sup>34</sup> Social interaction requires, and agents expect of each other, a *competence* to negotiate and manipulate a mundane understanding of norms, rules, institutional statements, and resources. This competence to negotiate may be called *agency*. And it is this competence and agency that constitutes a) *embodied memory*, or knowledgeability—what agents recall of previous performances, including how they construe those previous performances as the bases for future ones; b) *practice*—the instantiation of the real through performance; and c) *pleasure*—the experiential, kinaesthetic involvement of the agent in those performative relations, including the desire to recall and to imagine.

The distinction between performance and performativity, as advanced by performativity critics, depends on an outdated description of performance as hypostatic. Performativity is held to supersede performance analysis by its focus on the unstable and provisional constitution of agents through the iteration of discourses. Performativity critics doubt that positioned and nameable performers, knowledgeable of and negotiating

codes and techniques, can effectively resist the discursive strategies that, coming from "no place," constitute them. Yet performativity critics have not been able to identify tactics of resistance, precisely because resistance would have to come from agents who are identified, named, located (even if that naming is a performance effect and not an essence). The resisting "actant" (to use Cindy Patton's term) would have to resist *from somewhere, in media res*. Resistance will always be, in Patton's distinction, performance and not "performative." To allow that subjects are posited retrospectively by discourses is not to claim that "it is no longer sufficient to look at the performance itself." It is in fact what makes it necessary to look at agents' performances. Was this not the force of Butler's initial and important claim in *Gender Trouble* that "construction ... is the necessary scene of agency?"<sup>35</sup>

#### Gay and Queer

One of the most significant contributions of Michael Warner's important collection, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, has been its emphasis on identity as process—contingent, appropriative, and (we would stress) accrued in and across performances. As Patton argued in that volume,

Identities carry with them a requirement to act, which is felt as 'what a person like me does' ... the requirement to act implicit in even transient identities means that those who inhabit them feel they must do something and do it now.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. described filmmaker Isaac Julien's appropriation of Langston Hughes in the film *Looking for Langston* as a search for a "usable past" that might ground the practice of identity now.<sup>37</sup> Identification, in short, is a practice. The play between "gay" and "queer" is not a matter of ambivalence, but of *differing performances*. The same agent who claims "gay" in one setting may claim "queer" in another, and the choice of terms will most often be meant to frame and define in advance a particular kind of *collective* performance act or scene. In other words, reconfigurations of the frame mark the different knowledge claims agents make as they move among different social spaces; neither frame referring back to a fixed subjectivity. (Of course, to "frame" a performance does not imply that the performer initiates, invents, or authorizes it, or fully determines its meaning.) A model of identity politics that cannot be reduced



to individual experience makes it possible to name the agents of resistant practice collectively (as “gay” in this case) because that name is the figure of agents’ resistant occupations of particular social spaces and the networks of institutions and discourses that circumscribe them in those spaces. However, the same agents might claim “queer” to emphasize that they will invariably occupy many different spaces simultaneously. Agency, following Michel de Certeau, is resistant spatialization of the places that seek to bind us to a specific name. The “gay man” then is a nameable agent who intervenes in a hegemonic mapping of social spaces and practices by appropriating and negotiating the history of the category “gay” and its corollary gestures, vocal mannerisms, and so on. “Queer,” we feel, has been important for its articulation of a particular stasis in gay politics—the reminder that there are still stakes involved in claiming names (and spaces) as “gay” or “lesbian” or “bisexual” or “transgender,” or “intersex.”

We do not use “queer” to signal what Donald Morton bemoans as the “ludic” or “textualist” process of “disrupting the signified, the commonly held public denotations of words and other meaning units, by ‘sliding along the chain of signifiers.’”<sup>38</sup> “Queer,” as we use it here, invariably signals the claim to a knowledgeable, collective, and oppositional positioning by agents and through performance of their energies, interests, and pleasures on the front line against the coercive policing underlying the apparent naturalness and inevitability of heteropatriarchy. As the border between the normalized and the perverse shifts (e.g., as heteronormative institutions take up and appropriate trendy aspects of queerness), so do the forms of “queerness” that resistant agents occupy.

We do not overlook that “gays” can resist this queerness, that gay men can be racist and misogynist, for example. Rather we choose to make this critique of some gay men while emphasizing that the category “gay” marks a history and a practice that has been unfairly obscured in academic studies. If we emphasize “gay” in the title of this essay, it is because it has seemed to us that the lack of coalition between lesbian feminists and gay men (particularly in the 80s and 90s) has been reinforced by a failure of gay men to adequately describe and theorize their own history and agency. Since Gayle Rubins’s important essay “Thinking Sex,” queer scholars have been less willing to agree that the study of sexuality can be exhaustively treated under the single rubric of sex and gender difference. While gay

men and queers have benefited from feminist theorization of sex, gender, and sexuality, they have tended to adopt (most likely because of the lack of gay-male-specific theories) feminist perspectives to describe and analyze practices that have related, but distinct, histories and intentions and may not therefore be adequately treated as feminist issues. Carol Burbank has argued that lesbians and gay men do not hear each other because they are defining such terms as “visibility” and “power” in radically different ways. Rather than generating a single definition, she suggests that lesbians and gay men might pay more attention to each other’s experiences and envision pluralized rather than monologic political strategies. By restricting our focus here to accounts of performative agency by gay men, as well as accounts of the discursive constraints on gay male performance, we hope to begin to provide more specific analyses that might contribute toward a new dialogue between lesbians/feminists and gay men. Giving full historical treatments of specific performances might lead to a reconsideration of Robert Vorlicky’s argument that there was no politically viable gay male performance prior to the feminist theorization of performance. A feminist account of the politics of performativity may not be immediately applicable to an assessment of men’s performances.

Through this focus on materiality we hope to create additional dialogue among gay men and queers in and out of the academy. As J. Scott Chipman has written, “male gay experience in general and male gay performance in particular remains under-theorized, opaque to many of those who regularly perform and engage in male same-sex experiences, erotic or otherwise.” On the other hand, we would not want to claim that gay men outside the academy cannot give reasons for what they do. Rather, it has been the impossibility, until recently, for gay men to institutionalize and legitimate their knowledge that may explain the lack of fit between gay men’s everyday lives and academic descriptions of it. Gay male academics have had to turn to other more “legitimate” discourses to provide the terms of their own analyses (e.g., literary deconstruction, “straight up” history, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism), leading to the abrogation of their own authority to the leading voices, often nongay, of these other discourses.

#### Performances and Texts

In her landmark 1993 essay on queer performativity, Sedgwick moved



from astute analyses of the official reports documenting testimony in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” hearings to bravura readings of the characters in Henry James’s novels. But she never interrogated the way the objects and method of her study incessantly make performativity a characteristic of texts, rather than of agents. More debatable still is the move that takes the official documents of the trials of the military ban as accurate and transparent accounts of agency. Official records do not adequately convey or predict what agents have done and will do, particularly since agents’ performances will invariably negotiate previous performances remembered not through textual recall but *in the body*, that is to say, in the historically specific and culturally placed embodied interactions of social actors. While official records conveniently reduce agency to speech acts preserved in print, and thus make practices amenable to textual study, they only do so by taking written accounts as direct evidence of agents’ contestation of discourses. Ironically, this means the queer critic reading the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” or “Bowers v. Hardwick” case records must situate the available documents (official transcripts) as unmediated and transparent evidence of agents’ mediation of discourses. By privileging official records as documents of speech acts, and the latter as evidence of performance, they thereby erase all the elements through which agents manipulate and negotiate words: gestural and bodily codes, paralinguistics, proxemics, and kinesics.<sup>39</sup> *The reduction of queer performance analysis to the queer reading of texts would be a mistake.*

Promulgating Lacanian readings of the subject, performativity critics have too frequently reduced all performance to the linguistic and read all bodily activity—gesture, intonation, posture, movement, interaction and so on—as having the structure of a language *existing outside* agents’ negotiations and uses of it, and not fully registered in their practical knowledge. Performativity studies has displaced Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical description of everyday life as agonistic and substituted a reading analogy that isolates performers from each other and seems to make their individualized interior “texts” available to critical inquiry precisely to the extent that performers themselves can be assumed not to have known what they were doing. Performativity provides the terms whereby the critic acquires access to the unconscious life of the agent, reconstituting praxis across time as a textuality outside of time.<sup>40</sup> Turning to Lacanian psychoanalysis, queer

theorists and performativity scholars have taken as their object an unconscious construed as a (universalized) linguistic structure and available to objectivist and quasi-scientific analysis (granting legitimacy to both the inquiry and the inquisitor). Within these terms, the activity of social actors is understood, not as agency, but as expressions or symptoms of unconscious impulses available to analysis. Enter the analyst-critic who transforms the performer into a “symptomatic” text that s/he alone can decode. Performativity theorists argue that social actors’ representational practices are not fully available to their understanding: a “psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche. It also argues, rightly we think, that what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier and from the domain of corporeal legibility.”<sup>41</sup> The critic constructs *readable* agents/authors who are themselves not necessarily *knowledgeable*. The absence of agents’ knowledgeability underwrites the critic’s expertise.

To appreciate the de-emphasis on the agents’ knowledgeability in performativity studies, we need to interrogate the turn to psychoanalytic theory, a turn which in fact distinguishes performativity studies from its forebear, Performance Studies. Martin Jay’s investigation of the crossover between French film criticism since the 1960s and psychoanalytic is instructive here, particularly since a good deal of performativity studies has taken its methods and terminology, and often its subject matter, from psychoanalytic approaches to the study of film. Jay traces the shift from semiological analyses (including Brechtian and Barthesian analysis) to the psychoanalytic investigation of the cinematic apparatus as working, not at the level of codes available to analysis, but at the level of the Imaginary. In this kind of analysis, the ideological effects of the cinema are not reducible to the specific codes or images in any particular film on screen. Rather the ideological effects of the cinema are effects of the relation between the cinematic apparatus itself and the Imaginary of the spectator—the power of the cinematic apparatus to construct the suture of the spectator’s subjectivity with the mirror images of plenitude offered by the cinematic apparatus. From this perspective a study of any particular use by nameable agents of cinematic or theatrical codes—a “performance”—will be finally unconvincing since it assigns culpability or praise to agents and not to the apparatus which is said to precede and exceed them.



For the feminist film theorists who have been so deeply influential in performativity studies, the turn from semiological to psychoanalytic readings was meant to explain why it is that semiological analysis has not in itself solved the problem of the ideological work of the cinema.<sup>42</sup> Why do spectators resist analyzing cinematic codes or fail to do so in ways that lead to change? These have been important questions, both for their reminder that no one filmic performance exists in isolation from others and for their attempt to explain the unintended consequences of any specific instance of spectatorial pleasure—consequences that are to be explained by the apparatus as a whole and not by any one instance of its working. But can inquiries that have been successful at the level of *explanation* also provide a *method for intervention*? It is hard to imagine the sorts of interventions that must follow from analyses that hold that the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus are not available to agents' everyday practical knowledge. Critique may bring these effects to consciousness, but once consciousness has been raised we return to and rely on semiological criticism of the sort practiced by Pavis—to a reading of the way specific images, specific films, and specific performances deploy codes that they do not originate and which do not belong to them.

Perhaps what needs to be developed is a theory of how specific film or theatrical apparatuses defamiliarize or make strange the lure of the Imaginary. Rather than viewing the spectator as trapped by the apparatus, we might ask whether filmgoers or theatrical audiences are in fact the “sutured” subjects academic critics make them out to be, positioning the spectator in a place of passivity that literary critics since Roland Barthes would never place the reader. (It may be for this reason that gay male readers and critics have turned so frequently to Barthes, outmoded as he has said to be, to inspire their own pleasurable practices of memory and anticipation). The professional film or performance critic will invariably be more drawn into the medium than the everyday consumer. In our experiences at least, audiences treat films and performances as consumable objects from which they maintain a certain distance. They use an everyday language for criticism that allows them to describe what academic critics take as the most ideological of filmic traps (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock's over-identification of the spectator's look with the male protagonist's look) as predictable, silly, even campy.

More problematically, psychoanalytic methods of film and performativity analysis, in order to treat any specific representation, event, or agent must invert their own claims of irreducibility: if the specific cannot be treated in its own right it must be analyzed as a symptom of the apparatus or *dispositif*. Agents are thereby reduced to a symptomatic appearance of the apparatus. Agents or performances are read as images within ocular-centric discourses, that is to say, read for their symptomatic expression of an underlying apparatus not available to the knowledge of the agents themselves. The critic knows what the image or text can never know. Meyer's critique, in this volume, of Peggy Phelan's reading of *Paris Is Burning* in *Unmarked* from a still photograph of Venus Xtravaganza is significant: Phelan has read the black and white still photograph for its punctum (the foreshadowing of the dead drag queen); she has then taken that still photograph as the hermeneutic key of the moving, full color film as well as the protocol for reading the intentions and desires of the agents (allegedly) “documented” in *Paris Is Burning*.

In *Unmarked*, Phelan shifted her analysis of performance as activity that “understands the generative possibilities of disappearance” and “enacts the productive appeal of the nonreproductive”<sup>43</sup> to conclude, in the case of gay men's performances, that gay men are irresponsible to the originals they appropriate: “Gay male cross-dressers *resist* the body of woman even while they make its constructedness visible.”<sup>44</sup> Although she has defined performativity as activity that resists the proprietary discipline of modern societies—arguing for example that “Sexual activity which leads only to more of the same activity (as against leading to procreation) is unattractive to the ideology of production and reproduction which suffuses late twentieth-century capitalism”—Phelan finally insists that gay male drag is a violation of women's property in themselves.<sup>45</sup>

To take another example: In “Boys Will Be Girls,” Carole-Anne Tyler attempted to depose Judith Butler's then-reigning (subsequently disavowed) analysis of drag as the “proliferation” or “parodic reappropriation” of gender by asserting instead that drag is a fetish producing an illusion of plenitude and compensating for male castration anxiety.<sup>46</sup> Tyler argued that the disclosure of the penis, the removal of the wig, or the use of the male register for speaking in gay male camp performances signal the attempt by the male performers to appear as women and retain their



hold on the phallus.<sup>47</sup> The man in drag puts on femininity only in order to hold it “and the lack it signifies at a distance” through exposures of the “real” masculine body:<sup>48</sup>

It might seem the man in drag has put his identity in jeopardy by confusing the very oppositions which sustain the gendered difference our symbolic legislates.... However, analysts note, he has feminized himself only in order to “masculinize” (phallicize) himself, attempting to better secure a masculine or phallic and “whole” identity through cross-dressing.... The gay man in drag, like other men in a patriarchal symbolic, may feel whole at woman’s expense.<sup>49</sup>

The Drag Queen, for Tyler, is a phallic woman wielding the phallus at the expense of “real girls.” Tyler’s equation of Drag Queen with phallic women was worked out through an extremely superficial reading of porn magazines like *Drag Queens* that specialize in depicting “chicks with dicks” for a heterosexual male audience. Without considering for whom these pornographic images and narratives were constructed, Tyler suggested that the “chick with a dick” is the same as the gay drag performer, erasing in one gesture both gay men and transgender and transsexual women by denying all of them their specificity! The very quotations she provided from these porn magazines—Lola “can take her man where no woman has taken him before”—clearly indicate their specific audience.<sup>50</sup> Nor does Tyler grapple with the economic conditions of, and choices made by, the transgender and transsexual women who, posing as chicks with dicks in these magazines, perform as sex workers to raise funds for hormones and/or surgical procedures and who are neither “phallic men” nor “phallic women,” but women currently in (and out of) bodies socially designated as male. Tyler, like so many who theorize drag, shows a complete lack of knowledge of drag *practices* and what appears to be a total disdain of gay men. Tyler is a prime example of the kind of extremely skewed (and sometimes offensive) reading that results from the lack of field experience so characteristic of performativity criticism.

Phelan’s antipathy to gay men, at least in *Unmarked*, ostensibly because they have no contact with the bodies of women thus denying the (m)other,<sup>51</sup> may be contrasted with her odd paean to the misogynistic but psychoanalytically self-exposing Jack Deller, the eponymous “character” of Yvonne Rainer’s *The Man Who Envied Women*: “One wants to

credit him, however marginally, with some dignity: if he can talk in a way which evokes this woman dancing, he might have once moved in circles which once touched her.”<sup>52</sup> Phelan here valorizes heterosexual masculinity, however ambivalent it may be, for its proximity to female bodies and its confessional display of depth which seems to promise reciprocity with the (m)other, while reading gay male drag as simply underwritten by misogyny.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, because gay male drag does not confess itself but remains at the surface, Phelan (like Tyler and the Butler of *Bodies That Matter*, all of whom use a psychoanalytic methodology) must make it speak, reading drag “symptomatically” (the term is Tyler’s).<sup>54</sup> Nor does Phelan consider that the tension between gay men and some feminists may be an effect of a modern sex/gender economy which has constructed femininity and male homosexuality as proximate while pitting them against each other. “[F]or what?” Craig Owens once asked, “for straight men?”<sup>55</sup> By invoking psychoanalysis she instead locates patriarchal desire “inside” individual gay men, each of whom represents not only “gay male desire” in general, but can also epitomize “the psychic structure of ‘traditional heterosexual culture’—which is to say, male homosocial culture.”<sup>56</sup> The works of individual gay artists like Robert Mapplethorpe become objects of analysis; predictably Mapplethorpe’s images of black men are read as fetishes assuring the white gay spectator of his virility rather than interrogated in terms of the specific, material performances for which these stand as trace—gay male kinship, gay male negotiations of racialized desire, gay male negotiations of “high” and “low” aesthetic standards, circulation of resources among gay male artists and models, and so on.<sup>57</sup> Throughout, Phelan reproduces the psychoanalytic conflation of the individual and the structural at the expense of gay men, dismissing their agency. Psychoanalytic theory moreover collapses the agent’s discontinuous practices to construct a singular psyche characterized through ambivalence or exchangeability of desire. It then takes that internal ambivalence (which is really a discontinuity of external practice) as the explanatory root of the subject’s “symptoms” [read “practices”]. If Phelan can insist that the unconscious is performative, in every case psychoanalytic theories have provided a limited set of terms all too implicated in a homophobia that invariably turns against gay men.



We disagree with the assumption that Woman must be the subject of gay men's performances. If academic theorists and critics would take the time to make contact with and spend some extensive time with really real drag queens they might be able to gather some surprising new data and might, at the very least, actually gain some respect for the humanness and knowledgeability of their living subjects. We are reminded of Esther Newton's field research on drag queens in *Mother Camp* which, by her actually talking with living queens, has none of the traces of homophobia that these armchair theorists evince. In mistakenly identifying Woman as the subject of drag discourse, some critics actually display the same narcissism that psychoanalytic theory attributes to gay men.

Giddens's "practical consciousness" provides an important third term between what is usually understood as "consciousness" (self-reflexivity and the ability to put one's motivations into words—what Giddens has called "discursive consciousness") and that unconscious which has provided the stage of performativity theory. As we have previously noted, Giddens has argued that agents are knowledgeable about their recursive realization of rules and resources through their everyday activities, although they may not be able to put that knowledge into words. Motivations that agents may not be able to put into words are not necessarily unconscious but rather nondiscursive. "Practical consciousness," Giddens has observed, "consists of knowing the rules and the tactics whereby daily social life is constituted and reconstituted across time and space."<sup>58</sup> Giddens's model can help us distinguish between "discursive" and "practical" consciousness, both available to critical inquiry, and the unconscious, which is no more available to the critic than to the social actor. Giddens's "practical consciousness" specifies the same domain of iteration, the place of the impetus to repeat, that Butler has located in the unconscious, but does not deny knowledgeability to agents at the individual or collective level.<sup>59</sup> Rather the concept of "practical consciousness" points to the sociality and historicity of iterative or restored behavior as itself the virtual effect of prior practices. Importantly, for Giddens, the interpretative activity of critics is not going to be of a different sort than the interpretative activity of agents; lay actors are social theorists at the level of practical consciousness, just as the work of professional social theorists will be recursively implicated in the social structuration.<sup>60</sup> In his final work, Fou-

cault clarified something like "practical consciousness" as the necessary scene of political revision. Such a radical critique of our embodiment would not occur at the level of individual style, but only through the permanent contestation of (what Foucault had earlier called) the "enunciative function" through which our possible subject positions are articulated. As any enunciation is articulated on material institutions and discourses only the ongoing critique of what those institutional discourses enable us to say (and the excavation of how they position us to say it) can bring about new effects of embodiment.<sup>61</sup>



As Case has noted, performativity critics tend to write from the position of reception rather than production.<sup>62</sup> Readings can be claimed while production, since the Derridean critique of intention, is suspect. Rather than taking gay men's practices as objects of knowledge, we have meant to write, in Foucault's formulation, from within "the archive" (the historicity that positions the social actor to speak) and therefore provisionally: "The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable."<sup>63</sup> As gay men, our analysis has not been simply descriptive or interpretative of an object isolated and separated from whatever else we do in everyday life. Rather we have meant our writing to enable further critical engagements, to produce space and opportunity for performance.

The textualization of gay male performance is only one variant of the wider subordination of material performances to the exigencies of theoretical and critical agendas. In gay studies this has been only too predictable: the various individuals and collectives conveniently designated by academics, professionals, activists, and the media as "the gay subculture" is a discursive community bound together by shared practices, and many of those practices are sexual. Given the unease that accompanies U.S. discourses on sex,<sup>64</sup> it should come as no surprise that gay and queer scholars have preferred to practice armchair anthropology when it comes to the arena of sexual and erotic performances (especially those considered to be a part of everyday life) or to focus on gender rather than sexuality. Our focus on the specificity of performance domains is not only a corrective to this kind of approach, but is



necessary to pass beyond the hazy, myth-laden veil that surrounds the subject of gay performance.

Gay men's restoration of identity (that is, their work providing the social conditions of viable identifications and just representations, as well as occasions and resources for the personal and group pursuit of pleasure) is inseparable from the performance spaces they construct. David Román has argued that "direct action can result from [staged] performance;"<sup>65</sup> and by "direct action" he means, of course, performance in a place other than the stage. Gayness, we posit, is not the reproduction of subjectivity but the restoration of performance space—whether that space be a theatre stage, a cruising ground, a body, a community meeting or gallery space, a street demonstration, a dance form, a gay neighborhood, a bar or voguing hall, or a bathhouse. In those spaces, we might say that gay identity is restored when it is in the "future/subjunctive." While the act of iteration establishes its own presence, the "origin" to be attributed to any act of citation (here "identity") is always posited subjunctively during the performance itself; *but the desire for identity is not the same as the performance actually occurring*. Gay identity is (only) the "future/subjunctive" posited during the restoration of behaviors actively recalled from previous performance encounters.

One of us remembers, as a young queen, time spent sitting at the feet of legendary Mothers and receiving the oral tradition and instructions a fledgling drag queen is given. The very first correction given was that the goal of a Drag Queen (as opposed to a female impersonator) was *not* to look like a woman. As the Mother scolded: "Who would want to do that?" No, the goal of a drag queen was to look like a Drag Queen, something beyond Man or Woman, larger than life, fantastic, mesmerizing in her liminality. The aim was not to "pass" as a woman, but to stand out as a Queen, as a category of being beyond the gender binary. There is a big difference between a Drag Queen and a female impersonator. This was, in fact, the thinking that underscored and created the dramatic tension in season two of the television show *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (2010), where the ongoing weekly combat between contestants Raven and Tatiana was based on Raven's claim that Tatiana was trying to pass as a woman (and was therefore a female impersonator who should not have been allowed on the show) rather than be a Drag Queen.

*We can argue, then, that drag queens model themselves after, not "Woman," but the specific and nameable Drag Queens who have preceded and instructed them.*

In modified Butoh makeup, Chicago performer Doug Stapleton appeared in the early 1990s as Gurlene Hussey lipsynching Yma Sumac as a banshee. This is the shamanistic power by which the representation acts on the thing represented, expanding and replacing it.<sup>66</sup> Gurlene's imitation-contagion acts not so much on Sumac, but on other drag queens; it is always another drag queen that she projects. For drag queens appropriate their imagery not so much from women as from the "enunciative function" of heteronormativity that has positioned women and gay men alongside each other. The appropriated element refers, not backward or inward to an origin, but to the historicity that enables its enunciation—the contested traffic among effeminacy, spectacularity, femininity, and queerness. Female, gay, transgender, and drag bodies are distinct discursive practices, situated alongside each other and sharing the same enunciative base. As Schechner has argued, any performance is "based on previous performances" such that "The totality of all those previous performances ... may be called the 'original.'"<sup>67</sup> In this case, the "totality" of drag is the contested historical traffic among queers, women, and men (of variously sexed morphologies). Peggy Shaw has said that she modeled her Obie-award winning "femme" character Deeluxe in *Dress Suits to Hire*, not after a woman, but after the drag queens in Hot Peaches who had taught her how to act. Performance is not finally a matter of claiming origins but of restoring behavior through citation. If gayness is the recitation and revision of the procedures that enabled earlier performances of gayness, what is being restored in gay men's performance is not necessarily the continuity of subjectivity but the continuity of performance space, first and primarily the space of embodiment.

Where (post)structuralists (including some feminists) have read processual activity as symptoms or expressions of underlying and determinate discourses, so that drag, for example, is always "about" the ambivalence of men toward women, we insist that any evaluation of a practice like drag should begin with an account of the agent's negotiation, restoration, or revision of prior drag performances. At the 1997 Mambo Spring Ball, produced in Boston's South End, participants challenged, on



the floor, the very terms of ball culture.<sup>68</sup> The event that night put into play such revised and new categories as “Butch Queen Voguing Femme,” “Butch Queen Voguing old way,” “Butch Queen Voguing new way,” and “Open to All: Safer Sex Bizarre.” As the MCs called out these and other categories, instructing participants in the proper procedures for walking, “spectators” (the line here is quite deliberately blurred) joined in; during the “Women: Face” category, for example, then local performer and writer Craig Hickman yelled out “just give them face” to a beautiful young woman who was performing runway instead. Reinvention of the categories followed an argument during that same category when the New York MC attempted to separate those walking into “dark skinned” and “light skinned.” Refusing the judges’ assertion that this division was traditional to NYC ball culture, a large number of vocal Boston spectators insisted that the distinction was inherently racist. As performance, ball culture functions at a level of cognition obscured by its re-presentation in films like Jennifer Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, where it is indicative only of the false consciousness or alienated desire of the participants.

We are not interested in colonizing (through analysis) the subjectivities of those messy and outrageous drag queens holding court in bars, on runways, or in bedrooms, the leathermen who set up dungeons and street fairs, the sissy boys whose swaying hips and limp wrists leave their traces on our retinas. We’re not into deciding the proper origin of their costumes, gestures, or props. We want to query where they have just come from (which is not the same thing as their origin), what they are doing, and where they are going. Not just “how do I look?,” although she is undeniably fabulous, but what and how does she touch, smell, sound, and taste as she enters the scene? What space does the drag queen make when she walks through a room? (Moving into space, and thereby recreating it as performance space, may be what differentiates drag from any other performance of gender. It is all a matter of projection, the creation of a space in which others might perform otherwise.) What rearrangement of other bodies in space do her movements enable? How does she link one performance space—this dance club, that art gallery, the bathhouse—to another? How does her body articulate our possible movements among these spaces? What history does she activate with her body? How do her recitations establish a space that must be occupied now and in no other

way, a practice that is undoubtedly the only necessary practice for our performances here and now? Above all else, drag queens, leathermen, and sissy boys *make* performance space. Rather than focusing on “queer performativity” as those practices establishing and/or decentering identity, we are interested in *gay performance* as the vehicle through which gay identity is replaced by performed genealogies of space, history, procedure, and possibility.

## APPENDIX

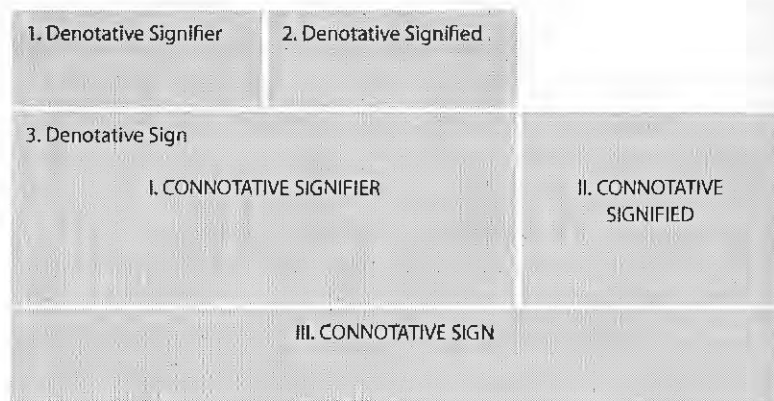


FIGURE 1 Connotation

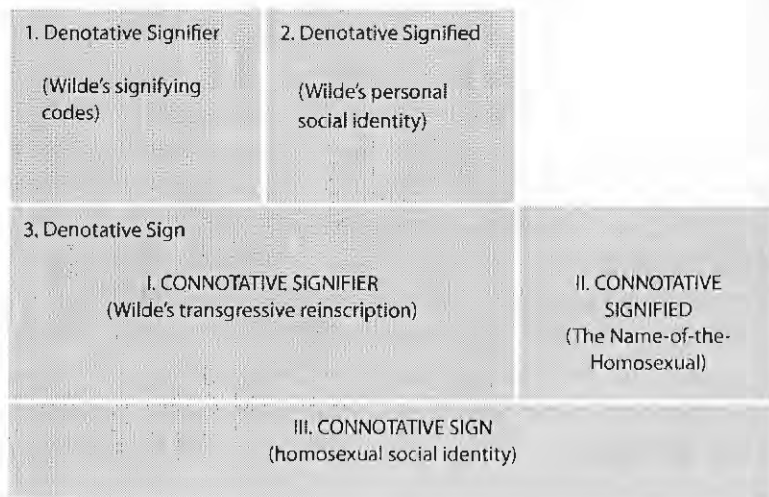


FIGURE 2 Connotative Analysis of Wilde's Trials

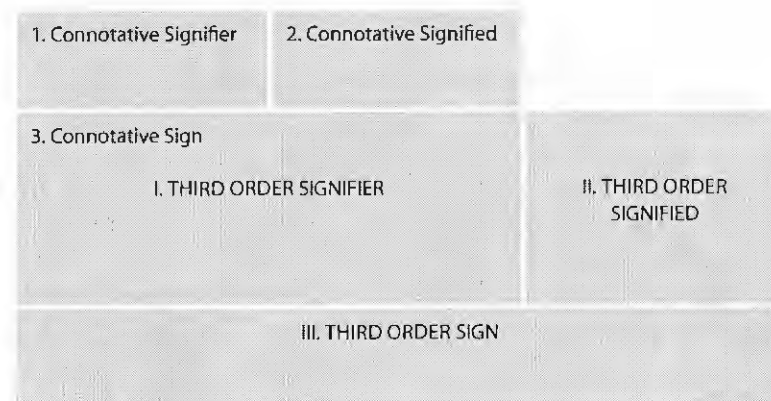


FIGURE 3 Third Order Signification

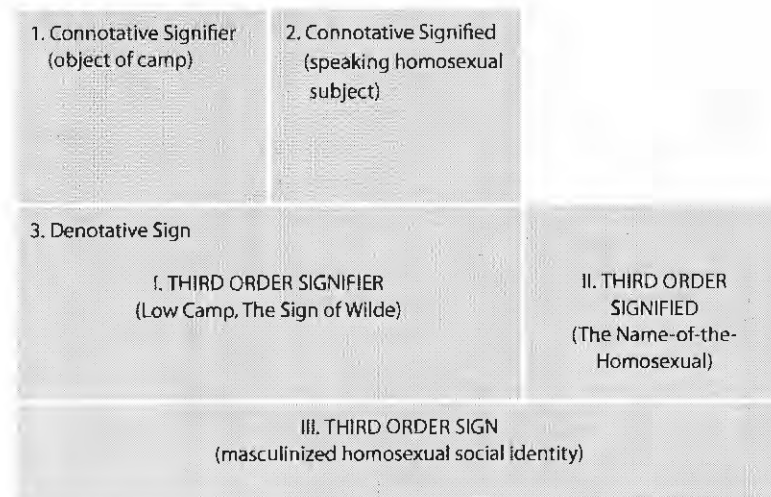


FIGURE 4 Third Order Signification Analysis of High Camp



## NOTES

### Introduction

1. Qtd from "In Defense of Gay/Performance" in this volume.
2. Butler, "Critically Queer" 24.
3. Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity" 14.
4. See especially, Zarrilli. A Microanalysis of Performance Structure and Time"; Daly, "The Balanchine Women"; and Geertz, "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight."
5. A good example of this is Tyler's "Boys Will be Girls." Tyler focused on the removal of the wig and/or a display of the penis by the drag queen on stage. I have never seen a drag queen display her male genitals in performance (they are tucked in so tight it would be impossible) nor have I ever seen a drag queen remove her wig. The removal of the wig is a no longer practiced convention of the female impersonator in a variety show for a straight audience, where the removal of the wig was done to indicate the art form. By the time Tyler wrote her essay, the only place you could see this was in comedy films and sitcoms, but certainly not seen on the drag stage. Her focus on the removal of the wig demonstrated that she did not study living queens, but rather their heteropatriarchal representations in media.
6. Important among these was the Camp Theory Symposium, Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois in May 1992 organized by myself, Thomas A. King and Mitchell L. Stevens.
7. Melly 161.
8. Newton, 105; Babuscio 40-41.
9. See especially Corey and Nakayama's groundbreaking essay, "Sextext." In that essay, the authors deliberately walked the fine line between theory and pornography. The essay provoked intense response, and over one hundred people withdrew their membership from the Speech Communication Association (the sponsor of the journal in which piece appeared) in protest.
10. Mercer's "Reading Racial Fetishism" stands as an important milestone. He read Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men from two different positions, as a black man and then as a gay man. Each of the conclusions was diametrically opposed to the other, thus foregrounding the relationship between the object of study and the critic's assumed personal identity. Mercer proved the need to produce studies that took into account race, class, and gender simultaneously.

### I. Unveiling the Word

1. Holly Brown, director, *The Easter Re-Run Show*, Club La Cage, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 03 April 1988.
2. For definitions of "camp," see Bronski 43-44, 97, 126-127; Goodwin 38-40; and Newton 104-111.
3. For reasons that I will argue in this essay, I define the "transsexual" as one who has a direct relationship with medical authority through engagement in conversion therapy, that is, the sex-change surgery. This definition includes those preparing for, are in the process of, or have completed therapy. I have also limited the study to male-to-female transsexuals,

since the female-to-male may be expressing a different narrative that is not within the scope of this paper to explicate adequately.

4. Bouissac 25.
5. Ibid.
6. Propp 60.
7. Ibid.
8. Lauretis 121.
9. Ibid. 108.
10. Barthes, "Striptease" 512.
11. Said 184-90.
12. In this regard, it is of interest to note the difficulties Ruth St. Denis had in attracting an audience. So strongly was oriental dancing linked to sex that it took more than a decade for her to establish and reeducate an audience to experience more than sexual titillation from her art. See Dressler 54; Maynard 83; Mazo 94-96; Terry 49; and Zeidman 13.
13. D'Emilio and Freedman 132-134.
14. Dijkstra 334.
15. D'Emilio and Freedman 130-138.
16. Hobson 111-114.
17. The literature on the Fallen Woman is substantial. For examples, see Baudelaire 36-37; Bullough 103; Freedman 203-205; Haller 91; Huysmans 65-66.
18. Hobson 114.
19. Foucault, *History* 19-22, 40-41.
20. Weeks, "Movements" 168.
21. Foucault, *History* 43.
22. Gay 224.
23. Duberman 519; Weeks, "Movements" 168.
24. This theoretical framework is known as the "medical model" of homosexuality. For further discussions see Bullough; Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion" 58-59; D'Emilio and Freedman 109-138; Foucault, *History*; Gay 222-235; and Weeks, "Movements."
25. Gay 202.
26. McIntosh 37.
27. On the concept of homosexuality-as-transvestism, see Ackroyd 25, 62; Brierly x, 10; Ellis 1-110; Katz 39-52; Marshall 146; and Krafft-Ebing 61-383.
28. D. King 163-164.
29. Crisp 27.
30. Chauncey, "Christian Brotherhood" 190.
31. Steakley 6-8.
32. Shepherd 214.
33. Koranyi 21.
34. D'Emilio 37.
35. Benjamin 171-172.
36. Koranyi 27.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid. 25-28.
39. Ibid. 111, 127.
40. D. King 171-172.
41. D'Emilio and Freedman 146-147.
42. Qtd. in Koranyi 111.
43. Qtd. in Martin 27.
44. Ibid. 28-29.

45. Foucault, *Birth* 199; Sontag, *AIDS* 8.

46. Lyotard 38.

## 2. Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp

1. My rethinking of Camp was based on observations of Joan Jett Blakk's Chicago mayoral campaign in 1991, before she announced her candidacy for the United States presidential election in 1992. My interpretations of the two campaigns are different. Comments about the mayoral campaign do not necessarily reflect my thinking on the presidential campaign.

2. For a complete record of ACT UP graphics see Crimp and Rolston. For a record of Blakk's campaign see Jeffreys.

3. I am indebted to Cynthia Morrill for suggesting the critique of masquerade theories of Camp in her essay "Revamping the Gay Sensibility" (110-112).

4. An overview of feminist masquerade and mimicry theories can be in Case, "Butch-Femme Aesthetic"; and Tyler, "The Feminine Look."

5. For the gay sensibility model of Camp, see Babuscio.

6. Sontag, "Notes" 105.

7. Dollimore 310.

8. Earlier examples of this writing strategy, i.e. defining Camp as a term that cannot be defined, may be found in Degen 87; Goodwin 38; Russo 206; and Thomas 122.

9. Writers ignore issues of appropriation in different ways. George Melly recognizes the gay origins of Camp, but fails to question just how Pop culture was able to wrest the discourse from this context (161). Andrew Ross's conspicuous erasure of gay identity in his essay, "Uses of Camp," constitutes an active depoliticization of Camp that leads to an articulated denial of Camp as a gay critique (137, 142-144, 162-163). Richard Dyer, on the other hand, identifies Camp as a gay discourse, but then proceeds to define the performances of nongay stars as "Camp." Dyer offers a detailed analysis of Judy Garland as Camp (178 ff.), but without addressing the problem of her nongay sexual identity, and without a political analysis of the relationship between gay discourse and nongay producers of Camp.

10. Sontag 106.

11. Ibid.

12. Bredbeck 275.

13. Ibid. 276.

14. Ibid. 274.

15. In order to distinguish between different constructions of Camp, the following usage has been adopted. When Camp is conceptualized as a politicized, solely gay discourse, an upper-case "C" is used. When an un-gay, apolitical, or Pop culture version of Camp is referred to, a lower-case "c" is used. The only exception to this occurs in cited material where it was mandatory to follow the spelling of the original text. For example, Susan Sontag, in "Notes on Camp," used an upper case "C." But according to the rule of usage employed here, Sontag's version of Camp, because it is an apolitical formation, would be spelt as "camp."

16. Butler, "Performative Acts" 270.

17. Doty 64, 71.

18. Hutcheon 7.

19. Ibid. 2, 7.

20. Giddens 31.

21. Case, "Tracking" 9.

22. Gates 124. It is not my goal here to explain the invisibility of the gay subject in representation. This has been done admirably in two other essays discussing queer invisibility, Sue-Ellen Case's "Tracking the Vampire," and Cynthia Morrill's "Revamping the Gay Sensibility."



23. See Jeffreys for a description of Joan's actions in this regard.

24. Blachford 193-194.

25. Foucault, "Power" 142.

26. Hebdige 90-99.

27. Sontag 107.

28. I use Andrew Ross's essay as the basis for a critique of Pop appropriation of Camp precisely because it has had such a major impact upon Camp theorizing. After Sontag's "Notes," Ross's "Uses of Camp," in my opinion, stands as one of the most significant contemporary documents on the subject. In the current trend to reread Sontag, Ross's essay has been overlooked. Yet, if we are to recover the discourse of Camp from the Sontagian formulation, Ross's essay, grounded as it is on that earlier work, must be included in the ongoing critique of "Notes."

29. Sontag 107-108, 111, 114.

30. Ross 139.

31. Shapiro 5-30.

32. Fabian 25-35.

33. Ibid. 27,37-69.

34. Ross 146.

35. Sontag, "Style" 151.

36. Price 7-22; and T. King passim.

37. Ross 151.

38. Ibid. 152.

39. Ibid. 153.

40. Ibid. 151.

### 3. The Signifying Invert

1. Partridge 114.

2. Ware 61.

3. See for example Booth 33, 39-40; Brien 873-874; Goodwin 39; Rodgers 40; and Ross 145.

4. Crompton 4-5, 37-38, 52ff.

5. The literature is vast when it comes to defining Camp as the term that cannot, and sometimes must not, be defined. See for example Babuscio 41; Blachford 195; Bredbeck 52; Britton 12; Core 7-8; Degen 87-89; Dollimore 59; Dyer 178-179; Hess +; Newton 105; Ross 145-146; Russo 206; Sedgwick 107; Sontag 105-106; Tripp 187; and Tyler 33-34.

6. For an introduction to the literature of the medical model of homosexuality see Bulough; Foucault; Gay 198-254; and Weeks, "Movements of Affirmation." As well, see the influential anthology edited by Kenneth Plummer, *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*.

7. Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion" 114-115.

8. Ibid.

9. Gay 334.

10. Foucault, *History* 43. The 1870 essay by Carl von Westphal that Foucault refers to is "Die *conträre Sexualempfindung*." It was in this essay that Westphal invented the term "contrary sexual feeling" that became the foundation for theories of gender inversion.

11. Hobson 114.

12. Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion" 116; D'Emilio and Freedman 130.

13. Duberman 519.

14. On the ascension of the medico-scientific community as the cultural authority in matters of morality and sexuality, and for historical analyses of the pathologizing of periph-

eral sexualities, see Barker-Benfield; Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion"; D'Emilio and Freedman 171-235; Freedman; Haller and Haller; Hobson 49-188; and Russett. For the relationship of the medical model of homosexuality to the larger projects of bourgeois sex reforms see Cohen 9-93; Greenberg 301-433; and Weeks, "Movements of Affirmation" 167-174.

15. "Christian Brotherhood" 204.

16. D'Emilio and Freedman 123.

17. Gay 202.

18. I use the term cross-dressing to indicate the entire range of cross-gender signifying from effeminate deportment to the assumption of total woman's attire by males.

19. Marshall 146.

20. McIntosh 37. Other writers such as Peter Ackroyd note that transvestism "was often ... confused with homosexuality" (25); while Harry Brierly explains that "It is a popular assumption that effeminacy is a common characteristic of all homosexuals and it is a small step to the assumption that ... cross-dressing and the assumption of femininity is a phenomenon of homosexuality in the male" (10). He concludes that "what was medically regarded as homosexual [in the nineteenth century] ... only related to a relative minority of those who now call themselves 'gay'" (x). Even Havelock Ellis, perhaps the most enlightened of the sexologists, regarded transvestism as a quite common occurrence and intimately related to homosexuality. See his study, "Eonism," in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.

21. In D. King 163-164.

22. Ackroyd 64.

23. Qtd. in Katz 40. See also the additional entries in Katz 40ff.

24. Crisp 62.

25. Ibid. 29.

26. Marshall 136.

27. Chauncey, "Christian Brotherhood" 192.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid. 190.

30. Feinbloom 91.

31. Steakley 6-8.

32. Qtd. in Ibid. 9.

33. Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* 32-34; Gay 224.

34. Westphal's term was the German "*conträre sexuellempfindung*" that was translated variously in English as "contrary sexual feeling," "gender inversion," or "sexual inversion."

35. Chauncey, "Sexual Inversion" 119.

36. Cohen 9.

37. Krafft-Ebing 286.

38. Ibid. 446.

39. Ibid.

40. For the outline of the four degrees of homosexuality and the supporting case histories, see Ibid. 282-335.

41. Ibid. 444. Interestingly, Krafft-Ebing's privileging of the visual in diagnosis seems to be strongly influenced by Franz Boas, and would account for Krafft-Ebing's celebration of an anthropological methodology. Franz Boas, whose methodology was published the year before Krafft-Ebing's book was released, also cautioned the researcher that unlike causes could produce like effects: "The outward appearance of two phenomena might be identical, 'yet their immanent qualities' may be altogether different" (qtd. in Jacknis 77-79). For Boas, as for Krafft-Ebing, the accurate identification of interiority or content was paramount. Earlier anthropological methods were based on comparing visual signifiers only. Boas and Krafft-Ebing both argued that two or more things were identical only if they shared both



the same signifier and the same signified.

42. Krafft-Ebing 447.

43. *Coming Out* 21.

44. "Movements of Affirmation" 167.

45. *Sexual Inversion* 212.

46. Sinfield 118.

47. Cohen 126-209. Ed Cohen, in *Talk On the Wilde Side*, has authored a detailed analysis and interpretation of the publicity surrounding the Wilde trials and its effect on the formation of a homosexual social identity, including a theory of exactly how the juridico-legal inscription of Wilde's body was accomplished. Cohen sees the inscription as the result of a set of institutional frames placed around Wilde's physical gestures in the courtroom by the press.

48. *Discipline* 111.

49. This idea was suggested by Brooke Williams who argued that learning can take place only through the cultural transmission of narrative in *History and Semiotics*.

50. Harris 144; Cohen 100-101.

51. Koestenbaum 187.

52. *Sexual Inversion* 30.

53. *Ibid.*, 212. See also Ed Cohen's analysis of this and the previous passage from Ellis in *Talk on the Wilde Side* 97-98. I interpret these differently than does Cohen. Whereas Cohen has interpreted the word "attitude" to define a way of thinking, I interpret "attitude" more literally, using the word's most common definition as a position of the body or its parts. Yet both Cohen's and my interpretation agree that Ellis's use of the word "attitude" signals an epistemological shift.

54. Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12. Michel de Certeau, in *Heterologies*, has described this vast transformative power over identity formation effected by spectacular legal inscription: Nomination does in effect assign him a place. It is a calling to be what it dictates ... The Name performs ... And that is only the beginning. He will 'incarnate' his name by believing it ... He makes himself the body of the signifier. But the word that is heard designates precisely this transformation. It is more than a splinter of meaning embedded in the flesh ... it also articulates the operation of believing, which consists in passing from a nameless ... [body] to a body 'remade' for and by the name: a [body] formed according to the specifications of the signifier ... The signified of the word ... designates the overall functioning of the signifier, or [the] effective relation to the law of the signifier. It expresses the precondition and the result of believing in the word, when this belief operates as identification (39).

55. *Ibid.*, 2; see also Weeks, *Sexuality* 95.

56. Certeau, *Heterologies* 76.

57. For a discussion of citational performativity in relation to sex and gender see Butler, Introduction 12-16.

58. Before the 1950s, Camp displayed a much more uniform definition and usage than it does today. For early mentions of Camp, see Crisp 26; Lincoln 33, 62; McAlmon 84; and Timmons 61. The first departure from the early definition was Christopher Isherwood's idiosyncratic gloss in his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening* (125-126). It was there that Isherwood divided Camp into two forms (High Camp and Low Camp) and initiated a process of the multiplication of forms of Camp that has continued since.

#### 4. Top Camp/Bottom Camp

1. Crisp 26. Crisp's account is an extremely important document for a history of Camp because it establishes a link between Camp and the literature of sexology. First, we know

from the sexological literature that homosexuality was determined by the deployment of specific performative codes—gesture, posture, speech, costume. Second, we have from the transcripts of the 1919 Newport scandal a description of this gesture system and how it was read. Third, the description of the gesture system from the 1919 Newport scandal matches that given by Crisp in the 20s. And Crisp gives us the name of the gesture system, verifies its function, and acknowledges it as a vehicle for agency. In the span of five decades, the Homosexual type had leapt from the pages of literature and into a fleshly incarnation, "a subject engendered precisely," as Teresa de Lauretis would say, "by the process of its engagement in narrative genres" (108).

2. For accounts of Camp as a marker of identity see Altman 153-155; Bérubé 86-87; Gagnon and Simon 152-153; and Newton 110. Far more numerous are the writings on Camp as a code of secrecy and concealment: see Altman 153-155; Blachford 195-196; Bronski 43, 46; Core 9; Cory 73; Fiedler 122-123; Russo 206; and Sontag 110.

3. Altman 155.

4. Andrew Britton's essay, "For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp," stands as the most negative evaluation of Camp based on the logic Altman is advancing, but it is reflected throughout the literature. See also Bersani 208; Brunvand 895; Ross 144; and Tyler 34-37. For a critique of the philosophy in which Camp is rejected in order to differentiate and champion the masculinized gay man, see Gough 120-121. Based on the semiotics of gender parody, Gough advances an interesting argument that dismisses, or at least minimizes, the differences between social identity performances of the masculinized gay man and the "effeminate," or Camp, homosexual.

5. Chauncey 103.

6. Gough 119.

7. Kinsey 623-636.

8. Koranyi 21.

9. Bronski 77-79; D'Emilio 37.

10. Foucault has argued that the medicalization of sex was based upon confession (*History of Sexuality* 57-73). Yet, as actually practiced in the field, the medicalization of sex—as evidenced by both Krafft-Ebing and Kinsey—seems to be based on an articulated rejection of confession.

11. Kinsey 616.

12. *Ibid.* 615.

13. *Ibid.* 617.

14. D'Emilio 41.

15. Meyer, "Unveiling the Word" n.p.

16. Escoffier 140-141; D. King 155; Marshall 151.

17. Tyler 33.

18. Isherwood's definition is recognized as a discontinuity that inaugurates the birth of contemporary notions of Camp. See Booth 11; Brien 873; Brunvand 894; Frazier 21; and Melly 161. This view does not, of course, take into consideration the preexistence of J. Redding Ware's 1909 definition.

19. Brien 873; Melly 161.

20. Isherwood 125.

21. Brien 873.

22. Frazier 19.

23. Isherwood 125-126.

24. Isherwood's complete list of Camp objects consisted of: ballet, Baroque art, Mozart, El Greco, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Freudian psychoanalytic.

25. In this regard, see Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*. His treatise on



Camp is actually an encyclopedia of Camp objects and artifacts only. This approach to Camp surfaces again and again as ambitious writers try to redefine Camp by redefining its objects. This practice of object substitution markets itself as "the new Camp." See especially two attempts to redefine Camp by offering an alternative or updated inventory in Michael Musto's "Old Camp, New Camp;" and Paul Rudnick and Kurt Anderson's "The Irony Epidemic: How Camp Changed From Lush to Lite."

26. Bredbeck, "Narcissus" 67.

27. Morrill 115-116.

28. See Beaver 116.

29. Kristeva 9.

30. Newton 105.

31. Babuscio 40-41.

32. Barthes 135.

33. Barthes never gave a name to the third order signifying chain. He advanced the concept of third order signification as a possibility only. To my knowledge, this theoretical possibility was never explored or developed in Barthes's later work. In the original version of this essay, I created the neologism of "supranotation" to describe third order signification. However, I feel that some critics would be resistant to the new term, and that such resistance would derail the substance of the theory. As a result, I have chosen to retain the more cumbersome "third order signification."

34. The High Camp sign offers a case against the conflation of signifier and signified with subject and object. Here, both the subject and object are signifiers.

35. Johnson 62.

36. Ibid. 41, 44.

37. Ibid. xix-xx.

38. Ibid. 29.

39. Ibid. 102.

40. Ibid. 23.

41. Ibid. 5.

42. Yingling 34.

43. Ibid. 32. See also Altman 146-171; and Bronski 205.

44. This concept of the "homotext" was first proposed in the 1970s by Jacob Stockinger.

45. Gough 122.

46. Altman 21.

47. Qtd. in Ibid. The gay bar scene emerged especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For histories of the bars see D'Emilio 31-33; and Kelsey.

48. I am indebted to Thomas A. King who first suggested this reading of the gay bars to me. See also Gallagher and Wilson's interview with Michel Foucault.

49. Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life* 97-99.

50. Yingling 31-32.

51. See especially Hal Fischer's 1977 study, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men*.

52. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 9-11.

53. Ibid. 11.

54. Baudrillard, *Seduction* 21.

## 5. Rethinking *Paris Is Burning*

1. This essay was written for an audience already acquainted with the literature on *Paris Is Burning* and Harlem drag balls. For those readers not familiar with these few works, I will

offer a quick sketch here. There are three primary essays: "Is Paris Burning?" by bell hooks; "The Golden Apple" by Peggy Phelan; and "Gender Is Burning" by Judith Butler. The encapsulation I offer here is not intended as a substitute for a first-hand look at these important essays. bell hooks's "Is Paris Burning?" is the baseline take on the film. She thinks that the drag queens in the film are engaged in acts of self-oppression, and that the balls are sites for the black internalization of white racism. The drag queens were seen by hooks as having constructed the balls as fantasy refuges that not only kept them from politically confronting the sources of racism, but actually reinscribing them. Phelan's "The Golden Apple" is an elaboration of hooks's thesis, but she develops it in a surprising direction. What begins as a critique of the film ends in a Lacanian feminist debate that uses black drag queens as evidence of gay male misogyny. Judith Butler, in her "Gender Is Burning," suggests that reading gay male drag as evidence of misogyny leads to a misidentification of Woman as the subject of the performances (rather than a specifically male drag subject). According to Butler, a critique of the film couched within terms of feminist debates (as is the case with Phelan's) will be ultimately misleading. In an astute move, she recenters interpretation of drag ball culture around a discursive analysis of the drag queens' social division into "houses".

2. Lionnet 9.

3. Mercer 204.

4. For the sake of efficiency I use the term "voguing" in this essay as an umbrella label that includes also all the mimetic dance forms found at the drag balls. This is with the understanding, however, that the word properly describes only one (usually non-mimetic) drag ball dance form among several.

5. Lincoln 160-170.

6. Sue-Ellen Case has additionally demonstrated that the reinscriptive function is accomplished through the deployment of metaphors ("Tracking" 11, 13). Thus I read the transvestite-as-metaphor as always already in the service of reinscription.

7. These tropes of transvestism were the subject of my "Performing Transvestism(s): The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."

8. Phelan 94.

9. For a comparison, see the drag competition documented by the 1968 film, *The Queen*. This is an example of the 1960s one-category competition. What makes this film so wonderful for an analysis of *Paris Is Burning* is that it features a very young Pepper LaBeija. The two films taken together provide a clear example of how one individual performer's drag has been transformed to accommodate the discursive remapping of the balls.

10. Goldsby 111.

11. Bakhtin 21.

12. Viegener 243. I am not implying here that bell hooks is a homophobic writer. Except for this single essay, hooks's other writings on homosexuality are extremely gay-friendly. What I am critiquing here are the writing strategies of this particular essay, "Is Paris Burning?" There seems to be something about the drag queens in *Paris Is Burning* that leads many writers into adopting dehumanizing interpretive strategies. That this kind of interpretation should show up in hooks's essay seems to be an indication of just how overwhelming the phenomenon of drag can be. For example, in a more recent essay by hooks, "African American Live Arts," she outlines a theory of African American performance that, for the most part, is in agreement with the interpretation of the drag balls that I am presenting in this essay (even though she does not apply her current performance theory to a rereading of the balls).

13. Hemphill 111.

14. Phelan 95.

15. Goldsby 108.

16. Corey goes on to explain how the Houses were named after their founders. These



founders were legendary drag performers with the power to materialize a social network centered on their expertise and mastery. This practice of naming the House after the founder is also a feature of many of the Houses of Yoruba possession-trance religions (see Matory 91).

17. Foucault, *Archaeology* 91-92.

18. *Ibid.* 101, 110.

19. "Gender Is Burning" 137.

20. Colin Palmer has pointed out that the influence of African kinship systems on some African-American family structures is often overlooked by scholars: a Eurocentric bias runs through much of the literature. The nuclear family may not always be the appropriate historical model to apply: "kinship arrangements must not be viewed simply as an extension of or a carbon copy of those of the whites" (90). The error in doing so is to see some African-American kinship arrangements as parodies of or failed attempts at (re)producing a Euro-American model. The critical writing on *Paris*, including Butler's, works from the assumption that the Voguing Houses are modeled after the white middle-class nuclear family, and fails to recognize the Africanism(s) at work here (see also Herskovits 167-86).

21. Butler, "Gender Is Burning" 127.

22. *Ibid.* 137.

23. The spread of Santeria in the United States following Castro's 1959 revolution was not literally overnight. There were a few priests and priestesses already practicing in the U.S. before that date. A few more came immediately after the revolution. But Santeria as a widespread contemporary religious phenomenon installed itself in the U.S. in an ever-increasing wave of Cuban immigration from 1960-1980 (Brandon 104-07).

24. During 1990-91 I was engaged in field research in Nigeria on the relationship of transvestites to possession-trance rituals. I returned to the U.S. just in time to catch the opening of *Paris Is Burning*. My spectatorial experience therefore was significantly different than many other critics of the film. Fresh from the field, I focused not on female impersonation, but rather on the social organization of the performers. That the social organization of Harlem drag ball culture is identical to that of many African religions has been noted by other scholars familiar with African ritual practices. Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti, in "Elements of Vogue," saw the connection between the drag balls and Santeria; and Donald Cosentino, in "Imagine Heaven," has suggested important links to Haitian Vodou.

25. In Santeria the titles are actually "godmother," "godfather," and the "godchildren." "Mother," "father," and "children" are shortened forms of the same (see Gonzalez-Wippler 88-89; and Murphy 49-56).

26. Gonzalez-Wippler 76.

27. On the inadequacy and inability of Western methodologies to recuperate African performance epistemologies, see M. Drewal, "(Inter)text"; and "Performance in Africa"; and Mudimbe ix-xi, 24-28.

28. Hemphill 119-120. For an account of the drag balls during the Harlem Renaissance, see Chauncey, *Gay New York* 257-63; and Garber, 324-25.

29. Hughes 42-43.

30. Chauncey, *Gay New York* 261.

31. Beattie xxv; Matory 1-25, 170-215.

32. Fry 143, 151.

33. *Ibid.* 143.

34. Qtd. in *Ibid.*

35. This was related to me by Santeria scholar Ivor Miller, a Santeria scholar who has done the field research on this particular gay Santeria House.

36. Arratia 205.

37. That "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" are epistemologically dependent terms

is a fairly standard concept in Queer Theory as it is espoused by those grounded in the philosophy of social constructionism. It is not within the scope of this essay to argue again the case for this particular theory since it has been treated in depth elsewhere. Instead, I refer the interested reader to the literature: see, for examples, Beaver; Cohen 9-14; Foucault, *History*; T. King; Sedgwick 1-22; and Wittig, "Straight Mind" and "Social Contract."

38. Wittig, "On the Social Contract" 41-45.

39. See also Sedgwick 1-22.

40. *Archaeology* 54-55.

41. *Ibid.* 46

42. I have addressed the issue of the "unthinkability" of sexual orientation in West African cultures, in my "I Have Two Eyes: Performing Alternative Gender among the Hausa of Nigeria: A Report From the Field" (see also M. Drewal, *Yoruba* 186).

43. Nevadomsky 186-207; and Rosen.

44. Gonzalez-Wippler 7.

45. hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" 154.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 92. Interestingly, it is precisely one of these black and white stills of Venus upon which Peggy Phelan centered her analysis of the film, and which is reproduced in her essay (110). It appears that Phelan is seduced by Livingston's strategy and uses the still photo to isolate and then render Venus as a stable text, as an object which can be recuperated to a Western epistemology. Indeed, Phelan concludes her essay by equating Venus Xtravaganza with the Venus of classical mythology and specifically with a myth whose title doubles as the title of her essay, "The Golden Apple" (111). The ontological insecurity occasioned by the drag ball has been reinscribed into the hierarchical relations of power within the Western canon of literature whose authority is invoked by Phelan in the first instance (through her essay's title) and in the last (the concluding invocation of classical narrative) by manipulating the death effect of the film's photo stills. Those who would proffer a psychoanalytic interpretation of the film, as Phelan does, would naturally be drawn to the static images of Venus because the black and white still photo is exactly what the Lacanian subject looks like when rendered visually, thus facilitating the transcoding of the photographic image as subject of theory. Phelan's interpretation is complicit with Livingston's image in that both conspire to render Venus as psychoanalytic subject.

48. *Archaeology* 95-96.

49. Schechner, "Restoration" 36.

50. This is an idea developed by social constructionist Alfred Schutz (66-69) by way of Husserl's explanation of the relationship of act and intention. Husserl made the distinction between continuous and discontinuous acts. The problem in interpretation lies in the nature of our perceptions of the discontinuous (in this case the discursive discontinuity of Harlem drag ball performances). Acts which are discontinuous, according to Husserl, are those in which multiple discursive enunciations are bound together. The completed discontinuity is a collection of discrete acts which, because they are performed simultaneously, constitute a single object in addition to the collection. The multiplicity of influences at work here disappear in analysis of the resulting singularity which now appears as a unified act of projection or fantasy (this unification being the trademark of the continuous act). As I will argue in the next section of this essay, Venus Xtravaganza's performances constitute only one trajectory within the collection that comprises the drag ball. The totality of the drag ball should not be reduced to the appearance of singularity given by any one trajectory. The drag ball is the result of a performance process located between agents and, as such, is not under the control of any single performer.

51. Bastide 302.

52. Murphy 131.



53. I draw heavily from the outlines of the social markers of possession-trance performances in Beattie; Beattie and Middleton; and Firth.

54. See Becquer; and Cosentino.

55. It is not possible to address possession-trance as a universal, global, or transcultural phenomenon. This becomes apparent when one compares descriptions of African and Asian trance forms. What is called "trance" in West Africa does not necessarily bear any similarities to the term "trance" as it has been applied in, for example, Bali. In this essay, I am addressing specifically African trance performances and the New World forms of trance originating in Africa.

56. Torgovnick 3-72.

57. Western scientific analyses of possession-trance have often tried to reduce it to a physiological state which can be measured. In the medico-scientific studies, the statements of the actors are discounted and possession-trance is reduced to quantitative data put in service of a search for a biological causality. This medicalization of the subject is a favorite strategy of the West for recuperation of the marginal and deviant.

58. Beattie 2.

59. Strathern 154.

60. Beattie xxvi.

61. In his influential essay "From Ritual to Theatre and Back," Richard Schechner introduced the idea of an efficacy/entertainment continuum for the study of performance. He discarded the notion that a performance had to be *either* efficacious (ritual) *or* entertaining (theatre). Rather these two functions are present in varying degrees in every performance form. All rituals contained theatrical elements and all theatre contained ritualistic elements. Accordingly, ritual could not be defined as not-theatre and vice versa. Thus by extension a spirit possession medium does not have to be *either* dissociated (ritual) *or* reflexive (theatre). Dissociation and reflexivity are present in degrees. An interesting study in this regard is Michelle Anderson's "Authentic Voodoo is Synthetic" in which she applied Schechner's model to the theatrical/entertainment aspects of vodou possession-trance rituals in Haiti.

62. Strathern 154.

63. Beattie xxix.

64. Besmer 82-84; Stoller, *Fusion* xxi-xxii; Kerr 45; Drewal, Yoruba 4-6.

65. Bastide 237.

66. Beattie xxvi.

67. Besmer 23; see also Beattie 5; and Nevadomsky 199-202.

68. T. King, "Performing Akimbo" 23.

69. Because of the West's obsession with the phenomenon of trance medium dissociation, it has been the only possession performance characteristic that has been tracked to the New World. Melville Herskovits, by tracking dissociation, was able to declare that "being moved by the spirit" in African-American churches was a survival of possession-trance behaviors from Africa (208-24). Yet there is no reason why we can't track other characteristics of the form, (e.g., social organization, performer status, level of memesis, etc.) in order to make a determination. African possession-trance is the only genre of performance in the world today which is defined by the West according to biological measurements. This medicalization of the subject of possession is one of the last holdovers of Victorian eugenics in contemporary theorizing. The racism inherent in the act of defining this black African performance genre by quantitative, biological data should be apparent. I don't think that we would seriously consider defining Western theater by strapping electrodes to the heads of actors, monitoring brain waves, and then declaring that theater can only occur when the actors display specific wave patterns. Why then do we unquestioningly do so with so many black African performance forms?

70. Paul Stoller, in his work on the cult of Hauka in Niger, has noted too that "the political power that devolves from embodiment" is generally not registered by scholars because it "does not lend itself to the visual bias that is central to discursive analysis" as it practiced in American academe (*Embodying* 20, 28). The discontinuous identities manifested in possession-trance produce knowledges which do not easily (if at all) lend themselves to textual translation. Mark Johnson reminds us that embodiments "*are not propositional*, in that they are not abstract subject-predicate structures.... They exist, rather, in a continuous, analog fashion in our understanding . . . at a level more general and abstract than that at which we form particular mental images" (23-24). Western analytical methods, based as they are on concrete images, need to render embodiments as static visuals in translation (as we have seen in the interpretations of Paris).

71. *Practice* 117.

72. *Ibid.* 105.

73. Arens *passim*; Herbert 221.

74. Herbert 2.

75. Fernandez 105.

76. Herbert 226.

77. Phelan 97.

78. *Ibid.* 95.

79. Herbert 22.

80. H. Drewal 160-185.

81. See also Kerr 41-58; and Stoller, *Embodying* *passim*.

82. Herbert 2.

83. Giddens 33.

84. Taussig 126.

85. *Ibid.* 78.

86. Horkheimer 180-81 *qtd.* in Taussig 215-219.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Taussig 176-177.

89. *Qtd.* in Stoller, *Embodying* 117.

90. Horkheimer; and T. King.

91. I am indebted to my conversations with Thomas A. King for much of the phraseology used in this concluding statement.

## 6. Celebrity Jack

1. Chauncey, *Gay New York* 102.

2. Watney 70.

3. Escoffier 143.

4. Altman, "What Changed?" 58.

5. Piontek 58.

6. Ramon Rivera-Servera, in a personal communication, has pointed out that the term "straight-acting" emerged during the pre-internet era when gay men would meet through personal ads placed in gay newspapers. In either case, the term was used in newspaper ads or early internet profiles in lieu of photographs. Tim Bergling, whose research was conducted primarily via internet interviews with informants discovered online, was not in a position to question the term as being specific to the internet, and uncritically forwarded his analysis to the praxis of everyday life.

7. Chauncey, *Gay New York* 104.

8. Bergling 82.

9. Chauncey, *Gay New York* 105.
10. Escoffier 145.
11. For those who need them, definitions of these terms are easily accessible online.
12. Data based on interviews of multi-generational informants between 2002-2008.
13. Harris 191.
14. See, for example, the spectacular epitaph in Flinn.
15. Berlant and Freeman, 196. See also Jeffreys.
16. King, "In Defense of Gay/Performance" 158
17. In the early 70s, just prior to the advent of the clones, there were some instances of effeminate gay men in drag as butch lesbians. It was not a widespread practice. However, there is a minor history of such drag trade-offs first manifested in the wake of Stonewall.

### 7. In Defense of Gay/Performance

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1. Roach, "Culture and Performance" 48.
2. Drewal, "State of Research" 2; and *Yoruba Ritual* 95-97.
3. King, *Queer Articulations* 11-16, 50-54, 136-138.
4. Pavis 17.
5. Ibid.
6. In King, "M/S," "Scenes," and *Queer Articulations*.
7. Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity" 14.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. 15.
10. Foucault, *Discipline* 192.
11. Compare Foucault's famous formulation of "the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (*History* 101).
12. Hutcheon 26; Drewal, "State" 84-102.
13. Parker and Sedgwick, Introduction 1. The conference referred to is The English Institute at Harvard.
14. Ibid.
15. For other accounts of the disciplinary relations among theatre, performance, and performativity, see Case, "Performing Lesbian"; Conquergood; Dolan, "Geographies"; Drewal, "State"; Roach, "Introduction"; Román 211-13; and Zarrilli, "Toward a Definition."
16. Bakhtin 21.
17. Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity" 1.
18. Gould 21.
19. Butler, "Critically Queer" 25.
20. Austin 26.
21. Butler, "Critically Queer" 24.
22. Ibid. According to Butler, "performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the per-

former; 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable" (*Bodies* 234; see also Derrida 310).

23. See also Sedgwick's short essay posted on the Internet, "Queer Sex Habits (Oh, no! I mean) Six Queer Habits," in which she reinvents longstanding methods of performance criticism. Butler also gestures toward a necessary analysis of social relations and institutions when she remarks that "a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" ("Burning" 205). Butler acknowledges that performatives acquire their force precisely because speakers "mak[e] linguistic community with a history of speakers" (206).

24. Austin 7.

25. For an account of the trace, see Certeau: "The trace left behind is substituted for the practice" (*Practice* 97; cf 35). This substitution, Certeau argued, equates the act of speaking with knowledge of the language, performance with linguistic "competence" (xxiii). See also Foucault, *Archaeology* 47-48, 84, 101-102. Cf Pavis's criticism of the attempt by semioticians to achieve "a taxonomy of codes" (17). See also Bakhtin; and Meyer, "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp."

26. The most compelling essay in Parker and Sedgwick's *Performativity and Performance* is Roach's "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World." What makes a comparison of Roach with the other contributors to that volume so interesting is precisely his presence in the field, prodded into the streets by his readings of Clifford, Drewal, Conquergood, Schechner, Zarrilli, and others. At the moment that he began the deployment of a field methodology, this theatre scholar metamorphosed into a Performance Studies theorist.

27. Parker and Sedgwick 2.

28. As Drewal has noticed, Butler's construal of performance as fixity, her conflation of processual activity with bounded events, leads her to degrade performance as the sedimentation of history and to locate the latter in the performativity of language. In a paper on New York's reversionist movement, Drewal has argued instead that

it is precisely the contestatory capacity of performers to embody skills and techniques completely alien to normalized social conventions, an active re-membering of that forgotten history, that unmoors performance and performers from constrained contingency and liberates the body for insurrection without recourse to either misappropriation or expropriation. Techniques of the body are not limited to embodied sedimentations of the history of state apparatuses. They may exceed the conventional through repetition with critical difference and/or they may stand apart from official conventions altogether.

29. Butler, "Critically Queer" 17.

30. Goffman's classic *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* takes as its fundamental unit of analysis, not the individual performer, but the "team" (80, 81n6, 83, 104). For an important account identifying the performing subject, not with the individual, but with the team, in this case the butch-femme couple, see Case, "Butch-Femme." The concept of performance communities developed out of the dialogue between King and Carol Burbank in "Critical Drag."

31. Butler, "Critically Queer" 18.

32. Foucault defined the "enunciative function" as that which allows statements to exist in relation to "collateral" fields of oppression (*Archaeology* 97). Instead of giving a "meaning" to these units, this function relates them to a "field of objects; instead of providing them with a subject, it opens up for them a number of possible subjective positions; instead of fixing their limits, it places them in a domain of coordination and coexistence; instead of determining their identity, it places them in a space in which they are used and repeated (106).



33. Schechner, "Restoration" 35-116; Drewal "State" 84-102; Drewal, *Yoruba* 88-89, 95-97, 161. In Schechner's formulation, the future/subjunctive posited in performance is not equivalent to the performance itself, "because performances are always actually performed" (41; cf 55). Schechner demonstrated this in his important discussion of what is "inside" and what is "outside" the performances of the agnicayana and of Balinese trance. Structuralist ethnographers, Schechner showed, have tried to equate ritual performance with an origin or ideal structure, weeding out all those activities which compete with that structure for the ethnographer's attention. This is a Platonic formulation: the "real" ritual is its ideal structure. Flipping the terms, Schechner showed that the actually occurring ritual activity includes the contestation and negotiation of the ethnographer's frame by participants; the ideal of the ethnographers is rather the "future/subjunctive" posited during the processual activity of ritual, but only unevenly and always available to contestation ("Restoration" 40-41, 55-65, 75).

34. Giddens 90.

35. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 174.

36. Patton 147.

37. Gates 231.

38. Morton 135.

39. Compare Giddens's argument that recoverable texts will always record discursive consciousness, that is, formalized talk, and will therefore record different kinds of motivations than those constitutive of everyday practices; in the latter agents are primarily motivated to negotiate the demands of interaction in situations of co-presence (102-103).

40. This disputation between dramaturgical and textual metaphors for sociological inquiry was given its classical formulation by Clifford Geertz in his 1980 essay "Blurred Genres." In an important critique of Butler and Sedgwick, Sue-Ellen Case has decried the privilege given writing and reading within performativity studies, arguing provocatively that "the project of performativity is to recuperate writing at the end of print culture" ("Performing Lesbian" 8).

41. Butler, "Critically Queer" 24.

42. Kaplan 310.

43. Phelan, "Broken Symmetries" 27.

44. *Ibid.*, "Golden Apple" 101.

45. *Ibid.*, "White Men" 135.

46. See Butler, *Gender Trouble* 148, 122.

47. Tyler 42-43.

48. *Ibid.* 41.

49. *Ibid.* 42.

50. *Ibid.* 44.

51. Phelan, "Golden Apple" 99-101.

52. *Ibid.*, "Spatial Envy" 82.

53. *Ibid.*, "Golden Apple" 101.

54. Tyler 33.

55. Owens 222.

56. Phelan, "Golden Apple" 99. For a feminist reconsideration of these arguments, see Butler *Gender Trouble* 137-138. Noting the absence of lesbians in male accounts of homosexuality, Diana Fuss has also remarked that some lesbian feminists have in turn invested this binarism and erected a lesbian identity on the rejection and repression of a male hom(m)osexual economy. In one extreme version of this view, the (male) homosexual is erased by feminist theorizations of the homosocial which posits the exchange of women between men as culture's inaugural institution of oppression. Or, in a far more pernicious view,

the homosocial is theorized as a socially acceptable expression of the homoerotic, and gay men are themselves situated to bear the burden of a cultural homophobia designed to mask the determinative power of gay male relations (*Essentially* 110-111).

57. *Ibid.*, "Developing" 45-47.

58. Giddens 90.

59. *Ibid.* xxiii, 4-5.

60. *Ibid.* xxxii-xxxiii.

61. Foucault, *Archaeology* 100-105, 182-183.

62. Case, "Performing Lesbian" 12.

63. Foucault, *Archaeology* 130.

64. In this regard, see Rubin, "Thinking Sex."

65. Román 218.

66. See Taussig 47-48 on imitative and contagious magic.

67. Schechner, "Restoration" 49.

68. Produced by groups such as Café Con Leche, Body and Soul, and the Lesbian Health Series, all then located at the Fenway Community Health Center.

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*An Archaeology of Posing* is a collection of essays from an innovative and provocative scholar of gendered performance who works beyond text-based queer theory toward a critique of gay cultural performance. The essays make a significant contribution to performance studies, performance criticism, and gender studies.

—Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Northwestern University*

*An Archaeology of Posing* compiles previous and new writing on gay culture by one of the field's most provocative critics. Diverging from the text-based premise of most LGBTQ theories, Meyer utilizes performance studies and interpretive anthropology to examine camp and drag performances in the spaces in which they appear. He explores a variety of topics—from transsexual striptease and Harlem drag balls to the death of camp—within the genre of gay and gendered performance. This collection of essays, with his celebration of the effeminate gay male body, presents a fresh interpretation of established art forms. From the pre-Stonewall era to the present day, Meyer redefines how we understand the phenomena of camp and drag.

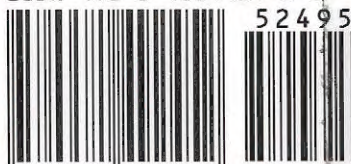
**MOE MEYER** was Lecturer in Performance studies at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* remains a landmark publication in queer performance studies.

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