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(En)Gendered Performances and the Problematics of Identity Construction in Contemporary Gay Literature

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by

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of Identity Construction

in Contemporary Gay Literature

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Dedication

I dedicate my time and work on this thesis project to my mother, Linda H. Claxton, whose unfailing support has helped to bring me this far in my career. I owe her for my spirit of enthusiasm, my work ethic, and my love of literature. When I warned her that I would not see or speak to her for the two months during which I would be completing the thesis, with a crooked smile, she said, "I'll be here when you're finished." Throughout my years in graduate school, she has never made me feel guilty for not spending more time with her, even though her battle with multiple sclerosis continues to defeat her spirit, and I know that having her family by her means a great deal to her. For such support, I am eternally grateful.

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William

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Introduction: Gender as Performance:

A Paradigm for the Nineties

> "'Sammy and I decided that if this is a girl, we want to name it Shelby' . . . 'What'll you name it if it's a boy?' 'Shelby, I guess.' 'That's the way it should be.'"
>
> *Steel Magnolias*

We are out.

In the 1990's, gay men have achieved a certain level of cultural and political visibility. The gay marriage debate continues; the Supreme Court recently struck down Colorado's anti-gay Amendment Two as unconstitutional. We are the news; we are on everyone's mind.

But what happens in this visibility? As gay people situate themselves in current culture, our understanding of ourselves becomes the conflict of identity construction. What is it to be gay? And perhaps more importantly,

if such a category exists, how do we recognize ourselves and others?

Richard Dyer's "Getting Over the Rainbow: Identity and Pleasure in Gay Cultural Politics" attempts to answer this question. After a lengthy, and fairly convincing, discussion of cultural politics centered on "the body," Dyer opens a discussion on the significance of dress, pointing out that it "reveals class, gender, racial and other subcultural positions whether consciously or unconsciously" (60). Moving away from essentialist notions of identity, Dyer offers us a fluctuating sense of self, one which in and of itself may be disconcerting to the individual and to society because we can no longer assume previously held notions of gender and identity to be "fixed." By trying to reconcile gay "identity" with gay "dress," Dyer suggests that what gay men wear "is especially significant . . . since being gay doesn't actually of itself 'show' physically, and it is only through dress that we can make a statement about ourselves that, unlike a verbal pronouncement, is there all the time" (60). But what part are we dressing? Is it true that dress is "there all the time." How I dress today is not necessarily how I will dress tomorrow. Dyer's analysis ends with neither a manifesto of appropriate dress nor an understanding of what "gay clothes" are.

Dyer touches on an issue that Reid Gilbert extends in his essay on body politics. Quoting Jan Kott, Gilbert asserts that the body is "the basic [theatrical] icon" or "at least 'the locus of interconnecting sign-systems'" (477). If the corporeal represents the base of signification, then, that Dyer does not propose a gay sumptuary law becomes irrelevant, for gay men are performing identity and gender regardless of what they wear--simply because they are clothed. Clothes, whether gay or straight (if indeed these categories exist), because we assign gender attributes to them, (en)gender the wearer.

Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* is to date the most comprehensive and enlightening theory of dress. Garber's introduction establishes her theoretical paradigm. Quite simply, she looks at the way cross-dressing "offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male'" (10). Society comforts itself with a system of signifiers which recapitulate themselves; dress is perhaps the most obvious of these signifiers, for what an individual wears offers the other its first impressions of a "me." Yet clothing, subject to the whims of fashion, carries an irrepressible "index of destabilization, displeasing to the monarch as to the sermonizer, since it renders the

[individual] *il*legible, incapable of inscription" (27). This inability to confine gender or identity into neat categories promotes the idea of a "third," which "involves moving from a structure of complementarity or symmetry to a contextualization, in which what once stood as an exclusive dual relation becomes an element in a larger chain" (12). A "Third," then, opens the door for a crisis by questioning ideas of "identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge" (11).

Garber's first chapter explores the sumptuary laws of England, particularly in relation to Shakespeare's theater of cross-dressing men. Since women were not allowed on stage, their parts necessarily fell to "pretty" men or boys, whose voices gave credibility to their (re)presentations. Yet the theatrical stage grounds itself in that "willing suspension of disbelief"; theater is unreal, fantastic, spectacular. Therefore, English playwrights and actors of the seventeenth century "were *allowed* to violate the sumptuary laws that governed dress and social station--on the supposedly 'safe' space of the stage" (35). Garber questions this notion of "safe space," for the audience "believes" what it sees only if what it sees in some way (re)presents an aspect of reality. For an audience to view men as women, and to believe the portrayal, the men must mimic their cultural and social understandings of stereo-

typed notions of "femininity." This mimicry alone calls into question notions of gender. If the patriarchal eye objectifies women in society, then when men dress as women, or for that matter enact "feminine" roles, and perform either on a real stage or on the stage of their daily lives, they may open themselves up to that same type of objectification. The "actor" is saying to himself and to his "audience," "I am what I believe the other to be." But his self-assertion also offers him up to rebuttal: "What other are you? What other are you trying to (re)present? Do you achieve your goal?" Such (re)presentation opens the Pandora's box of questions in relation to gender: if a man can, simply by changing dress, perform the female, how solid is gender construction? Garber wonders, "If [people] are taken for males (or, in the opposite case, females) throughout their lives, to what gender *do* they belong? . . . How artificial are the 'real' signs of gender?" (47) If men or women can easily shift from one gender to another, then gender itself must be a constructed identity, not at all essential or biological, as many have believed it to be.

Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub define gender as "what we make of sex on a daily basis, how we deploy our embodiedness and our multivalent sexualities in order to construct ourselves in relation to the classifications of

male and female" (3). Such a definition points to the constructivist nature of gender itself. Apparently, as Laurence Senelick asserts, "gender *is* performance": "As a cultural construct, made up of learned values and beliefs, gender identity (if one can posit such an absolute) has no ontological status" (ix). By "catching gender in the act--as an act," we realize that "there is no natural, essential, biological basis to gender identity or sexual orientation" (Taylor 32). Identity faces its own "ontological challenge," according to Moe Meyer, because "bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous" must give way to "a concept of Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts" (2-3). Therefore, gender and identity fall into a "non-space" of uncertainty foregrounded primarily by a refusal of binarity or essentialist ideology.

Here, then, is Garber's "category crisis": "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossing from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave" (16). Garber's notion of "category crisis" is tied to the idea of complementarity by dismantling the concept of binarity. The transvestite operates at the margin, and as such, proffers a

"'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (16). As will become more clear in chapter three, the transvestite may occupy an empowered space that can "disrupt, expose, and challenge, putting into question the very notion of the 'original' and stable identity" (16). Consider Judith Butler's "copy to copy" theory:

> The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of "the original" . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original. (qtd. in Garber 142)

If both the assumed "original" (heterosexuality) and the assumed "copy" (homosexuality) are merely the parodies of ideas, then they represent a site of doubled-discontinuity. Neither is original or copy, and therefore both are utterly constructed. This "category crisis" offers a problem for gay men.[1] As long as we remain outside of society's idea of "normal," we do not see ourselves (re)presented. Yet (re)-presentation itself becomes increasingly problematic because

there is no cornerstone of originality, only multiple levels of imitation.

Invariably, during the "coming out" process, young men question themselves, their sexuality, their gender, for their feelings often do not coincide with society's constructs of gender. In the United States, to be a man is to want women (probably more than one); to be a woman is to be wanted by a man and equally to want a man. Each category is characterized by an "appropriate" behavior and dress. Since gay men have not fit into the existing categories, we have had to either force ourselves into one or create one of our own. Lack of communal support has led many gay men to assimilate, as best we can, and create a seemingly "safe space" in which to perform our daily lives. Contemporary gay literature offers us an intriguing look at the ways in which we have attempted to center ourselves in American culture, as well as the ways in which we have attempted to operate outside of it.

The following chapters will examine different masks gay men assume--passing, camp, and drag--in order to discover both how these masks are constructed and how they work for the performer and his audience. Following Garber's theory of "gender as performance," we will look at these masks as (en)gendered performances. By (en)gendered performances, I

mean those which act out (and act up) or are based on traditional gender stereotypes. For both passing and cross-dressing are constructed on the notion that there is some essential "masculine" or "feminine" identity that can be appropriated. Camp, too, is a performance rooted in traditionally "feminine" behavior. As performances based on seemingly fixed notions of gender, passing, camp and drag are all fundamentally problematic masks. Since gender is not fixed, these masks are constructed on fluctuating systems of identification. These markers also overlap so that the masks themselves often turn one into another. Because these masks are based on individuals' perceptions of gender, they also tellingly represent how gay men see themselves, as well as the "gender" they are appropriating and/or parodying.

Let me clarify my use of the term *masks*. In an anthropological discussion of masks, Elizabeth Tonkin points out that a mask's "communicative character cannot be understood without considering [its] use, which is generally in performance, as part of a costume. [It] communicate[s] meanings through transforming the wearer" (225). Tonkin goes on to comment that "when masks on their own communicate power, this seems derivable from their transformative and therefore re-creative capacity. . . . / To change, replace, or

obliterate a face by a mask signals at the least a change of identity" (226). By holding that masks create and re-create identity, Tonkin points to an idea I wish to explore in the following chapters: that passing, camp, and drag are, physically or metaphorically, masks which attempt to construct identity. If the transvestite rests at the margin, or more appropriately in a liminal space,[2] then the power of masks to "conjoin opposites, . . . crossovers from one state to another" (228), seems to apply. For as Tonkin claims, "Masks are widely used in rites of transition, which move participants from one social state to another" (228). Passing functions, in some ways, as a step in identity construction, as does, for some, bisexuality. A popular phrase in gay parlance is "Bi now, gay later," which underscores a recognition on the part of gay men and lesbians that in the "coming out" process, there are many phases, as well as areas of transition from one to the next. Camp may also function as a transitional mask, using humor to make individual transitions easier.

The next three chapters will be exploratory. If recent theories of gender identity and construction point to any one idea, it is that so many of the questions we have in relation to gender seem unanswerable. Chapter One looks at the relationship between "passing for straight" during/after

the coming out process and how the mask functions as a reflection of gender stereotypes. Chapter Two explores the next "stage": the way that camp reflects these stereotypes by relying on stock notions of "feminine" ideals. In Chapter Three, returning to Marjorie Garber's theories of transvestism, I look at the ways in which "drag" both appropriates gender stereotypes and perhaps undermines them. In the end, I hope to point out how these masks work together and contain elements of subversion and reinscription. I will also underscore the way that these masks, because they are all constructed on similar ideas of gender, begin to blend together, thus advancing the theory that in gender construction, absolutes do not appear to exist.

Notes

1. Although lesbian literature may contain the same types of masks, I will be dealing primarily with gay male texts. I have found that gay men's literature explores the way that, because they are often viewed as "women" or effeminate men--and thus to some extent castigated for that "feminine" alliance--gay men have used passing, camp, and drag to either work within the dominant culture or outside that culture.

2. Liminality, the idea of being "betwixt and between" two states, is usually seen as a transitional phase of development. For Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, the liminal figure is "no longer assigned to a culturally defined social position or status" and therefore "finds himself in limbo" (65). As I explore in chapter three, the transvestite, because (s)he is neither "male" nor "female," occupies a middle, or "third," space that does not necessarily involve moving from one "fixed" space to another as much as it involves dismantling those previously "fixed" notions of gender.

Chapter One

Passing: Presentational Gender Performance

> "In my day, you could tell by a man's carriage and demeanor which side his bread was buttered on, but this day and age, who knows?"
>
> Clairee, *Steel Magnolias*

The first time I watched *Steel Magnolias* (the movie), I was in high school, very much closeted, probably less, now that I think about it, to those around me than to myself. I laughed when Clairee told the story of her grandson, Marshall, and his trip from the closet. After more than forty viewings, I realize that Clairee has hit upon something that becomes increasingly problematic: "who knows?" The inability "to know" points to the problem of identity construction, and even whether such a thing is possible. If we are performing our "selves," our genders, we are basing these performances on something exterior to ourselves. In this

chapter, I look at the act of passing, a conscious act which operates to "hide" or "protect" the masked individual from the dominant culture. But passing is a mask that nonetheless relies on conceptions of gender stereotypes for its construction. Passing may be summed up as the attempt to assimilate oneself to the dominant culture's essentialist notions of gendered identity. Such assimilation, however, seems to prove ultimately unsuccessful.

Before we look at passing in the literature, we should examine the social construction of masculinity, femininity, and a "third," effeminacy. The problem here is the construction of heterosexuality as the norm. Male heterosexuality constructs itself on the notion of masculinity, that man is subject because he is man, an essentialist ideology. Diana Fuss, editor of *Inside/Out*, argues in her Introduction that the "metaphysics of identity" (1) are rooted in "the language and law that regulates the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution" (2). This "compulsory heterosexuality,"[1] says Fuss, "is the language and law of defense and protection: heterosexuality secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predator encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality" (2). If masculinity is subject, then femininity is

other, and homosexuality is other because of its acceptance of "feminine" traits. Homosexuality represents a feminized position because the gay man is often viewed as a passive individual, the one penetrated, and therefore the woman.[2]

But is homosexuality or a gay identity the same thing as being a woman? Is the homosexual "feminized" or effeminate, a totally different animal? Following the arguments of Daniel Harris, Carole-Anne Taylor, and Marjorie Garber, I will argue that effeminacy does not copy the feminine as much as it dismantles both the masculine and feminine by positing itself as a third category, and therefore challenges binarities and "identity" itself. Harris's article "Effeminacy" juxtaposes androgyny and effeminacy and examines their socio-political as well as cultural context. For Harris, effeminacy represents "a direct affront to an unspoken ideology of the body," "an unwilled form of radicalism, of unrepentant exaggeration" (72):

> Whereas androgyny creates its own mystique of sexual ambiguity and tasteful self-containment, effeminacy is animated, excessive, and engaged. Androgyny is tantalizingly withdrawn; effeminacy is theatrical and extroverted, causing acute embarrassment and disgust not only among the intolerant but the socially progressive as well. (72)

The phobia of effeminacy is not, then, a problem with the Other as much as it is a problem with acting out. Thus the self-contained distaste for effeminate men in the gay community that leads to personal ads which stress "straight-acting, straight-appearing only" "expresses a new anxiety on the part of gay men to strip themselves of the demasculinizing traces of the subculture" (Harris 77).

Carol-Anne Taylor, however, takes a different view from Harris. For Taylor, to accept the role of the feminine is to be effeminate, a form of mimicry. Quoting Irigaray, Taylor points out that mimicry "'assume[s] the feminine role deliberately . . . so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible'" (qtd. in Taylor 53). Harris, however, views effeminacy as "not so much imitative of women as . . . *non-imitative* of men, for the state of effeminacy is characterized by complete inattention to gender, a kind of forgetfulness of one's duty to uphold the rituals of fellowship" (75). Taylor's problem, as well as that of others who attempt to locate effeminacy in the feminine, is that such a notion "presumes that these gestures are deliberate, however unconsciously, when in fact they are simply the outcome of total, anarchistic relaxation of one's vigilance in maintaining the masculine stance and demeanor" (Harris 76). Both Harris and

Taylor come to the same conclusion, however: effeminacy "does" ideology and likewise "undoes" ideology, calling into question heterosexist constructs. By locating itself in a third category, effeminacy creates the need for contextualization. No longer can we assume that "masculine" and "feminine" are the only options. As such, effeminacy "undoes" the existing binarities.

Garber also examines the role of effeminacy in *Vested Interests*. Comparing Jan Morris, a transsexual, and Quentin Crisp, an effeminate gay man, Garber points to the political ramifications of effeminacy and passing. Morris, through surgery and careful attention to dress, "sets out quite deliberately to turn herself . . . into an ordinary Englishwoman . . . . Where Morris becomes sartorially *invisible*, by transforming herself into a woman, Crisp remains defiantly visible as an effeminate man" (140). Crisp is "blind with mascara and dumb with lipstick"[3]; he is clearly a man acting out effeminate stereotypes because "he wanted to be *seen* and *read* for who and what he was; he wanted not to be mistaken or obliterated from view" (137). The difference is clear. Morris attempts to pass; Crisp, flamingly out of the closet, does not. For him, effeminacy is radical because it forces him into the subject position, acting out, while it causes great discomfort to the warring subject who is now

oscillating between the subject and object position. The former subject, "straight America," doesn't know how to categorize a Crisp, so it stigmatizes it, calls it "feminine" and makes it Other. Passing attempts to deal with this type of displacement, this othering gaze of a straight, masculine, heterosexist culture.

Since gay men must first find a way to deal with the constant gaze from the straight world, one of the most common and obvious masks is that of "passing." Passing, not unlike the African-American idea of "passing for white,"[4] involves gay men's passing as straight men. Because our society values and validates "masculine" traits, passing is another attempt to eschew that which is "feminine" and thereby operate within hegemonic constructions of gender "identity." In a homophobic society, coming out without this feeling of self-revulsion would seem odd. For if society constructs the myth that heterosexuality is the only real or acceptable orientation, that marriage and erotic desire for the opposite sex are the natural ends to a "real" man's maturation, then anyone who stands outside this ideology feels first and foremost like an outsider. In order to gain access to the monolithic construct of heterosexuality, the individual tries ardently to be "straight," to construct a mask to cover up his effeminacy or his erotic and philial

desire for other men. He must force any difference behind this mask in order to be accepted. And we all recognize the absolute desire in most children, or most people for that matter, to assimilate, to never stand outside the dominant social hierarchy.

Before I address the "gay" texts, I would like to explore Nella Larsen's *Passing*. A seminal text of the Harlem Renaissance, *Passing* is a "parody of the tragic-mulatto tale" (McLendon 95). Larsen wrote in a time that was looking for a rebirth of racial identity. As Jacquelyn McLendon notes, Larsen "wrote from a political need to counter (re)presentations of blackness and black female sexuality created by racism . . . as well as from a need to affirm racial pride" (4). We will first look at what passing means in the African-American tradition and then at its relationship to the idea of gay (and lesbian) passing.

Larsen keeps her readers aware that there is a sameness of some sort involved in Clare's and Irene's situations. Irene feels when she meets Clare after so many years that there "was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize, but which was, to Irene Redfield, very familiar" (*Passing* 22). After all, they have both passed: Clare in her marriage and social life, Irene when necessary. We may even read Irene's self-confined

position in her apparently unhappy marriage as a sort of passing. She feels that her children have been a hindrance, especially after she spends time with Clare, but she also knows that she loves them. She sees her marriage as problematic, especially in her fear that her husband may be interested in Clare's light complexion. Irene has been passing as the model mother, wife, and social leader. A part of Irene wants to break out, to know "about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment" (36-37). McLendon even argues for the ambiguity of Larsen's title, for it may "refer both to Clare's actions . . . and to Irene's actions, implying psychological passing or escapism" (96). Of course, we can take it a step further and also claim the title refers to the latent lesbian relationship between the two women and their attempt to "pass as straight" in a homophobic environment.

Like Judith Butler, I find the psychological aspect most interesting, for this dimension strongly denies the novel's tragic-mulatto theme and promotes a more revolutionary reading. Irene often refers to Clare as a "having" person. Irene seems to want, in some way, what Clare has. Larsen depicts Irene as feeling "anger, scorn, and fear" (19); as

wanting some "intangible something, too vague to define" (22) which Clare has; as being "curious" (36) about passing and its advantages and disadvantages; as "struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger and contempt" (61). Irene's character explores psychological complexities, for she wants what she is afraid to possess: both Clare's person (body) and that indistinct something which she possesses. As much as Irene knows the problems that she is supposed to feel with passing, she seems to realize what Clare has: passing is a means to an end. Franz Fanon believes that "the Negro wants to speak French [or we can read "pass"] because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago" (38). Clare has managed to use passing for social climbing; there is an aspect of this self-promoting desire that Irene also craves. Yet she is constantly pulled by her "two allegiances, different yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her" (180). On the next page, Larsen has Irene wishing, "for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro" (181). Irene has begun to internalize ideas about race that go against her "socialist" ideas of her place and purpose in her race.

Part of Irene's problem may be that she has married a man who could not pass if he wanted to, and thus she is

trapped by being yoked to him. Even when she wants to pass, her allegiance to him prevents it. Her desire at the end of the novel to try it is echoed early when she says, "'It's funny about "passing." We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it'" (97-98). Yet because Irene feels stuck without the option of passing as easily as Clare does, she begins to harbor resentment. She questions whether or not she owes Clare any loyalty: "That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare? Clare, who'd shown little enough consideration for her, and hers" (184). Irene has begun to feel betrayed by Clare, and here, betrayal causes uncomfortable "status-shifting" for Irene which leads to Irene's "shifting" Clare out of the window. Judith Butler claims that we cannot know for sure what happens to Clare Kendry. Although Irene is the last to have her hand upon Clare's arm, Butler asserts that the text is too ambiguous to ascertain a clear meaning of the murder/suicide (*Bodies* 168-74). However, a closer examination of the text seems to offer a clear reading. In the last scene of the novel, Larsen points out the way in which Irene tosses her cigarette out the window: "Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the

tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below" (206-7). Later, Larsen describes Clare's falling in the same way: "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (209). In between we hear Irene's mad thought that she 'couldn't have [Clare] free" (209). Larsen's comparative images and Irene's actions and reactions all point to Irene's pushing Clare through the window, and it is this act of murder which "revises conventional endings of tragic mulatto and passing tales" (McLendon 109). Larsen's novel offers at least two concrete examples of passing--passing for white and passing for straight--both of which end badly for the main passing character. Because Clare causes a psychological crisis for Irene, Irene cannot have her survive. Contemporary gay literature draws characters whose passing for straight offers a like crisis, and their masks exhibit a betrayal of gay "identity" that the gay authors apparently cannot condone.

A good example is the nameless protagonist in Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*. Nicholas Radel argues that White's characters "fail to achieve a coherent sense of self, and the failure can be attributed to the politics of sexual and gender difference" (175). For me, however, the main character's search for identity is more problematic.

This protagonist, an effeminate boy desperate to gain his father's love, says when he has failed in his attempt, "Somehow--but at what precise moment?--I had shown I was a sissy. . . . I'd betrayed myself" (30). He says later, "I was a fraud, a charlatan" (115). And at one point, near the end of the novel, he discusses his masked persona:

> It was men, not women, who struck me as foreign and desirable and I disguised myself as a child or whatever was necessary in order to enter their hushed, hieratic company, my disguise so perfect I never stopped to question my identity. Nor did I want to study the face *beneath my mask*, lest it turn out to have the pursed lips, dead pallor and shaped eyebrows by which one can always recognize the Homosexual. (169-70, my emphasis)

The boy realizes "that to be a sissy . . . is to have no power in his society" (Radel 182), and his fear of powerlessness/exclusion forces him to construct his mask. At the same time, the realization that he has constructed this mask commits him to being the Other that society wants him to be, devalued to the point that he later claims, "I had to be a performer, for at all times I was aware I was impersonating a human being" (188-89). Because the boy believes what Reid Gilbert says is the "axiom maintained by many men--that the

straight man is superior to the homosexual male, in that the homosexual occupies a position closer to the female, and therefore further from the apex of power" (480), he constructs a mask which inadvertently forces him outside the mainstream when the whole reason for the mask's construction was to be a part of it.

This same type of performance can be seen in another Edmund White novel, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, which continues the boy's story. The nameless protagonist meets Lou, who offers another look at both passing and effeminacy:

> "We queens are so self-conscious, our little heads so drugged on just the sheer thrill of existing publicly, that we can't even cross a room without simpering and mincing. It's not that we start out wanting to appear effeminate. It's that we use effeminacy after the fact as an alibi for our embarrassment, our florid but somehow ill-timed gestures, the bizarre tilt of our heads." (141)

Lou points out the self-perpetuating hegemony that the straight world constructs for the gay world. The Other always sees himself as performing. Yet it is this constant gaze by the straight world, and also the gaze of the gay world on its "members," that causes the individual to construct a way of feeling comfortable while under this gaze.

Therefore, White seems to be advocating the idea that effeminacy is not an inherently gay characteristic, but a mask that gay men use to push off the destructive Look of others and assert an assured self, even if it is only a mask of defense.

Lou's comment asserts something else: "the sheer thrill of existing publicly." At the most basic level, Lou means coming out, refusing to accept the dominant ideology that has kept one in the closet. Lou speaks of this "embarrassment" for feeling "out of step," from living a life on the margin. White's protagonist makes that change from book one to book two. These texts (re)present his odyssey from seeing himself as a "limp-wristed queer" to an individual, a person, to gaining autonomy and self-respect. Because his passing mask is ultimately transparent, the protagonist eventually realizes that he must take it off in order to find happiness of any sort. Since *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* concludes with the 1969 Stonewall Riots, marking in effect gay liberation, White leaves the reader feeling that it is the removal of the mask that is liberating, not the hiding behind it.

White's protagonist's problem with passing moves to the stage to become Louis's and Joe's problems in Tony Kushner's award-winning *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* and

Perestroika. Louis Ironson is an "out" gay man in New York whose lover, Prior Walter, is dying of AIDS. After Louis's grandmother's funeral, Louis laments to Prior that he always "get[s] so closety at these family things," to which Prior responds, "Butch. You get butch. (*Imitating*) 'Hi Cousin Doris, you don't remember me I'm Lou, Rachel's boy.' Lou, not Louis, because if you say Louis they'll hear the sibilant S" (1.4.19-20). Like so many gay men, Louis does not feel he can come out to his parents. He has internalized the stereotypes about himself, so conscious of his sibilant *s* that he has to act hyper-masculine at home to keep his family from knowing the truth. Louis, however, is not safe, for as Lynne Segal argues in *Slow Motion*, "Masculinity is structured through contradiction: the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question" (qtd. in Healey 88). And as Murray Healey has noted, "the very overcompensatory nature of hypermasculinity, the very effort to authenticate manliness, threatens to expose rather than allay that anxiety. Masculinity, as a conscious act or a pose before the camera, is then revealed to be inauthentic" (88). Louis reconstructs himself, his personality, to fit the accepted model. After a rocky break-up because he cannot handle Prior's suffering with AIDS, Louis seduces Joe Pitt.[5] At the end of *Millennium Approaches*, Louis tells Joe

to call him "Lou," "butching" himself up in order to be attractive to Joe, a closeted, conservative Republican. Again, Louis tries to adopt a passing mask, unaware that his overt masculinizing of the self is a cover.

A Mormon from Salt Lake City, Joe Pitt has a similar problem. He has come to New York to get away from the unblinking gaze of the other Mormons. He married his wife, Harper, before he moved from Utah because she was different, "out of step" with their community. Marrying Harper helped him to feel less different because he shared with her a commonality of awkwardness, of not belonging:

> I know I married her because she . . . because I loved it that she was always wrong, always doing something wrong, like one step out of step. In Salt Lake City that stands out. I never stood out, on the outside, but inside, it was hard for me. To pass. (2.4.53)

Joe leaves because he cannot pass as a straight man in Utah. Harper confronts Joe after learning of his homosexuality during one of her Valium-induced dreams in which Prior tells her that he can clearly see that her "husband's a homo" (1.7.33). Joe denies her accusation in the beginning, but when he changes his response, he not only admits his

homosexuality, but also shows how his attempt to pass has been a false covering, a mask:

> Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with every thing I have, to kill it. . . . For god's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill.
>
> As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God. (1.8.40)

In some ways, it is ironic that Louis and Joe end *Millennium* together. They have both tried to pass for straight, and their attempts have gotten them two failed relationships. Their relationships were based on lies, on masks created because neither could accept himself or love himself. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of hope for their survival as a couple at the end of *Millennium* since Louis is fronting as "Lou," and Joe is still caught up with the "straight-acting, straight appearing" ideology. They have not learned enough to let their masks go.

Throughout *Perestroika*, Joe and Louis experience an abusive attempt at love. In fact, in Act 2, scene 8, they fight, and Joe hits Louis several times. Joe is so caught

up in his self-hatred that he cannot reach out and accept love from anyone, his wife or Louis. He does not even know how to deal with Roy Cohn's sadistic paternalism. We are not surprised that *Perestroika* ends with Joe's attempting to return to Harper, who leaves him, and Louis and Prior's reunion, in a sense, waiting on the new age. By setting Joe up as an intensely homophobic homosexual--a "baby" Roy Cohn, I suppose--Kushner asks us not only to anticipate Joe's failure, but also to consider the reasons for it. As long as we pass as straight, we are masking feelings and ideas that would seem to be a part of identity construction. As such, we are denying ourselves the possibility of "identity." Through Joe Pitt, Kushner points out the grave "danger of passing for straight" (Taylor 55).

Kushner also uses Roy Cohn to depict the problems with passing. Demonized in most gay literature and thought, Roy Cohn represents the result of a bitter life at the margin, one unable to accept himself, yet keenly aware of the reality of being homosexual, especially when this identification is different from identifying one's self as gay. Although clearly involved in homosexual acts, Roy Cohn refuses to identify himself with homosexuality because gay men are a powerless lot. Roy will not accept his HIV diagnosis because to do so, at that time, would have been a clear

acceptance of a homosexual label; in fact, he dares the doctor to call it HIV or to tell him he's a homosexual:

> Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me . . . ? (*Millennium* 1.9.45)

Roy recognizes the site of power as a place that gay men do not inhabit. Roy, of course, makes a creditable point. Why identify one's self with the oppressed if one can pass? Why surrender power? In *Perestroika*, Cohn is the only one with any AZT because he has the power, the connections, to get it. In Act 2, scene 9, Ethel Rosenberg's ghost comes to Roy's hospital room to tell him that he has been disbarred. The audience/reader witnesses the superfluity of Roy's existence; he says he's forced his way into history, but we remember Roy Cohn today as a self-hating homosexual who was one of the fiercest opponents of Gay Liberation. He's not a hero, but, as most of the literature points out, Satan himself. We also see Cohn's death near the end of *Perestroika*. Again, Kushner seems to be saying that passing is only an avenue of self-destruction. Roy, however, is also

aware of the core issue of identity construction. Realizing that he "acts out" a seemingly homosexual identity, Roy nevertheless refuses the label. As such, he points again to the incongruity between appearance and reality that problematizes identity construction.

Before we leave this chapter, I would like to assert one final idea about passing: that passing, in the end, usurps all ideas of identity construction. A look at John Rechy's *City of Night* clarifies my point. In the section entitled "Pete: A Quarter Ahead," we have the most startling depiction of the hustler, his distancing from homosocial-/homophilial desire, his homosexual behavior, and his assertion of hypermasculinity. The narrator relates one incident with Pete:

> Like the rest of us on that street--who played the male role with other men--Pete was touchy about one subject: his masculinity. . . . / "That cat's queer," Pete says, glaring at him. "I used to see him and I thought he was hustling, and one day he tried to put the make on me in the flix. It bugged me, him thinking I was queer or something. . . . Whatever a guy does with other guys, if he does it for money, that dont make him queer. Youre still straight. It's when you start doing

> it for free, with other young guys, that you start growing wings." (40)

Pete is a hustler; he performs homosexual acts for money; to him, that category excludes being gay. However, at the end of the chapter, Pete asks the narrator to spend the night with him. Although the text does not indicate anything sexual happens, something more important does: a recognition of homophilial desire. The narrator notes, "Neither of us moved. Moments passed like that. And now his hand closes over mine, tightly" (51). The loneliness that inhabits Rechy's dark world has overwhelmed both Pete and the narrator until they welcome this moment of togetherness. Although Pete acts out a masculine/butch "identity," there is still a homosexual/-social "identity" warring below the surface. Pete--as well as the narrator for most of the novel--is passing for straight through the guise of the hustler.

Why do I consider this scene so important in my discussion of passing, though? In part, I find it relevant in light of what Murray Healey argues about masculinity in his intriguing discussion of rapper Marky Mark in "The Mark of a Man: Masculine Identities and the Art of Macho Drag." Healey sees current cultural trends as deconstructing "masculine" identity signifiers so that "no safe and

unquestioningly heterosexual identity [is] left for 'real men'" (86). Marky Mark, like Pete and the narrator in Rechy's novel, "overindulges in macho signifiers to distance himself from codes of effeminacy" (86). However, what was once the realm of the female in the patriarchy--accepting the objectified position in front of the camera--has been modified to include men, for now "the demands of marketing have located the male body as an objectified commodity," and placing a man in front of a camera puts him in the "unmanly passive" position of "acceptance of objectification" (86). Healey also points out that, whereas in the past the male model looked with contempt at the camera, eschewing its feminizing gaze, Marky Mark and contemporary male models are "making love to the camera," accepting the object position. To do so, however, problematizes gender, for suddenly masculine signifiers are "disrupted," and when the person, the butch queen, who formerly "passe[d] as straight to straights" comes out, he calls into question all the previously held identifiers of gender: "once macho drag is revealed, it shifts the whole terrain of masculine identities and it is the straight man who then has to worry about passing as gay" (91). In *City of Night*, Pete's and the narrator's problem is that they feel constantly that their "scores" and the queens they meet are sizing them up as gay;

their hypermasculinity attempts to be a defense against this encroachment of an unacceptable identity, but invariably it "expose[s] rather than allay[s] that anxiety" (Healey 88).

All the passing I have explored involves anxiety, psychological ramifications that reach deep into the characters involved. In *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity*, Anselm Strauss argues that "everyone presents himself to the others and to himself, and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgements. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgments" (9). Thus, we establish ourselves by understanding others and making assumptions of their understandings of us. Such an "identity" defies notions of essentialism because it is constructed as the site of interaction between an individual and others, a realm that is constantly in flux. That Louis changes his "mask" when he is around Prior or his family points to the situational aspect of mask. Because they are situational, masks are disconcerting to the viewers because identity is not fixed; what we thought was "real" appears to be illusion. Identity becomes increasingly problematic for any person or group who offers the world a primarily superficial marker of difference. Whereas the African-American has to worry about his "jungle status" (Fanon 18), gay men who pass feel the need

to eschew their "feminine status." As Fanon argues, "Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized . . . [the] other will remain the them of his actions" (217). In part, the mask of passing becomes the individual's attempt to be recognized by the subject group, and though the recognition may never be full acceptance, it is at least a chance to rise above the jungle. We can also view the "passer" as one involved in "status-forcing" (Strauss 77). Strauss argues that groups "force their members in and out of all kinds of temporary identities" (77); however, self-enforcement is also an option. Thus at times, individuals pass to fulfill personal inadequacies or to correct self-concepts, to satisfy a position within a group, or, opportunistically, to advance themselves.

However, the greatest problem with passing remains the end result: self-hate and/or self-destruction. Such an outcome seems plausible in light of Strauss's definition of "betrayal." Strauss argues that all people encounter "transforming experiences," and the one which has the most "shattering or sapping impact . . . is betrayal . . . by anybody with whom you are closely 'identified'" (97):

> When you have closely patterned yourself after a model, you have in effect "internalized" what you suppose are his values and motives. If the model abandons these, he leaves you with a grievous dilemma. Has he gone over to the enemy? . . . Or did he lead you up an illusory path of values?--then with cynicism and self-hate you had better abandon your former self too. . . . A third variety of betrayal often goes by the name of "rejection"; that is, rejection of you after you had closely identified with him. Here the beloved has symbolically announced that you and your values are not right, or at least are not wholly satisfying. (98)

When Clare Kendry abandons her allegiance to her race in order to pass, Irene feels betrayed. Prior feels betrayed by Louis's attempts to pass at his family gatherings. Harper, to an extent, feels betrayed by her husband's passing because it consciously undermines her attempts at creating a happy marriage. The queens in *City of Night* feel betrayed because they cannot categorize Pete, the narrator, and the other hustlers. It would seem plausible, too, to argue that our gay authors supply their passing characters--for the most part--with tragic endings because they

themselves feel betrayed by their characters' passing. If writing a gay novel is a manifesto of "outness," the final step from the closet; if by publishing, the author makes his final claim that, clearly, "I am gay," this "hazardous" aspect of passing may result from his own psychologized projections.

Whether we look at them as masculine, feminine, effeminate or as representative of even another category, White's, Kushner's and Rechy's characters are all involved in this dangerous game of passing. A performative mask based clearly on gender constructs/stereotypes, passing offers us a good first look at mask theory and the ways in which gay men begin to use masks for identity markers. I will also point out that, like passing, camp and drag have their defensive aspects, but more than passing, they serve to disrupt mainstream notions of identity construction.

Notes

1. I insert Adrienne Rich's term here because it seems to state clearly what Fuss is arguing in her Introduction. See Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry, Selected Prose 1975-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986) 23-75.

2. John Marshall's "Pansies, Perverts, and Macho Men: Changing Conceptions of Male Homosexuality" offers a discussion of the historical aspects of gay "identity" and its perception by the dominant culture.

3. Crisp's description here may sound like "drag," but Crisp does not, at least in this instance, assume "feminine" dress. He has merely added some make-up and rearranged his own clothing along "flashier" lines. Dressed as such, Crisp presents an effeminate "identity" or demeanor, not a cross-dressed one.

4. Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, as well as Nella Larsen's *Passing*, offer a look at the African-American idea of passing for white. Larsen's novel, in fact, has an explicit lesbian subtext that moves passing from race to gender/sexuality. After reading *Passing*, I first realized that gay men and lesbians also pass for that which they are not. Interestingly, the characters who pass in these three novels do not fare better than the characters we will be looking at in contemporary gay literature.

5. Married to Harper, Joe is passing for straight. However, the audience watches him "come out" throughout the play sequence.

Chapter Two

Camp: Appropriating and Subverting Gender

"Marshall always was very *theatrical*."

Clairee, *Steel Magnolias*

Aside from drag, what gay mask is more "in your face" than camp and its apparent effeminacy? As much as passing constitutes a physical performance of gender--though not as obvious as we shall see with transvestism/drag--camp represents a performance based on stock gestures, one-liners, and popular icons of gay culture. Because camp relies on "knowing" the signs, it creates an inside/outside: those who "identify" with it and use it are on the inside; those who "disidentify" or do not "know" what constitutes camp are on the outside. Camp asserts itself as a mask, an engendered performance of both defense and offense, by maintaining the inside/outside dichotomy. White's protagonist is as worried about the way he talks as he is about the way he walks, for he knows what Louis knows in *Angels*: that sibilant *s* is a dead give away for the sissy. Moving away from passing, we

come to a performance which roots itself in the conscious movement from the closet (passing) to self-acceptance or an alliance with a gay "identity." Camp, as we will see, also problematizes "identity," as the definitional conflict between the works of Susan Sontag and Moe Meyer elucidates.

Since most gay men, consciously or not, have "passed" as straight--if at no other time than before their coming out--they have felt the weight of that mask. Camp offers gay men moments of respite from the mask of passing, as well as from the assaults of the dominant culture. In fact, camp offers may men momentary assaults *on* the dominant culture. Defining camp, however, is not easy; in fact, although many disagree, Susan Sontag's attempt to create a theory of camp clues us into the most relevant issue involving camp: its ineffability. One of the first to attempt a definition of camp, Sontag finds it to be a "sensibility"; defining it, making it an "idea" negates it (275-76). Sontag sees camp as a love "of artifice and exaggeration. . . . a vision of the world in terms of style. . . . It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (275, 279). For Dennis Altman, camp is "play acting . . . exaggeration . . . [and] carefully cultivated vulgarity. . . . Camp carries with it certain suggestions of effeminacy and in this sense to 'Camp it up' becomes a form of assertion of

identity common in homosexual gatherings" (37-38). But camp is more than that. As sociologist Esther Newton points out, camp is "transformation and incongruity. . . . not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities" (46). A "relationship between things," or we might argue "among things," camp "points to the complexity of the situation of constructing selves" (Roman, "'It's My Party'" 327). Therefore, camp problematizes identity construction because it operates at the "non-space" of uncertainty, an area that inherently changes as different generations envision camp. Camp itself is multi-faceted: it can provide agency, as an act with consequences; it can be a form of self-castigation in self-construction; and it can be a mask that attempts to prevail against the onslaught of the straight (and, at times, gay) world.

What once seemed like a clear view of camp has changed. The recent publication of Moe Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* represents a conscious effort to (re)claim camp discourse, to rescue it from Sontag and her followers. Whereas Sontag claims camp is "disengaged, depoliticized--or at least apolitical" (277), Meyer, in his introduction to the anthology of criticism, asserts the following manifesto: "Camp is political; Camp is solely queer (and/or sometimes

gay and lesbian) discourse, and Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique" (1). Meyer and the contributors to his book agree that camp is specifically a queer discourse, that Sontag tried to mainstream camp and instead of edifying the discourse, bastardized it and turned it into Pop Culture. But Meyer's definition of camp as "solely queer" may unwittingly presuppose an essentialist notion of gender identity. Meyer claims that "the function of Camp . . . is the production of queer social visibility," and he defines camp "as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity" (5). In the end, camp can be understood "through a rereading of the phenomenon as a signifying practice that not only processually constitutes the subject, but is actually the vehicle for an already existent . . . cultural critique" (Meyer 12). Meyer seems to contradict himself: if he argues for a *processual* constitution of the subject, he seems to be arguing against essential, or fixed, notions of gender. So, although critics like Kate Davy claim that camp tends to "reinscribe, rather than undermine the dominant culture paradigms it appropriates for its parody" (138), the ways in which camp functions as a performance of gender/gender stereotypes may offer liberating possibilities.

The most important function of camp, according to Carole-Anne Taylor's essay "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," lies in the realm of subjectivity: "Whether revalued or devalued, camp and its interpretations participate in the reproduction of subjectivity and can be defensive as well as counter-offensive" (33). In Armistead Maupin's *More Tales of the City*, Michael makes much the same observation about camp. In a conversation with his best friend, Mary Ann, Michael, from his hospital bed, expresses his exasperation with "gay culture." Reacting to Charles McCabe's editorial in the paper, the one in which he claims that there will be a "big backlash against homosexuals, because the decent folks out there are sick and tired of the 'abnormal,'" Michael yells, "'Guess who else is sick of it? Guess who else has tried like hell *not* to be abnormal, by joking and apologizing and *camping* our way through a hell of a lot of crap?'" (178-9 my emphasis). Michael sees gay camp as a defense mechanism, but ultimately, one which does not seem effective.

If camp works as defense, then I find it odd that John Rechy does not "camp" much in his *City of Night*. An early gay publication, *City of Night* (1963) depicts a world, according to Ben Satterfield, that is "a jungle of fear, emptiness, and anxiety where there is not salvation" (78).

I find Satterfield's summation of the Rechy *oeuvre* interesting:

> John Rechy has written five novels that vividly describe the physical and emotional terrain of the misfit, novels that explore with varying degrees of success the terrifying landscape of the taunted and tortured, of the desperate and deviant, of those who suffer the pain of "lost" life--in short, the damned. (78)

In his critique, Satterfield marks a world ripe for camp, a place and a people that need salvation from their self-hating, marginalized position. Yet strangely, Rechy rarely uses camp in *City of Night*. The novel depicts an inherent contempt for "queenly" behavior, and since camp is often seen as an assertion of effeminate behavior, Rechy may have avoided it in order to "straighten" his characters. However, when Rechy does mention camp, he offers a clearly pre-Gay Pride vision; in fact, camp is solely something the "queens" do. Nowhere do the narrator, a butch hustler, or the other hustlers "camp it up." Throughout the novel, one queen berates another queen for "being on the rag" or being "too nelly for her own good." When they encounter the "straight" hustlers, there is a conscious effort to "feminize" them, to make them into gay men in hiding. Often,

they throw female pronouns and epithets at the hustlers. In part, this queering the masculine through camp slang-- "Oh, please, Mary!" or "I know her, and she ain't foolin' nobody"--represents both offense and defense. Offensively, the queens--through the narrator's eyes--are attacking a masculinity of which they cannot be a part, destroying with words the illusion of the masculine hustler. By feminizing him, they defend themselves from the hustler's Othering stare. Throughout the novel, Rechy creates two angles of vision: that of the hustler and of the queen, the masculine and the feminine. But camp transgresses these seemingly strict boundaries and turns them inside out.

Yet Rechy's characters are centered on this notion of closet in part because at the time of the novel, "coming out" was one of the main signifiers of identity. But by playing with notions of the closet, Rechy's queens continue to reconstruct the closet. Part of the camp defense/offense is the need to "out" the macho hustlers by exposing their (allegedly) self-created closets. Attempting to gain subjectivity through camp, the queens manage only to reproduce the construct of the closet. As Judith Butler points out, "being 'out' must reproduce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out.' In this sense, *outness* can only produce a new opacity; and *the closet* produces the

promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come" ("Imitation" 16). Because it relies on stock conventions, on "identifying" with gay men and their definitions of camp discourse, camp must overtly reproduce this closet. As a marker for identity, camp draws the line between inside/outside, margin/center, gay/straight.

In contemporary gay drama, camp may have a more hopeful function since AIDS. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America--Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*--and Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* demonstrate how camp functions today. As Dennis Altman says of gay life and the theater, "If the homosexual mimics straight society he stands outside it as well; the actor is ever conscious of the proscenium arch, even if he persuades his audience to forget it" (44). Some actors are so aware of this "proscenium arch" that in recent gay drama a stock character, the Camp,[1] has emerged. Although all the characters may "camp it up" or camp at certain times--for as Sontag has noted, camp is "something of a private code, a badge of identity"(275)--the Camp tends to emerge in most plays as the individual who makes camp camp, who draws the lines, who exhibits style, pretentious or not. In *Angels* and *Jeffrey*, Prior Walter and Sterling Farrell, respectively, are the paragons of camp, the Camps themselves.[2] Yet Sterling is much more a stock figure than Prior. His

name alone implies a self-aggrandizing aloofness from the cast of mere mortals. Whereas Prior's camping appears focused, Sterling's seems open, taking random shots at anyone who gets in his way.

Rudnick's stage notes explain Sterling's character as "*never bitchy or cruel; he adores his life and his friends, and exults in stylishness*" (1.12). Sterling is exalted in the camped game show, "It's Just Sex!," which follows his entrance. The stage is transformed in the most theatrical manner for a game show in which the participants "explore human sexuality and win big prizes!" (1.15) The juxtaposition of sex and sexuality with game show prizes is certainly campy, but the host's explanation that "the most stylish reply wins!" (1.15) supports the fact that camp is a "winning" sensibility, that those who camp fare better than those who do not. For the second question, "Who is your favorite sexual fantasy?" (1.16), the others answer "Denzel Washington" and "Steve" (Jeffrey's love interest from the gym). Sterling, however, resounds with a flourish, "Jacqueline Onassis." The stage directions read, "*EVERYONE stares at STERLING questioningly. He rolls his eyes at their obtuseness*"; Sterling finishes his response: "to see the apartment." Of course, he wins. Sterling has taken a popular icon--Jackie O, a former First Lady and a paragon of

grace--and uses her to camp his answer. Here, though, we must observe a difference between Rudnick's play and the movie version released last year. In the movie, Sterling responds with "Yoko Ono." The difference is significant. Jackie O represents style, culture, success. Yoko Ono, however, represents none of these qualities. Her career has been abysmal since John Lennon's death; she never represented class or style; as a progressive performance artist, Ono does not represent the "classic" glamour of Hollywood and television. The most apparent reason for the change is that when the movie was made, Jackie had died. And although the Dakota, John and Yoko's trendy apartment complex, may be worth seeing, it does not seem to offer the same "style" that Jackie's apartment would have.

Yet one of Sterling's funniest scenes occurs when he, his lover Darius, and Jeffrey are having a discussion about "boyfriends." Jeffrey comments that Sterling and Darius are "like Martha Stewart and Ann Miller" (1.29). The following transpires between Darius and Sterling:

> DARIUS: Who's Martha Stewart?
>
> STERLING: She writes picture books about gracious living. Martha says that nothing else matters, if you can do a nice dried floral arrangement. I worship her.

DARIUS: And who's Ann Miller?

STERLING: Leave this house. (1.29)

Sterling can handle one infraction from his "dumb" lover--after all, Sterling believes that one "need[s] a boyfriend, not a person" (1.14)--but two may result in his pulling Darius's membership card from Queer Nation. For Sterling, one simply cannot *not* know Martha Stewart and Ann Miller. It would be like not knowing Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* or Judy Garland, the original displaced/misplaced girl--unheard of. Martha Stewart and Ann Miller have become camp icons because of their absolute seriousness about decorating and Broadway/movie roles, respectively. When Sterling comments that "Martha says that nothing else matters," he is pushing the limits of interpretation, surely, but he is choosing to believe, half-heartedly, in the idea that "a nice dried floral arrangement" is all that is important; it certainly helps him deny the fact that his lover is dying of AIDS. Then again, a dried floral arrangement is lifeless. *Jeffrey* is the epitome of Babuscio's idea of camp, in which the "introduction of style, asceticism, humor and theatricality, allows us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment, so that only later . . . are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed" (28). In some plays, camp

may even create the illusion that is theater. Bertolt Brecht would argue that the audience should achieve a certain distance from the play and thereby make objective judgements about the play's message. This type of theater emphasizes the theatricality of theater. Although it works differently camp seems to achieve the same goal. Camp functions in opposition to notions of essentialism, for it is based on gender stereotypes which constantly change both within cultures and between them. Encased in such "discontinuity" (Roman, "Performing" 212), camp defies fixity. Perhaps that is why defining it seems impossible.

Here, we should differentiate between what Christopher Isherwood has labeled High camp and Low camp: "High camp . . always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you are making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance" (qtd. in Free 17). In Isherwood's view, what Sterling does--and often it is the Camp's job to over-camp--is Low camp, poking fun at any available object, creating and promulgating a canon of pop iconography. Yet Isherwood's categories create a problem. In Sterling's situation, Low camp is really High camp, for a great deal of his "camping" attempts to defend himself (and Darius) from the

reality of AIDS. Perhaps this type of distancing has become the most important or most common use of camp since the AIDS pandemic began: the juxtaposition of the horrendous, the sad, the moribund with humor, grace, and aplomb. In *Jeffrey* camp moves between "high" and "low," elucidating again a fluctuation that defies boundaries, even two as broadly defined as Isherwood's.

As in *Angels*, the camp in *Jeffrey* is primarily used to deny AIDS its sting. But is "laughter the best medicine"? When real medicine cannot find a cure for someone, camp and laughter certainly help him out of the depths of despair. When Jeffrey is upset because they are "cruising" a memorial, Darius tells him, "Well, I like it. I mean, cute guys, and Liza, and dish--it's not a cure for AIDS, Jeffrey. But it's the opposite of AIDS. Right?" (2.57)[3] Just as Jeffrey points out that his own weapons against straight America's brutality are "Irony. Adjectives. Eyebrows" (1.49), Steve uses camp as a weapon against AIDS. During one scene near the beginning of Act Two, Steve responds to Jeffrey's rather obvious discomfort at Steve's AIDS:

> (*Steve goes to the medical cart and begins holding up various items. His tone is that of a haughty, scintillating host at a fashion show.*) What will today's sassy and sophisticated HIV-positive male

> be wearing this spring, to tempt the elusive, possibly negative waitperson? Let's begin with the basics--a gown! (*With a flourish, he unfurls a green hospital gown and puts it on over his clothes.*) It's crisp, it's cotton, it's been sterilized over five thousand times--it always works. (*He begins to model the gown, as if on a runway.*) It's a go-nowhere, do-nothing, look, with a peekaboo rear and (*indicating a bloodstain*) a perky plasma accent. Add pearls and pentamidine, and you're ready for remission!
>
> JEFFREY: Only in green?
>
> STEVE: Please! Green is the navy blue of health care. But it's the accessories that really make the man. Earrings . . .(*He holds two syringes up to his ears and aims them at JEFFREY.*) Careful! Hat . . . (*he places a bedpan on his head as a chapeau; he removes the bedpan and reads the label.*) "Sanicare"! (2.59)

Jeffrey can even play along until Steve reminds him that only the "truly chic" can buy this "collection," the "fashion plates who may not live to see the fall collections" (2.59). Following the theatricalist structure of the play, Jeffrey stops the show because even with the camp

atmosphere, the reality of AIDS is more than he can bear or is willing to bear in order to be in love with Steve.

As the play draws to a close, Darius dies of AIDS-related complications. The audience witnesses Sterling's and camp's momentary parallel breakdown: "I couldn't scare it off, with a look. I couldn't shield him, with raw silk, and tassels, and tiebacks. The limits of style" (2.82). As hard as individuals may try to camp AIDS, the reality eventually destroys the illusion; that's what Sterling realizes in this scene. Of course, Darius's message from the grave is "Hey--it's still our party" (2.84). Darius and Sterling represent the antithesis of Jeffrey; they are characters who are willing to live courageously, foolishly, sentimentally, heartlessly--whatever it takes to survive. Until this scene, Jeffrey would rather have given up on life than taken a risk. In fact, Jeffrey camps the opening scene of the play in order to deal with giving up. He claims that, because of AIDS and safe sex, he will no longer have sex:

> Okay. Confession time. You know those articles, the ones all those right wingers use? The ones that talk about gay men who've had over five thousand sexual partners? Well, compared to me, they're shut-ins. Wallflowers. . . . But I want to be politically correct about this. I know its

> wrong to say that all gay men are obsessed with sex. Because that's not true. All *human beings* are obsessed with sex. All gay men are obsessed with opera. And it's not the same thing. Because you can have good sex. . . . Except--what's going on? . . . Sex is too sacred to be treated this way. Sex wasn't meant to be safe, or negotiated, or fatal. . . . So. Enough. . . . No more sex. . . .I will find a substitute for sex. Sex Lite. Sex Helper. I Can't Believe It's Not Sex. . . . The sexual revolution is over! England won. (7)

Though delivered with all the panache of camp, what actually underlies Jeffrey's monologue is a matter of grave importance: the ever-increasing numbers of AIDS or HIV related illnesses and deaths. The movie version cut almost all of the camp elements from the above monologue. Of course, the movie also puts Jeffrey in a high school varsity jacket and butches him up, in effect, "passing" him off as a "straight-acting, straight-appearing" gay man. This Jeffrey does not realize what the Jeffrey of the play does: that camp, though fun and possibly temporarily liberating, cannot eliminate serious issues. In fact, the movie seems less liberating because it tones down the camp elements.

Angels also uses camp mainly as a defense against AIDS. In Kushner's play, the Camp is also the PWA (person with AIDS), Prior Walter. Before Louis abandons him, Prior camps his illness both for himself and for Louis, attempting to remove the agonizing effects of AIDS, to deny the disease its punch. When Prior first develops lesions, he remarks to Louis--and it is important to note that this happens immediately after Louis's grandmother's funeral--"K.S., baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death. . . . I'm a lessionaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Lesion. Lesionnaire's disease . . . . My troubles are lesion . . . . Don't you think I'm handling this well?" (1.4.21). Prior does not want to accept that he is heading down a seemingly ill-fated path, nor does Louis. Later, when Prior is alone on stage, "preparing a face to meet the faces that [he'll] meet," he turns from his mirror where he has been applying makeup and addresses the audience:

> "I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. Demille."
>
> One wants to move through life with elegance and grace, blossoming infrequently but with exquisite taste, and perfect timing, like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid . . . . One wants . . . . But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One . . . dies

> at thirty, robbed of . . . decades of majesty. Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit. (*He almost crumbles; he pulls himself together; he studies his handiwork in the mirror*) I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you've hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag. (1.7.30-31)

In his short soliloquy, Prior juxtaposes pop iconography, the aesthetic, death, and comedy. As I read this scene, I see a blatant play on the "too serious" Norma Desmond of *Sunset Boulevard*. She makes her famous one-liner-- "I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. Demille"--however, as the police have come to take her away, herself no longer in touch with reality. Prior seems to camp this scene in order to create humor out of a humorless subject, AIDS. However, throughout the monologue, Prior recognizes what Sterling has also recognized about "the limits of style." Camp begins to fall apart in the presence of more serious issues. There are also two possible readings of the final line. We could see it as Prior's utter collapse, that drag has become insufficient as a defense mechanism. Or could it be read as a more flippant display? The play on corpse, moving to the "French"-sounding *corpsette*, ties to the scenes in which Belize and Prior use French to camp Prior's confinement to the hospital bed, almost as a way to distance the disease.

After this "camping," the final line becomes a light-hearted look at drag and a realization that if costuming and make-up cannot "save" him, perhaps "camping" drag can. Of all his scenes, this one most accurately demonstrates Roman's concept that camp emphasizes "the complexity of constructing selves" (327). Prior is physically (re)creating himself in "drag" that fails. He, at the same time, tries to construct a self that is not ill, diseased, or a "corpsette" through camp. Yet camp's incongruity abounds, for ultimately, Prior fails on both accounts.

This scene is not, however, representative of what Sontag considers to be the highest art form of camp: "Camp is the glorification of 'character'" (285), she says; "Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (284).[4] Whether it is Tennessee Williams's own homosexuality or the grand seriousness which is "too much" in Vivian Leigh's portrayal of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams and Blanche are two of the most frequently camped figures in contemporary gay drama and life. Prior and Belize take advantage of Blanche and *Streetcar* in four short lines:

PRIOR: Miss Thing.

BELIZE: Ma Cherie Bichette.

> PRIOR: Stella.
>
> BELIZE: Stella for star. Let me see. (*Scrutinizing Prior*) You look like shit, why yes indeed you do, comme la merde! . . . Not to despair, Belle Reeve [*sic*]. Lookie! Magic Goop! (2.5.59)

Now everyone will probably recognize both Stella and the infamous Belle Reve; however, this scene seems to work particularly well with Scene One from *Streetcar*. Blanche has just told Stella that Belle Reve is lost, and she offers the following defense:

> I, I, *I*, took the blows in my face and my body! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths--not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, "Don't let me go!" Even the old, sometimes, say, "Don't let me go." As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they put them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out,

> "Hold me!" you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! *Saw! Saw!* . . . Why, the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep! . . . Belle Reve was his headquarters! (1.1.10)

Aside from their both suffering the loss of the "Beautiful Dream"--Prior, life and his lover because of AIDS; Blanche, her family and the plantation--Blanche's vivid depiction of death and dying points out the problem with Prior and Louis's relationship: Louis refuses to watch Prior suffer and bleed and die. Like Blanche, Prior has watched many of his friends ("family") die of AIDS, as Blanche has watched her family die of disease and loss. The Grim Reaper is lurking outside Prior's doorstep, just as he was at Belle Reve. Also, one could say that Prior contracted AIDS from "restless nights in one night cheap hotels," riding that same streetcar named Desire that Blanche rode: "it brought me here, where I'm not wanted, where I'm ashamed to be." Through a commonality of experience, Prior uses Blanche's serious monologue from *Streetcar* to camp his own experience. That high seriousness of the movie version is "too much," and therefore turned on its ear to help Prior transcend the depressing hospital bed. Connecting to Blanche/Tennessee Williams is also a way for Prior to connect to a gay history

that has been overlooked. Ironically, Prior's "camping" Belle Reve also has the serious implications that he too has lost his "Beautiful Dream" and, like Blanche, will not regain it. After all, she goes crazy and is committed to a mental institution at the end of the play. Likewise, Prior is hearing outside voices, the voices of the other Priors and of the Angel, which may lead the other characters to believe him to be crazy, too.

Perhaps camp's functions are too many to examine in such a brief space. However, we have seen how camp works in reaction to both a life at the margins and to AIDS: defiance and defense, connection and rootedness. Surprisingly, the best summation of the purpose of camp comes from Harper (Joe's wife) as she speaks to Prior during their "dream" scene: "So when we think we've escaped the unbearable ordinariness and, well, untruthfulness of our lives, it's really only the same old ordinariness and falseness rearranged into the appearance of novelty and truth. Nothing unknown is knowable. Don't you think it's depressing?" (1.7.32) Of course, Prior finds it depressing; of course, Sterling and Jeffrey find it depressing; of course, Louis and Belize and Darius and Steve find it depressing--it is their ability to place the mask of camp on their faces, to smile and grin and "mouth with myriad subtleties" that helps them survive the

"ordinariness and falseness" of their lives, or us the "ordinariness and falseness" of our lives. Yet they each eventually realize the superficiality of such an existence. Although they may camp away their troubles, Harper's comment seems to demonstrate the way in which the "ordinariness and falseness" finds its way through the mask.

Camp is not easily pinned (or penned) down. It encompasses an array of functions and can be delivered in many different ways. Because, as Sontag notes, camp is not easily defined, as a marker of identity, it remains ultimately problematic. In *Jeffrey* and *Angels*, camp becomes an unsuccessful way of dealing with the world, AIDS, and identity. Sontag notes that camp becomes an assertion of gay identity, but an identity rooted in the incongruities I noted in this chapter sets itself up for failure. The wit and humor that camp affords offer a temporary liberation from overwhelming circumstances, but such liberation is ultimately circumscribed by a dangerous reality.

Notes

1. From here on, I will refer to the character with a capital *C* (the *Camp*) and the concept/mask of camp with a lower case *c*.

2. Although Belize, the ex-ex-drag queen of *Angels*, could be seen as a Camp figure, I have chosen to deny her that position. Because (s)he is a drag queen--a category that, for the moment, I have chosen to separate from camp--I will address her role in the play in chapter three.

3. I should mention that Liza Minnelli, Judy Garland's daughter, has found her own special place in gay camp. Though she is not her mother, she does hold some of the rights and privileges of heiress to that throne. *Dish* is a popular term for both a good-looking man and lascivious, spiteful gossip--both meanings seem to work here.

4. Some examples include *Titus Andronicus* and, more contemporary, *Steel Magnolias*. *Titus*, one of Shakespeare's liminal plays, offers scenes which are overtly serious. For example, Lavinia's arms and tongue are severed so that she cannot avenge the ills done her. However, when she must help with the slaughtering of others, one scene usually involves her carrying one of the soldiers' amputated hands in her mouth. In *Steel Magnolias*, everything is serious, and consequently, everything is funny. The six women friends gossip about trashy people, church, weddings, funerals, radio stations, family, gay men, and illness. Harling's attempted seriousness is distorted by its "too much" seriousness. The script and the characters become camp icons because, in some ways , of what they represent: a fallen aristocracy still making it as best it can, women resisting defeat because of social circumstance.

Chapter Three

"A Girl Child Ain't Safe In a Family of Men": The Problematics of Cross-Dressing

> "You can't mess up her hair. You just tease it and make it look like a brown football helmet."
>
> Shelby, *Steel Magnolias*

Look at two scenes in 1980's cinema. In *The Color Purple*, African-American women fight for life and community, their greatest opponents men. After Celie has told Harpo to "beat" Sophia, Sophia comes tearing through the cornfield to confront Celie. In this scene, Sophia points out that she has had to fight all her life: "I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house." In *Steel Magnolias*, Truvy has turned Malynne's hair over to the new girl, Annelle, and Annelle is naturally nervous. Shelby

tries to assuage her fears by saying that her mother's hair is like a "brown football helmet," almost as though it were a wig that could be taken off, sculpted and polished, and replaced.

I draw from these two movies as I move from camp to cross-dressing in part because they are two of the most frequently camped "straight" movies, but also because they demonstrate two points I want to make about cross-dressing. Like Sophia, those who cross-dress are not "safe" in patriarchal America, a family of men in some respects, because of the space they inhabit and what they represent. And Shelby's comment about her mother's hair provides an example of the constructedness of gender. Shelby's metaphor of the "brown football helmet" underscores the way that people create an appearance, "prepare a face to meet the faces that [they] meet." In this chapter, I will draw on Marjorie Garber again for a background in cross-dressing and its socio-political ramifications. Then I will examine the ways in which cross-dressing has been represented in contemporary gay literature/drama and cinema and point out that the "safe" space of the stage is not always that safe.

As I mentioned earlier, cross-dressing "offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity" (Garber 10). The ability to shift from one "gendered" outfit to another calls into

question our Cartesian essentialist notions of gender. That "Mike" can be "Mary" with a few vestimentary changes calls into question what we are seeing when we try to determine Mike's/Mary's gender identification. In fact, the concept of "identification" becomes a false assumption because to claim an identity presupposes an essence, a fixity that does not exist outside of culture. By moving from one gender to another, from customarily held "male" to "female," the cross-dresser creates a "third" (Garber 11). In fact, I think we could argue that by stopping at a "third," we are re-inscribing fixed positions. I believe Garber's notions of "third" incorporate the concept that "fourth," "fifth," "sixth," *etc.* are possible, thus moving, as she says, from "complementarity or symmetry to a contextualization, in which what once stood as an exclusive dual relation becomes an element in a larger chain" (12). This "third" brings into being "a space of possibility" (11), and thereby creates an crisis of identity for the subject. The person looking, appropriating, defining, is now denied any certainty in his/her assumptions of what he/she views. Such a perceptional dysphoria seems itself to be subversive. But is it?

In her discussion of dress codes and the sumptuary laws of England, Garber points out that "it is 'excess' that is

stigmatized and deplored. Excess, that which overflows a boundary, is the space of the transvestite" (28). Marjorie Garber, Esther Newton, and others see the transvestite as the site of "vestimentary transgression" (Garber 28). This idea brings me back to Daniel Harris's theories of effeminacy: "Effeminacy is an unwilled form of radicalism, of unrepentant exaggeration, hands that rake the air rather than remain clenched at the sides" (72). In male-to-female cross-dressing, an effect of "femininity" appears to be the cross-dresser's aim. Although Harris effectively argues that effeminacy and femininity are two distinctly different categories of representation,[1] it seems impossible to deny that male-to-female cross-dressing involves some concept of femininity, for our culture has traditional (written and unwritten) laws of dress for men and women. To dress in a dress and wig, with all the accouterments of the "female," is to assume to some degree that gender. In America, subjectivity is still exclusively "male" (Garber 94). If the transvestite, then, represents the space of the Other, (s)he represents the space of excess, both in Garber's notion by the way (s)he dresses and in Harris's by the way (s)he behaves, or performs.

What does excess mean, though, to the performer? I suggest two careers that have ended: Freddy Mercury and Boy

George. In the seventies, Mercury and his band, Queen, rocked America with hits like "We Are the Champions," "We Will Rock You," and "Bicycle Race." Although they enjoyed moderate success after the release of "Crazy Little Thing Called Love"--a video which lampooned a British sit-com--the video itself seemed to dismay certain viewers in the United States because the members of the band were dressed as cleaning ladies; the video pointed out what many wanted to believe about rock, and Freddy Mercury in particular: excess is bad because it leads to gender dysphoria, an end which must be deplored if we are going to maintain "values." The revival of Queen's popularity in the late eighties was due to the use of "Bohemian Rhapsody" in the movie *Wayne's World*, but the idea that Queen was a group of queer cross-dressers persisted.

Of all pop stars, though, Boy George perhaps most represents the success and failure of excess. In the early to mid-eighties, Boy George enjoyed a success with "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me," "Karma Chameleon," and "I'll Tumble 4 Ya." Teens enjoyed his flashy clothes and inattention to conservative ideas about dress. On *At Worst . . . the Best of Boy George and Culture Club*, his "Greatest Hits" CD, Boy George writes, "People ask me if I look back in shame at my Culture Club costumes. 'Nish dear, they weren't costumes,

I'm absolutely proud.' . . . These days I'm itching to get back into some seriously confrontational drag. I've just bought myself a pair of six inch sling back wedges." I think his comment points to the difference in his early success and the relative failure of both his "Greatest Hits" CD and his most recent *Cheapness and Beauty*, on the cover of which he sports a blue hat, dress, and feather boa, as well as an ample supply of makeup. He was read as costumed in the early eighties, throwing the concept of dress to the wind, but such dress was not "seriously confrontational drag." His costumes, although they gave Mama and Daddy a heart attack, did not necessarily call concepts of gender into question as his current dress and his recent public "outness" do.[2] Some is allowed; excess is not.

As Garber points out in her discussion of Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club, which often performs plays with all the female roles enacted by cross-dressed men, gender subversion can be at once allowed and denied. Because Harvard's men are already well-to-do, respected members of society--a position that wealth and connection supplies them, for the most part--the men, who clearly "frock" in order to lampoon, do not consider their transvestic play serious or a gender role that they appropriate: "Harvard's Pudding to a certain extent mainstreamed and 'legitimized' female impersonation,

establishing it as a class act to be acted out, and acted up, by the members of a certain class" (60). Whereas professional drag queens and transsexuals represent a marginalized counter-culture whose "drag" offers the possibility of subversion, the Hasty Pudding Theatricals are seen as contained fun because the players "de-frock" after the staged performance, never re-gendering themselves in their own minds. Yet as Garber notes, their performances are policed by "boundary transgressions of all kinds--transgressions that tested the limits of inside and outside, town and gown, male and female, "masculine" and "feminine," gay and straight, through the figure of the transvestite actress" (61). These transgressions sound subversive, but the overall effect seems to be one of containment. Ultimately, even if the performer feels that his drag is "contained," the audience may react differently.

But what happens when boundaries are transgressed, not contained? Again, Garber's discussion of Jan Morris, Quentin Crisp, and *Mademoiselle du Maupin* elucidate a theory of gender as performance. In discussing Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, Garber quotes the following passage:

> "I was imperceptibly losing the idea of my sex, and I hardly remembered, at long intervals, that I was a woman; at the beginning, I'd often let slip

> some phrase or other which didn't fit in with the male attire that I was wearing. . . . If ever the fancy takes me to go and find my skirts again in the drawer where I left them, which I very much doubt, unless I fall in love with some young beau, I shall find it hard to lose this habit, and, instead of a woman disguised as a man, I shall look like a man disguised as a woman. In truth, neither sex is really mine . . . I belong to a third sex, a sex apart, which has as yet no name." (qtd. in Garber 74)

Here, the protagonist displays her own understanding of the constructed nature of gender, that one day she could "find [her] skirts again" and assume a "female" gender as easily as she could a "male" gender. That, if she crossed back to the female, she would be a "man disguised as a woman" is especially interesting. Apparently, her argument espouses some form of essentialism, at least in as much as she feels that she is really part of a "third sex." This essentialism is likely a product of the thinking of the time of the novel (1835), and with Garber, Butler, and others' notions of gender construction, we can see Maupin's gender confusion merely as the inability to name.

Jan Morris, however, creates another issue: transsexualism. For the subject, Morris moves in a realm of gender denaturalization. On one occasion during her pre-operative stage, Morris was traveling abroad, and the Mexican housemaids could not discern Morris's gender from her wardrobe, so they asked if (s)he were a man or woman: "'I whipped up my shirt to show my bosom,' Morris recounts, ' and they gave me a bunch of flowers when I left'" (qtd. in Garber 15). Garber goes on to point out that "*Transsexualism*, in fact, is one distinctly twentieth-century manifestation of cross-dressing and the anxieties of binarity, an identifiable site, inscribed on the body, of the question of the constructedness of gender" (15). After the operation, Morris cannot, it would seem, simply defrock to change genders since her sex organs now declare "female," not "male." However, if Garber's ideas of gender construction based on clothes holds, then transsexualism should itself almost not be an issue in gender construction, but in sexual redefinition. If all gender is constructed, then Morris can move just as easily, on a surface level, even after the surgery. It is only on the site of the body itself that "sex" has been reinscribed. In a different incident at Kennedy airport, Morris, "dressed . . . in jeans and a sweater" and having taken hormones to alter her body before the actual

surgery, does not know whether (s)he will be ushered to the men's or women's friskers. Morris must prepare an answer for both. Eventually, Morris is told to "Move Along there Lady, please, don't hold up the traffic" (qtd. in Garber 107), and she joins the female line. Here, the issue is not what gender Morris appropriates, but what gender the person viewing ascribes to him/her. Because Morris must accept whatever gender (s)he is given, (s)he must be prepared to move in and out of her own concepts of gender identity, the gender (s)he has chosen at that moment. This situation, perhaps more clearly than the other, points out the way that Morris, before surgery, has the option to move easily from one gender to another, upholding the constructedness of gender itself.

To a large extent, then, the issue is not necessarily what gender the individual identifies with, but how the individual is read. Quentin Crisp, "'blind with mascara and dumb with lipstick'" (qtd. in Garber 137), as I noted earlier, wants to be read as a gay man, so he emulates contemporary stereotypes in order "not to be mistaken or obliterated from view" (137). I am most concerned with this type of envisioning because the cross-dressing characters which I treat occupy a staged space. David Roman has noted that "performance, due to its *discontinuity*, offers neither a

fixed subject position nor an essential representation of the "real" ("Performing" 212). By placing cross-dressed characters on stage, Henry David Hwang, Tony Kushner, and Stephan Elliot proffer their own views on transvestic play--exploratory, visionary, and perhaps subversive.

In "Gay Theater Today," Mark Gevisser argues that in *M Butterfly* "homosexual men imitate heterosexual society by dressing up as women and trying to make gay identity fit into the mold of the traditional nuclear family" (48). But *M Butterfly* is less about homosexuality or a homosexual "identity" than it is about the nexus of Orient and Occident, of "masculinity" and "femininity." In the play, and more clearly in the movie version, Hwang clearly represents Song as a gay character.[3] But Song's transvestic play seems a more appropriate site for discussion. For Gallimard, Song is the "Perfect Woman" (1.3.4), from whom he "learn[s] the benefits of being a man" (2.3.46). For Comrade Chin, however, Song Liling is always a man dressed as a woman in order to serve the Revolution and Chairman Mao. Chin does not understand why Song is always dressed in Western gowns and Oriental dresses. Of course, Chin herself represents contradictory notions of gender bending. In Act Two, scene four, Chin argues with Song about Song's methods for helping the Revolution: "You're not gathering information in any way

that violates Communist Party principles, are you?" (2.4.48). Chin then reminds Song that "there is no homosexuality in China." Again, for Chin, if Song transgresses the male/ female boundary, then (s)he is homosexual. After Chin leaves the stage, Song says sarcastically, "What passes for a woman in modern China" (2.4.49). I see Chin dressed as she is in the movie: a sterile gray slacks outfit, complete with a cap which hides her hair, the perfect Communist comrade. As such, Chin's acquisition of the Communist uniform situates her in a "male" gendered performance space. Yet Chin sees herself as a woman. Song's comment reminds us of the vestimentary construction of gender in a scene which has two cross-dressers, each crossing for similar and dissimilar purposes.

Yet Song, as well as the other cross-dressers I treat, is also concerned with "realness." If (s)he is going to perform as a "woman," then the portrayal must be believable. As such, Song's comment to Chin that "only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" signals that his/her performance is both a vision of how "man" perceives "woman" and therefore a "real" representation. Butler has noted that

> "realness" is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established cate-

> gories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates. (*Bodies* 129)

That Song attempts "realness," or that Belize or Bernadette or Mitzi or The Lady Chablis attempts "realness," presents again the problematics of cross-dressing. She wants to be Gallimard's fantasy, to be as real as possible, and yet that "realness" would seem to be a desire for a phantasmic state that in and of itself is unrealizable.

"Realness" for Song is perhaps easier because Gallimard creates a fantasy of "woman" and denies anything about Song that does not fit that vision. For Gallimard, Song is the "feminine ideal" (1.3.5); later, he claims, "I believed this girl" (1.6.15). After one of his first nights with Song, Gallimard notes, "Women do not flirt with me. And I normally can't talk to them. But tonight, I held up my end of the conversation" (1.8.22). Here, Gallimard fulfills his

fantasy that Song is the perfect woman because he can talk to her, he is not intimidated by her. I think Hwang wants us to see the irony that, in fact, Gallimard has been talking to a man dressed as a woman. *M Butterfly* makes clear Carole-Anne Taylor's idea that "gay men are the better women, represented as better equipped to undo identity" (40).[4] For Taylor, gay men (read men in drag), because of the constructedness of their appearance, perform a better woman in part because they are equipped with the phallus, and can thus move back to a "masculine" identity and therefore the person who is "subject" in culture.

The audience knows that Gallimard is concerned with notions of gender performance because, as the play makes clear, he is in love with a fantasy of the ideal woman, a "woman" which necessarily exists in the realm of construction because here the "ideal" is based on ideas of Eastern/Western, Orient/Occident.[5] During a short affair with Renee, Gallimard sees her completely naked; Song, however, has refused Gallimard this pleasure because she is "a Chinese girl" (1.11.31). Gallimard finds it "exciting to be with someone who [is]n't afraid to be seen completely naked. But is it possible for a woman to be *too* uninhibited, *too* willing, so as to seem almost too . . . masculine?" (2.6.54) Again, gender construction is the issue. Gallimard finds

Renee's behavior masculine, even though his eyes tell him that he is in bed with a woman. This scene also represents Garber's notion of "excess." Because Renee exceeds Gallimard's "feminine ideal," she threatens his previously fixed notions of gender. On the other hand, Song presents herself as a model of traditional notions of femininity, especially, as the play points out, to the Western mind the notion that the Orient has demure, docile women: "There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women" (3.3.91). Yet, for Gallimard, there is always this underlying knowledge--Garber's "category crisis"?--which creates the tension and mystique in his and Song's relationship. He questions his previous inaction when Song finally submits to his violating hands and asks, "Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps" (2.6.60). At the end of the play, during the trial, this "knowledge" is the key issue. In the play, Song changes from kimono to dress suit in the courtroom, staging, as it were, her own gender construction and moving from one to another before Gallimard, who now feels the discomfort of such category shifting and makes clear for me what Garber has been addressing in her book. Gallimard has fallen prey

to the "crisis which is symptomatized by *both* the overestimation *and* the underestimation of cross-dressing" (Garber 11).

Song's final full strip scene in front of Gallimard destroys his fantasy by displaying "the absolute insignia of maleness" (Garber 97), the penis. So how do we read the final scene? The last time I taught the play, my students thought Gallimard became mad, crazy, deranged. I read the ending differently. Gallimard's problem is that because Song's cross-dressing calls into question his previously held ideas of binarity, border crossing becomes his realm of fantasy, the only place that he can have his Butterfly. In fact, his cross-dressed finale seems to mark two clear points. One, Gallimard himself has recognized the overarching nature of gender construction. Here, gender bending has inflicted, to some extent, Strauss's notion of betrayal on Gallimard. By displaying the penis, the gendered figure of his desire has betrayed his fantasy. And two, in order to maintain the fantasy, Gallimard must become Madame Butterfly, himself now occupying the realm of gender construction, and commit suicide in order to preserve the fantasy. By changing into Madame Butterfly, Gallimard continues to promote the idea that the Orient/East is the feminized Occident/ West. The binarities originally proposed, however,

become lost in the possibility of movement back and forth between Orient and Occident, East and West.

Here, I draw a distinction between the cross-dressing in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals and *M Butterfly* and the drag of *Angels in America* and *Jeffrey*. Although both cross-dressing and drag occupy similar spaces--politicized and depoliticized--they are also dissimilar in some respects. *M Butterfly* more clearly than the Hasty Pudding Theatricals represents a notion of "compelled" performance:

> Each is "compelled" by social and economic forces to disguise himself or herself in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political "freedom." Each, that is, is said to embrace transvestism unwillingly, as an instrumental strategy rather than an erotic pleasure and play space . . . . The ideological implications of this pattern are clear: cross-dressing can be "fun" or "functional" so long as it occupies a liminal space and temporary time period; after this carnivalization, however, whether it is called "Halloween" (in Provincetown) or "green world" (in Shakespeare), the cross-dresser is expected to resume life as he or she was, having, presumably, recognized the touch of "femininity" or "masculin-

> ity" in her or his otherwise "male" or "female" self. (Garber 70)

Ostensibly, Song cross-dresses for the Revolution and Chairman Mao; how much pleasure (s)he gets from this act remains ambiguous to some extent. Of course, in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals, the idea is always present that gender bending will end and heterosexual desire will manifest itself. In other contexts, cross-dressing becomes an economic necessity. Anne Herrmann argues that "female impersonators or 'drag queens' cross-dress not for sexual pleasure in private or for public lives as women, but to earn a living within the gay community" (61).

As a physical manifestation of camp, drag is not without political implications. Daniel Harris believes that

> Camp is a new expression of their [gay men's] unsparingly objective view of their own mannerisms, a form of monologuing, grandstanding, and self-display in which effeminacy becomes a cunning and deliberate ceremony, a highly detached street mime or self-theater with its own repertoire of stock moves, parts, phrases, gags, bits--all of the elements of the outlandish cartoon, the "queen." (79)

The queen, however, is more than an outlandish cartoon; (s)he certainly has the potential for political actualization and subversion. The deliberate flouting of social norms associated with gendered bodies seems to be the cornerstone of the drag queen. In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Bernice remarks that one of the young queens, Felicia, has become a good little performer, "twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week." It is this acting up and acting out that separates Belize in *Angels* and the queens in *Priscilla* from Song in *M Butterfly*. What is most interesting, again, is representation: how are the queens viewed on stage and screen? And how is gender re-presented?

Before I address Belize in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, I need to comment on Kushner's cosmology, for without it, we cannot fully understand either the play as a whole or Belize's role. In the "Playwright's Notes" that precede *Perestroika*, Kushner comments that he is "indebt[ed] to Harold Bloom's reading of the Jacob story . . . in which Bloom translates the Hebrew word for 'blessing' as 'more life'" (7). *Millennium* and *Perestroika* confront the difference between motion and stasis. In Act Five of *Perestroika*, heaven "*looks mostly like San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake. It has a deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble is strewn*

everywhere" (5.2.120-1). During this scene, Harper comments that "Everyone here wanders. Or they sit on crates, playing card games" (121), and later, "Heaven is depressing, full of dead people and all" (122). For Kushner, heaven is not paradise, but the lack of life, a static and unchanging environment. Although heaven is supposed to be like San Francisco, Prior notes that the "real San Francisco, on earth, is unspeakably beautiful" (122). When Prior finally sees the angels in heaven, the stage directions make it clear that this heaven is one rooted in the past, one unwilling or unable to change: "*The Continental Principalities sit around a table covered with a heavy tapestry on which is woven an* ancient map of the world. *The tabletop is covered with* antique and broken *astronomical, astrological, mathematical and nautical objects of measurement and calculation*" (5.5.128 my emphasis). Later the angel Europa comments that heaven is the "Tome of Immobility, of respite, of cessation" (5.5.134). Prior, however, wants a blessing because he understands how important life is. Prior points out that people "can't just stop. We're not rocks--progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*. Even if we go faster than we should. We can't *wait*. And wait for what? God . . ."

(5.5.132). Prior is clearly voicing Kushner's idea that life is positive because it is the opposite of stasis. Kushner distinguishes between the land of the living and the land of the dead, a place of options and possibilities and a place where everything remains constant. In Kushner's cosmology, there is respect for life, even Roy Cohn's, because it *is* life, change, renewal.

Belize, an ex-ex drag queen (3.2.94), represents a field of possibility. In one conversation with Prior, Belize speaks of a time when she "gave up drag" (2.5.61) because it was not politically correct. That Kushner has Belize back in drag in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* points to the way that the drag queen, at least for Kushner, represents a realm of options. Unlike the inhabitants of heaven, Belize can move in, out and between "fixed" genders. A representative of change, Belize stands more ready than anything "heavenly" to usher in the new millennium.

Belize's most important scene is when she has Louis offer Roy Cohn, "the polestar of human evil" (4.3.95), the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. The Kaddish is a blessing, "more life." For Belize to want to offer Cohn, an individual infamous for his gay-bashing and political opposition to Gay Liberation, more life seems to promote an

ideology of acceptance and forgiveness. She is taking Cohn's now unneeded supply of AZT for Prior, but she's willing to thank the (unwilling) donor and offer him "more life" as he passes on. That the drag queen has the idea of the Kaddish makes Belize into a guru of sorts, perhaps like the Native American *berdache*. In the Native American tradition, the *berdache* is an individual who is considered neither male nor female, but a third sex all together.[6] A *berdache* in a tribe was a sign of good luck and a blessing from the gods. Often, a warrior chief would take a *berdache* into his family beside his wife. If the chief were ill, legend held that sex with the *berdache* invoked healing powers. Since Kushner mentions Native American mythology and spirituality in *Angels* (*Millennium* 3.2.92), Belize could represent this type of guru. In such a reading, Belize--and drag queens, then, in general--because of the liminal space they inhabit, stand ready as ushers of this new millennium of justice, compassion, and love that Kushner's two plays seem to herald.

But note the difference between Belize, as a drag queen, and the Continental Principalities. The angels, like the heaven in which they live, represent stasis. Because they are hermaphrodites of sorts, they do not need another angel or entity of any sort in order to procreate or

experience sexual pleasure[7]; sex, however, seems to be good in and of itself since *Perestroika* opens with the Angel's bringing Prior to sexual climax. As static creatures, the angels embody the opposite of Bloom's definition of *blessing*. The angels are not allowed to rejoice (5.5.129); one angel comments that they are "impotent witness[es], dichotomous, propulsive" (5.5.130). Belize, though in drag performing a "woman," is not bi-sexed, but vestimentarily cross-gendered, and her border crossing can move either way, as her comment that she once gave up drag proves. A gay character, Belize probably will not procreate, but (s)he may still have sex with another person and experience love, two options that seem unnecessary for and irrelevant to the angels. Again, for Kushner, the angels, though divine, seem to represent a backward motion, whereas Belize offers "forward dawning" (*Millennium* 3.1.85).[8]

Stephan Elliot's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* posits a new way of viewing drag and the queen. In its colonialist context, the movie creates a chasm of differences between Sydney, where the drag queens have been living, and Alice Springs, a resort in the center of Australia. To view the queens' situation, then, is to examine the use of margin and center, outside and inside. Although Sydney is the center of culture, at least geographically,

the trip from Sydney to Alice Springs--appropriately named if we see the resort as a spring of revitalization or nourishment--should be a chance for the queens to resituate themselves inside a culture that seems to want them exterior to it. Therefore, their trip constitutes a revisioning of the margin/center dichotomy. For example, between Sydney and Alice Springs, they encounter two alarming situations. In Broken Hill (a pun on "heel"), the locals originally want to refuse them service at a bar because they are "bloody female impersonators": one very butch woman slams her hand on Bernadette's and yells that "we've got nothin' for people like you. Nothin'!" Bernadette, however, uses wit to put the local ruffian in her place, and immediately the bar falls in love with them. The next morning, however, the girls find their bus vandalized and the words "AIDS Fuckers Go Home!" painted on the side. Regardless of how hard they try, they fail to "fit in." Ever aware of their enforced Otherness, Mitzi comments, "No matter how tough I think I'm getting, it's still hard." Likewise, their performance in the next town is applauded by a single individual, Bob, a character who is originally from Sydney, not the Outback. The men at the bar prefer to watch Bob's Asian wife, Cynthia, shoot ping-pong balls from her vagina. If the Outback represents "center," then it is a "center" that is hostile

to the queens. *Priscilla* points out that the center/margin dichotomy itself is not absolute, but mutable depending on our concept of each.

In Kupapeetie, Bernadette refuses to allow Felicia to leave the hotel room on her own because Bernadette knows that she will get into trouble, which is precisely what happens. After Felicia has been hit several times by a local man who is appalled and confused by his interest in Felicia--he offers her a drink and only when he sees her arm hair realizes that "she" is a "he"--Bernadette comes to her rescue by beating up the guy. Consoling Felicia afterwards, Bernadette says,

> We all sit around, mindlessly slagging off that vile stinkhole of a city [Sydney], but in some strange way, it takes care of us. I don't know if that ugly wall of suburbia has been put there to stop them getting in or us getting out.

Bernadette, a transsexual, then points out what we have already seen, that "being a man one day and a woman the next isn't an easy thing to do." Mitzi, Felicia, and Bernadette encounter mostly disrespect and hostility during their journey from margin to center, whereas the margin (Sydney) offers them at least marginal acceptance. In Sydney, if they do not fit into the mainstream, they at least seem safe

in their own community. Again, the film inverts our more typical reading of the center and the margin. Here the Other enjoys its marginalization, if for no other reason than because it is *its* margin, *its* community, a place where *it* makes the rules, or at least knows the rules.

Their trip to Alice Springs represents a physical manifestation of their liminal experience. Liminal, "betwixt and between," may be the more traditional sense of the space that the drag queen inhabits. Because (s)he is neither "male" nor "female," our penchant for binarities places him/her in a transitional state. Yet the space in which the transvestite operates is not necessarily a transitional one, between polar opposites. *Priscilla* suggests that, to some extent, the queens occupy neither the margin nor the center exclusively, but can move in and out or occupy a "third" space altogether. If they "pass" successfully as female--Bernadette has certainly removed the "absolute insignia of maleness"--they can remain in the center; in fact, Bernadette stays with Bob in Alice Springs at the end of the movie. Consequently, their liminality can offer them liberating possibilities.

At times during the trip, the queens gain support and make friends. The aborigines they encounter help them when their bus breaks down in the desert. Of course, they camp

it up a bit in order to deal with the breakdown. Felicia decides to paint the bus lavender: "We're going to start off with a little facelift," she says; "nothing like a new frock to brighten up your day." While practicing for the Alice Springs gig, they realize that a local, Allen, is watching. After he takes them to his camp, they feel obliged to perform. In fact, one of the men, Allen, even dons drag to perform Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" along with the professional queens. The aborigines seem oblivious to the fact that others may find the drag queens abnormal. They simply take them in, enjoy their performance--in fact, they begin to participate in the music making.

Consider the difference between *Priscilla* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, produced in the United States. *To Wong Foo* offers a sterile representation of drag queens, for unlike the queens in *Priscilla* who move in and out of drag, at times in half drag, the queens in *Wong Foo* almost never come out of drag--in fact, they rather unrealistically sleep in it. Of the two scenes in which the illusion of drag is displaced, one occurs when Patrick Swayze's character, Vida Boheme, temporarily loses her wig. After this break in "costume," Vida beats up the abusive husband in the movie, apparently underscoring the idea that only a "man" can beat up another man. The "center" of *To*

Wong Foo is a broken down town, Snydersville, somewhere in "middle America." Apparently "unrefined," the Snydersville men are abusive to their women. The women of the town, however, accept and enjoy the drag queens who have come as "fairies" to correct the evils there. In such a "dream" world, the queens win the "Drag Queen of the Year" contest in New York (margin and center like Sydney), fix up uncultured areas of the United States (center and margin like Alice Springs), and end up winning the national drag queen contest in Hollywood. Although they fear Snydersville and its people originally--for the threat of homophobic danger seems to loom in back of the queens' minds throughout their trip to the interior--such fear never manifests itself. The film seems to say that the very real violence often involved in homophobia is a fiction that gay men and lesbians have created, one which remains ultimately unrealized.

Yet in *Priscilla*, the center is a resort which is hostile to the drag queens' performance--the audience claps obligatorily--and the only ones who really support them are Bob, Mitzi's wife, Miriam, and their son, Benji. While there, the queens help Felicia realize her childhood dream of "climbing King's Canyon as a Queen in a full-length Gautier original" before they leave. When they make it to the top, the highest stage in Australia, Bernadette notes

that "It never ends does it, all that space?" They may "camp" trip up King's Canyon, but they soon realize that the geographical center of Australia is surrounded by a space that continues, denying a center. It is only when Mitzi and Felicia return to Sydney and perform ABBA's "Mama Mia" that they realize that the margin is their home, both enforced and chosen, for that is where they flourish, where camp and drag survive. Their quest for the center ends with an increased appreciation for the margin. For the queens of *Priscilla*, the center and margin represent two distinct, though apparently reversed, sites, whereas as center/margin dichotomies fall apart in *To Wong Foo*.

Throughout *Priscilla*, we have hints that the real problem with our burnt-out queens is not the margin, but their understanding of the center--in some ways a wish-fulfillment to travel there--and its relationship to them. Their quest is not really one of joining the center (as we assume it to be), but one of (re)centering themselves. By accepting the view that the margin is a negative place to be, the protagonists want to escape it. When they realize the value that the "margin" has for them, they are prepared to embrace it, to make it central to their lives, and relish their now (partially) chosen position at the margin as a

position they have "centered" for themselves, one in which they too "will survive."

The film seems problematic, however, in that the ending offers two distinct interpretations. On the one hand, the queens seem quite happy to claim a space for performance. They establish their own rules for themselves. But they are also situated back at the margin. So although they camp and drag, they do not achieve any form of significant subversion, unless we consider their reverse colonizing of the people they encounter on their trip to the Outback. Because the aborigines and the bar folks in Broken Hill begin to accept the queens, we could see the queens' trip as an example of reverse colonization. They seem to force their culture on the people they meet, in some ways subverting those cultures. Although it seems ridiculous to suppose a scenario in which everyone is happy in the end, the two conflicting views of *Priscilla* perhaps point to the very nature of gender construction: always between apparently binary oppositions, drag/cross-dressing is itself a liminal construction at the nexus of interpellation.

Louis Althusser proposes that we understand ourselves, that we recognize who we are, when we respond to a call or "hail" from another. We recognize who we are in our culture by how we are hailed. Explicating Althusser's theory, Perry

Noodleman claims that "we come to see ourselves in the way our culture wants us to see ourselves in the process of acknowledging that it is indeed we who are being hailed" (292). As such, interpellation rests at the root of identity construction. I suggest that the area of interpellation for the transvestite is a nexus of previously binary considerations. No longer are "male" and "female" essential categories, for in between or at the margins are multiple shifting signifiers that contribute to identity construction. Interpellation also underscores the notion of gender as performance. Judith Butler argues that it is through interpellation that the "subject becomes socially constructed" (*Bodies* 122). Although the call itself may be formative, the individual's response is performative, for he or she has the option of answering or not when the call is issued. Because the response is inherently an existential choice, the transvestite may respond to a "female" interpellation--as Jan Morris did at Kennedy Airport--or refuse to identify with "female." Likewise, the transvestite may respond or refuse identification as "male." Ultimately, the transvestite seems to operate in a realm of possibility.

Notes

1. The reader will remember my summary of his ideas from Chapter One on passing. Restated here, Harris essentially argues that effeminacy involves a "complete inattention to gender" and that what seems "imitative of women" is really a state of being "*non-imitative* of men" (75).

2. I do not suggest that his "confrontational drag" is the only reason for the CD's lack of sales. Certainly, the music itself and popular tastes apply. I mention it only as *a* possibility, one of perhaps many. The CD is also riddled with gay themes and lyrics, as well as representations of drag/transvestism.

3. In the movie, when Chin visits Song, Chin finds her in a western-styled dress, reading Western fashion magazines. The movie seems to say that Song enjoys both sex with Gallimard and Western femininity, a more "gay identified" (if we can assume such a thing) situation than the play proposes. In the play, though, Song also points out that (s)he has had anal sex with Gallimard, a notion that appalls Chin. Both point to an apparent gay identity, at least in Song's understanding of him-/herself.

4. Taylor presupposes or equates gay men with drag, or rather drag with gay men. Her article does not address "straight" transvestism, but she does make excellent arguments for gender construction. Her only real problem seems to be reconciling gay identity with constructivist notions of cross-dressing.

5. Hwang argues in his afterward to the play that "our considerations of race and sex intersect the issue of imperialism." As such, we observe that "good natives serve Whites, bad natives rebel." For Hwang, because good natives of both sexes are "submissive and obedient, [they] . . . necessarily take on 'feminine' characteristics in a colonialist world" (99).

6. For further discussion on the *berdache*, see Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*, Boston: Beacon Pr, 1986.

7. Significant to Kushner's design, the angels *do not* procreate. Although they may have the equipment to do so,

they have opted not to create new life. Therefore, they stand outside of Kushner's theme of "more life."

8. I am indebted to Dr. Patricia Pace of Georgia Southern University for this reading of Kushner's play. Recently, she pointed out what should have been obvious--the angels' sexual duality and their apparent representation of stasis.

Conclusion

I Want Answers!

> "Sammy's so confused he don't know whether to scratch his watch or wind his butt!"
>
> Truvy, *Steel Magnolias*

Throughout the preceding chapters, two main questions persist: 1) Are there possibilities for truly subversive masks in gay culture since existing categories seem both unsuccessful and contained? and 2) Do the masks of passing, camp, and drag offer liberatory possibilities to those who assume them or those who view them?

The first question, I think, is ultimately unanswerable. I submit David Van Leer's argument on power: "Power admits of only two positions--the enfranchised and the disenfranchised, the majority and the minority" (603). Or is it as simple as that? For instance, a white gay male in America may ostensibly, superficially be a member of the

majority, the enfranchised, because his "gayness" does not necessarily show. So to those who understand him to be a straight white male, he is empowered. Yet at the same time, to himself and to those who know, he aligns with the disenfranchised, the minority. It would appear that when dealing with (en)gendered issues, we cannot make even categories of power absolute. So, how do we ascertain whether passing, camp, and drag are subversive or not when they can operate in more than two realms of power relations?

Yet there are many more considerations. I return to Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* because she points out the problematics of trying to answer such questions. In her introduction, Butler comments that, for "those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered," there arises a question of their "humanness" because "the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means" (8). It would seem, then, that when someone who is passing, camping, or dragging is unsuccessful--so that the viewer questions the authenticity of the mask--the masked individual's humanness comes into question. As such, unsuccessful attempts at masking seem to "reinscribe, rather than undermine, the dominant cultural paradigms it appropriates for its parody" (Davy 138). Yet by offering itself as a site of confusion, of abjection--that "unnameable terror, a kind of psycholo-

gization of threat and deviance" (Epstein and Straub 13)--the masked individual seems to call into question those "dominant cultural paradigms," at least for the viewer to assess. So what happens, subversion or containment? Or is "subversion" a notion that occurs at the most individualistic of sites--the viewer and the performer--problematizing a monolithic theory of subversion?

As I pointed out in chapter three, "there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion" (Butler, *Bodies* 125). To elaborate on Butler's idea, I point out that "drag is a site of a certain ambivalence" because it "may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and the reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (125). Discussing the film *Paris Is Burning*, Butler argues that the protagonist, Venus Xtravaganza, "calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them" (125). Venus is a Latina in New York; Butler argues that--as Garber has noted--the transvestite becomes a site of multiple crossings, representative of "boundary transgressions" of all types. Since the movie ends with Venus's painful death, Butler argues that "the film suggests . . . that there are cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization": "As much as she crosses gender, sexuality, and race performatively, the hegemony that reinscribes

the privileges of normative femininity and whiteness wields the final power to *re*naturalize Venus's body and cross out that prior crossing, an erasure that is her death" (133). The film, however, reanimates Venus, and the drag ball queens who show up in the film, in a "cinematic performativity" that "brings fame and recognition not only to Venus but also to the other drag ball children" (133). Does Livingston's film reinscribe or subvert?

Of recent fame because of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, The Lady Chablis is a drag queen whose "home" is Club One Jefferson in Savannah, Georgia. Her drag ranges from show-all, two-piece outfits to elegant ball gowns; her fans range from young gay men and lesbians to blue-haired heterosexual women who come to Club One to get their book signed and see for themselves the spectacle that Berendt describes in *Midnight*. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub argue that

> crossdressing still occurs primarily in protected clubs and private residences, going public only to 'pass.' . . . Festivals--Halloween or Mardi Gras; lesbian music weekends or drag shows--still do the work of defusing gender ambiguity by incorporating it into institutionally available and culturally demarcated spaces. (21)

Is The Lady Chablis subversive? She caters during her shows to the heterosexual ladies who are there, often satirizing them or making fun of them and their husbands. But her act is not toned down for them; she curses as much and makes the same lewd sexual comments to the early show as to the late show, which is primarily gay men and lesbians. Her popularity brings "straight" people--she has even had people visiting from London and continental Europe--into a "gay" atmosphere, which itself may offer subversive opportunities. Her notoriety has helped the other drag queens at Club One who seem to pay no heed to the "straight" members of the audience. Yet these blue-haired ladies and their husbands must feel that Chablis occupies a "safe" space, so in their minds, is Chablis really a woman? Does that make her "safe"? Or do they enjoy the spectacle of performance, willingly suspending disbelief? Perhaps Chablis is only preaching to the converted?

Cross-dressing, it seems, has become the current cinematic trend. *The Birdcage*, a remake of *La Cage Aux Folles*, and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* seem to mainstream both camp and drag. Do they "reinscribe, rather than undermine"? *Birdcage*, using Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as its drawing cards for straight and gay America, respectively, seems to place drag queens center stage, but

also problematizes the notion of subversion. We see Robin Williams's character directing drag acts, and we witness Nathan Lane's character both in and out of drag, at times in half drag. Clearly, the audience bears witness to the idea that Lane's (en)gendered performances are just that, performances. Then again, we have to consider what he's performing. By appropriating and parodying Barbara Bush, Lane's character is in drag, but he's also chosen a conservative, ex-First Lady in order to convince his "son's" fiancé's Republican parents that theirs is an ideal home, which represents good, conservative values. Williams's and Lane's characters seem to want to depict a traditional married couple, one which subscribes to the heterosexual model. Yet, as Butler has pointed out, because such a model is itself a "copy of a copy," it "involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated" (*Bodies* 126). The movie's culmination in a traditional wedding ceremony also seems to "reinscribe" the idea that such a construct is the most appropriate, or natural. Nevertheless, the movie, just by introducing drag as a performative construct, seems to promote ideas of gender/identity as constructed rather than "natural." Ultimately, the question of its subversive

nature seems to remain in the hands, or eyes and minds, of each individual viewing the film.

In some ways, *To Wong Foo* creates the same problematic denial of absolute categorization. Again, the producers chose already well-loved celebrities, Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes, as well as lesser known John Leguizamo, which, as I will explain shortly, posed its own problems. The most disconcerting aspect of the movie, for me, is that the characters never move out of drag or invest in partial drag, once they "frock" in the opening scene. Swayze's and Snipes's putting on "drag" depicts the way that drag is performative. It also serves a second effect of pointing out that these characters *are* Swayze and Snipes, two "heterosexual" males. Vida, Noxie, and Chi-Chi are always drawn as "fairies," magical and unreal characters who have come to save women in back-woods America. Choosing Swayze and Snipes for the lead roles both calls into question gender performance and displaces it. Putting them in drag seems to be a mode of acceptance of transvestism and a "gay" identity that is popularly associated with drag; however, because both Swayze and Snipes are already famous, ignoring that these "straight" men were underneath the makeup and dress became almost impossible for me, whereas I much more easily believed that Leguizamo's character, Chi-Chi, was a

"real girl." Is this inability to suspend disbelief subversive or not? On the one hand, such an inability keeps the constructedness of gender foregrounded; on the other hand, because the characters underneath are "straight," the subversive elements seems to be contained, much as in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals.

Here, though, is yet another problem. When the actors were interviewed on *Oprah!*, Swayze and Snipes seemed content with their performance and secure in their "heterosexual" identity. Leguizamo, however, continued to make marginally homophobic remarks as an apparent attempt to distance himself from the character he played in the movie. At one point, Leguizamo commented that, during production, he would go home in the evenings and "have to" make love to his wife several times, just to keep things "straight." Leguizamo's comment underscores his problems with his own gendered identity--either already or because of his moving from his "male" attire to drag and back each day. It also points out that because he is not the celebrity that Swayze and Snipes are, he must make his "identity" clear to anyone who saw the movie and might be confused. Again, does Leguizamo's comment and situation point to cross-dressing's subversive possibilities or not?

The other question I posed at the beginning of this chapter can actually be divided into two questions: What are the liberatory possibilities of the categories I have created? and What, if any, limitations do they impose? As I see it, passing, camp, and drag each offer extremely liberatory moments for the performers, even if the outcome does not itself embody utter liberation. But I do not necessarily see that the categories themselves impose limitations on the ones in them, for these categories ultimately blend into one other.

White's *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* constitute a *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist tries to assimilate until he recognizes that a "gay" identity can be an option. The mask of passing is supposed to liberate him from his feelings of inadequacy and self-hate, to make him into the son that he thinks his father wants. As long as his father, or his peers for that matter, believes his mask, he seems safe. Sterling and Prior look to camp for escape from their conditions. I do not doubt that Sterling is a relatively happy individual who, as the stage directions point out, "exults in stylishness." For both Sterling and Prior, camp offers respite from the reality both of a marginalized position, for, indeed, gay men are not yet free from discrimination, and of AIDS. In this

sense, camp liberates them to move on with their lives, to live; in Kushner's sense, it *blesses* them. Drag, especially if we buy Garber's, Epstein's, and Straub's idea of the stage as a "safe space" for such performance, in the end offers the queens of *Priscilla* a place away from the hate they encountered in the Outback. For Belize in *Angels*, drag may even function, because of its constructedness, as a mode of moving between or among different genders, identities, and situations. Yet in the end, each of these performances seems to be an unsuccessful attempt, the "why?" of which I explored in the preceding chapters.

Limitation--the idea seems both improbable and unacceptable. Although to impose categories of interpretation seems to ascribe a notion of fixity, I think mine deny limitations because they are consciously performative, as well as categories which bend, and at times, interweave. After all, could we not envision passing as drag? or drag as passing? and camp as a signifying argot that works within and through both? If, as I pointed out in chapter three, drag operates at times on the idea of "realness," then does not passing also construct itself on an idea of "realness," being "straight" and thereby dressing, acting, and talking "straight"? The quality of the performance of passing seems as rooted as cross-dressing in the establishment of

"realness." Conversely, cross-dressing/drag seems rooted in the idea of passing, only passing for "feminine" instead of "masculine."

For me, the three masks that this work has addressed--passing, camp, and cross-dressing/drag--can be separated as well as linked. Such an understanding offers future possibilities both in further drawing the lines of distinction and in arguing that "lines" also give way to crossings, "boundary transgressions," that remain ultimately problematic. Yet because these performances are ultimately (en)gendered, based on non-fixed categories of (re)presentation, ascribing a monolithic nature to them seems both impossible and unwise.

By posing more questions, I hope to broaden the scope of contemporary readings of "gay" texts. That I end with questions perhaps underscores the idea that gender/identity construction is ultimately problematic. In fact, if I can ascribe any "nature" to gender and identity as performance, it is that, because they are performative, they deny closure and thus create the possibility for multiple (incongruous) interpretations.

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