

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Dance, Dress, Desire:  
Drag Kings, Prison Wear, and the Dressed, Dancing Body

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

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The Dissertation of Tania Nicole Hammidi is  
approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dance, Dress, Desire:  
Drag Kings, Prison Wear, and the Dressed, Dancing Body

by

Tania Nicole Hammidi

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies  
University of California, Riverside, December 2010  
Dr. Marta Savigliano, Chairperson

In this dissertation, I make an argument for the inclusion of a more rugged critical approach to costume in performance, focusing on contemporary drag king performance as a genre. I make the argument that clothing fundamentally effects choreography. I further suggest that dance studies provides a fertile ground for recognizing and interpreting kinging as a physical practice, even while LGBTIQ dancers, choreographers, and performers continue to confront the homo- and trans- phobias of the dance industry and linked scholarship produced to interpret dance. Forwarding a notion of “the dressing, dancing body” as a response to humanist conceptions of “the fleshy body” as a unified, biologically-based entity, I challenge the homo- and trans-phobia of the industry and of normative dance scholarship by providing an intimate, scavenger, and multi-sensual methodology for approaching costume in performance. This gesture transgresses the stable boundaries of interpretation and subject-object relations at its core, queering conventional scholarship and invoking desire, feelings,

imagination, texture, sound, and ornamentation into the formula of knowledge production. I look at the costumes of drag kings in contemporary drag king cabaret and at women's prison uniforms in the context of federal incarceration as material sites where dress, desire, and dance come together in U.S. statecrafting. What brings these two seemingly disparate subjects together – drag kinging and prison wear -- is their common enemy: a violent state praxis designed to corporealize normative U.S. citizenship by controlling the dress and movements of all bodies. I foreground the centrality of the sartorial in the subject-formation of drag kings and female political prisoners, as a strategy for accounting for kinging's exclusions from normative dance on the one hand, and for exposing how the U.S. State historically invests in dress policy and enforcement. Finally, drawing out a theory of sound and drag king subject formation and of "sonic rub" of drag king costumes as they touch the performing body, this dissertation in its repose offers a critical approach to drag kings attentive to embodiment, costume, and the sonic home-base of the drag king performance.

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## CHAPTER 1

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### SEXUALITY, DANCE, COSTUME

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*“In other words she has fully embodied the costume and it is now an extension of herself”*  
Ryan Jordon, 1997

#### **Introduction**

Two curiosities and one great disappointment inspired me to pursue doctorate work in dance. The first curiosity came from observing the world of dance as an outsider to the community, while a resident of the greater Bay Area during the 1990’s. I observed that dance as a physical practice was filled with many gay male and some lesbian dancers, yet there appeared to be very few butch lesbians and even fewer transmen laboring as dancers in the field. As a drag king who took dance classes as a way to refine my technical skills as a mover, I found this absence of “my people” psychically jarring and a challenging intellectual puzzle. I wondered, was there something essential to the construction of female masculinities or female-to-male (FTM) gender identities in combination with queer, dyke, or lesbian erotic desires that discouraged most butches, gender-queers or FTM’s from pursuing dance, either casually or professionally? Or was this demographic simply the result of everyday butch, trans, homo, and queer discrimination in the culture(s) of dance, linked to the larger project of unifying the U.S. nation based on notions of a racially white and gender-normative, hetero U.S. citizenship? I knew I often felt uncomfortable in even

the most hip or “liberal” dance class because of the rigid gender binaries that organized the class’ activities and techniques. I experienced loneliness without other butches or gender-deviants in the classroom with whom to identify, rehearse movements, and create mini-narratives for dancer exercises that reflected our lives and interests in dance. Many of my drag king friends in the San Francisco Bay and New York City areas had access to dance, yoga, and movement classes filled with gender-queer people (with creeps and wierdos like me, as the 2009 Radiohead song goes), which was not my case in graduate school.

The second curiosity that drove me to pursue doctorate work in dance arose out of my occupation as a wildland fire fighter for six years. During summers while getting a Master’s in Community Development at a university in Northern California, I had a job as a fire fighter on a 20-person handcrew for the U.S. Forest Service. This job issued standard government Nomex fire fighting gear that was usually too large for my thin 5’ 4” frame. While the two arenas of thought and physical practice (sociological research on adornment, and intensive physical labor in the world of fire) seemed to have nothing to do with each other, I felt liberated as a fire fighter in spite of the challenges the uniform offered for movement *and* in spite of the rampant political and intellectual conservatism of the U.S. Forest Service world.<sup>1</sup> I identified as a “neo-butch” lesbian then (in the early 1990’s, this was a relevant term) and claimed pride and ownership of my masculinity; yet, there was nothing specifically “butch lesbian” about the way the government-issued khaki pants, bright yellow Nomex shirt, or uni-size hardhat framed

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<sup>1</sup> Overall, based on my observations and participation, I found the fire world to be a culture rife with racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

me in relation to the butch styles of the day. Still, within these conditions, I felt the most free to experiment physically, challenge my consciousness, feel my erotic power, and perform the job with proficiency. Was this simply the case of a “good fit” professionally, I wondered? Or was there something more going on about choreographic discoveries in the face of sartorial limitations that propelled me forward as cross-dressed performer and thinker?

These two curiosities led me into graduate school with a general inquiry. Yet, it was one final disappointment that produced the ground zero of what became my dissertation topic. This disappointment came while taking a costume history course during graduate school.<sup>2</sup> There, I learned that engaging costume critically in performance called for the ability to identify accoutrement names, styles, and tailoring details historically. Not only did I struggle with this method for its alignment with a European patriarchal teleology and binary gender categories, but I also found in the method no way of understanding how “costume studies” in Theatre or Film departments might differ from “costume studies” in Dance Departments, where the fleshy body’s interfacing with clothing would be more highly valued. I found that the impact costume had on wearers was absented by the method offered in my graduate class; it likewise denied the tie between costume and wearers in the production of dance as a choreographic event and what that relationship produced, historically. What follows in the dissertation are my researched responses to these initial curiosities and disappointment.

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<sup>2</sup> This course was taught in a Theatre department by an interesting and very knowledgeable professor. From observation, no other course critically addressing clothing was offered in any humanities or social science department during my time in graduate school.

## Bodies, Anxieties

Modern dance pioneer Martha Graham once suggested that dance is a celebration of “the miracle” of the body in her essay *I am a Dancer* (1984). “Think of all the little bones in your wrist. It is a miracle. And the dance is a celebration of that miracle” Graham wrote (67). The affective tenor of Graham’s prose is attractive, making the compelling claim that dance is touched by miracle(s). Graham continues her prose: “the body never lies” (66) ... “the body is a sacred garment ... your first and last garment” (68). In *I am a Dancer*, Martha Graham consigned a belief about the “the body” as a truth serum of human motivation and essential physical potential, aligning herself with an ideology which claimed “the body” to be a singular, hermetically sealed, biological entity identifiable through anatomy, from head to toe. In this dissertation, I depart from the legacy of Graham, to argue for a different notion of the dancing body and it’s potential. I suggest that the dancing body is a complicated critical entity, more than flesh, muscles and bones; more than energy, chemicals, and neurons. Stretching in loose-fitting T-shirts and sweats before a rehearsal or leaping on stage in leotard and ensemble wear, the essential thesis of my dissertation is that the dancing body is a costumed body, what I call “a dressed, dancing body,” whether naked or garbed. To acknowledge this viewpoint as a critical scholar in dance means to let go of the humanist view of the body and adopt an expanded notion of what creates, maintains, and projects “the body” into language and therefore into history, both discursively and materially. For these reasons, I call modernist fantasies about the body in dance into question in this dissertation, shifting the frame of conception from a utopian one based

in modernism, to one much more attentive to the anxieties and pleasures produced by dancing in a material world. In this way, this dissertation queers and is queer.

Instead, I forward the notion that the body is a “dressed, dancing body.” This conception of the body produces and unveils alternate notions of what the body is, foregrounding the role of embodiment in producing theory. Perhaps poetically, I forward the idea that this articulates connection between dress and the body that has existed alongside movement since the first brush of life on earth.

### **The Dressed, Dancing Body**

In *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), art historian Amelia Jones describes a cultural anxiety produced by 1990’s body art in the U.S. and Western Europe. Jones notes the era’s use of technology in live body performance to name subjectivity, disarticulating an age-old reliance on humanism as the organizing logic of culture, history, and bodies. Similar to arguments made in Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” essay of 1991 and Bruno Latour’s 1998 incisive analysis of European modernity’s reliance on the nature/culture split to forward its notions of progress, Jones describes the anxiety as based in the false belief that the human body at its truest state is pure flesh, untouched by culture, untechnological. Jones writes, “Much ink has been spilled (or many pixels activated) over the effects of technology on human existence. As Guattari suggests, one tendency has been to lament the incursion of technological forces into a presumably previously unmediated and more wholesome state of human existence” (Jones, 1998, 205). I hail Jones’ discussion of a technological body and the anxiety it

produces to the analytic stage of this dissertation, to situate my two core subjects.

This dissertation focuses on a performance form that reached an apex during the wave of political activism and artistic production in U.S. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (LGBTIQ) communities in the 1990's, drag kinging. While kinging since that time has developed in complexity as a genre and inspired millions of LGBTIQs to take to dress as a drag king, there is not much work on the fundamental effect drag kinging as a performative language has on notions of "the body" as a material, historical, and political concept. To contextualize this claim, the dissertation focuses on a legal definition of punishment as it influences prison wear policy on female political prisoners in U.S federal and state prisons, as part of articulating that performative. What brings these two seemingly disparate subjects together – drag kinging and prison wear policy – is their common enemy: bio-political tools of the state aimed at corporeally creating normative U.S. citizens out of the bodies within its sight. What is at stake in this process of hegemony is how "the body" is categorized, understood, and privileged as "a body" in the game of essential survival.<sup>3</sup> Those who do not conform to the mandates of modern embodiment are the first to be extinguished in this on-going, genocidal process, albeit differently. Thus, while drag kings and female prisoners experience vastly different physical and psychic violence in

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<sup>3</sup> Scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore's much-quoted understanding of racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has much influenced my understanding of "survival," "life," "death," and the process of slow genocide inherent to discriminating physical and psychic punishment of all sorts. In *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007) Gilmore writes: "Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme." (247).

relation to state power,<sup>4</sup> this dissertation creates a stage for their performatives and common choreographic propensities. On the stage of this dissertation, these figures are given plenty of room to sit, stand, strut, fall to their knees, bang on doors, sing out in live or lip-synched song, without displacing each other, choreographically or theoretically.

In sum, I suggest that by taking up Amelia Jones' understanding of the "de-essentialized, dispersed technosubject" characteristic of 1990's body art (Jones, 1998. 204), a common political performative wrapped around the notion of the *dressed, dancing body* is produced that can attend, as a concept, to both drag kings and female political prisoners. I suggest that this *dressed, dancing body* is best understood as a technological being, one who's body cannot be reduced to the flesh, but instead comes to its materiality and movement through encounters and un/spoken relations with costume. In this way, subjectivity and subject-formation is produced in the networks and textures within and between the folds of dress and the sensing fleshy body.

### **Approaching Costume**

The dance world is filled with dance costumes – flowing and tight fabrics of all colors, shapes, and sizes intent on grounding moving bodies into the circuitry of cultural, philosophical, spiritual, sexual, political and materialist economies. During my fieldwork from 2007-2010, I spent research time exploring the clothing artifacts at the

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<sup>4</sup> Except, clearly, in the cases where incarceration or formally-incarcerated take to the stage – which may be more often than is immediately, or visibly, evident.



San Francisco Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS). In conventional archivist protocol, staff at GLBTHS saved hand-sewn costumes of entertainment and political figures in the LGBTIQ communities in the Bay Area in large, archival quality boxes, such as by Sylvester, an esteemed gay disco diva.<sup>5</sup> These archival choices made a claim for costume: that fabric, feather boas, sewing style, and traces of use like smells or stains in costume might hold the marks of history, as an interfacing of human bodies and clothes. This fieldwork experience raised a question in my work: how to interrogate the stains and sheens of important figures to encourage the most knowledge of their moving corporealities? There remained only traces of the body in the costume, shedding so little light on Sylvester's actual performances.

How does one approach an object of LGBTIQ costume or clothing from a dance studies perspective? As I suggested earlier, current methods of studying costume historically may not offer the critical tools for draw-stringing dress and dance together. In this dissertation, I wield a method which combines *costume* and *clothing* as a way to harness the uniqueness of the medium into one conception which I will variously describe as "costume," "clothing," "dress," "garb" or an "accoutrement." My reason for this choice is to gather together the commonalities between these various discursive locations and identify the common forces working against them within the framework of logo centrism.

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvester was a revered drag queen and singer who's hit single "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" (released in 1973) won her the unofficial title "Queen of Disco." The song was inducted in the Dance Music Hall of Fame in 2004. Sylvester dies of AIDS-related complications on December 16, 1988 in San Francisco.

English and African American studies scholar Fred Moten discusses methodology in an interview about interdisciplinarity and performance (in Cahill/Thompson, 2001). Moten says:

We've all that had moment. You're walking out into the street and something just hits you. And as it hits you, it demands of you a certain kind of attention . . . . when something demands attention of you in that way, you should respect it. And one way that you respect it is by developing some serious protocols for how to engage it (50).

While there exist traditions for approaching costume in theatre, history, cultural studies, cinema, and even anthropology, I am suggesting in this dissertation that approaching costume in performance calls for a different set of conceptual tools that account for costume's unique materiality. Moten's statement comes in response to a discussion he is having with two interviewers about new methods in art and performance studies to engage the kinds of objects and processes that characterize 21<sup>st</sup> century art and performance-making. Yet, Moten's theorization is productive, I would argue, for any moment of forming a new discipline in one's analytic practice, because of his return to the object and the ethics it demands, upon arrival to the scene. Interpreting dress, like any medium I would argue, calls for a specific set of conceptual tools; it calls for intimate theories and sensual histories that match the intimate and sensual physical and conceptual locations that the sartorial occupies.

Costume itself, as clothing, resides in the boundaries and fuzzy borderlines between nature and culture, liveness and virtuality, the material and immaterial, self-care and capital, private and public, ornament and crime. As a discourse it registers the feminine: accused of all that is ineffectual, inconsequential, not about 'truth,' 'content,' not in conversation with an Oedipal reproduction of the phallic order. What this means

is that in the narrative production that may be fragmented by a queer inflection, the scene of Oedipus wherein a male child feels an incestuous desire for his mother while watching his mother and father have sex, is disrupted. This disruption interrupts the heteronormative desire of the normative nation-building project, inserting a different phallic economy into the mix. In my view, *costume* much like *clothing* designates a base and frivolous subject, amounting to nothing “productive” in the capitalist sense of the word. In everyday dialogue, clothing becomes a way of signaling and discussing class in contemporary U.S. public cultures, often as the butt of a joke, a side comment, a provocation, a loathing. In this way, clothing and costume serve to give view to the dance of U.S. citizenship and national belonging.

Secondly, as a medium of its own, I suggest that dress provides a site where sound, smell, touch, sight, thermoception, and other perceptual functions are linked. In interpreting dress in this dissertation, I produce analytic stories about these networks of senses, and about the choreographies, feelings, and representations playing intimately at the threshold of dress in the dancing of drag kings and in the daily embodiments by U.S. female political prisoners. In so doing, the project does more than press into the folds of clothing as a way to mark its analytic journey. It also presses into notions and practices of intimacy, affect, choreography, philosophy, architecture, the material, sensory deprivation, high-security isolation, sexuality, race, gender and queer(ed) human rights. I would argue that this is an ornamental method, meaning something that seems to be unnecessary, decorative, too personal/or intimate, an accessory considered excessive and without value. Instead, in this dissertation, I discuss how such a view of the ornamental denies the actual structural role of ornamentation in producing, shaping,

and holding a process (and a project) together. I argue for ornamentation (and costume) as an agent of choreography, something that is part of the process of producing dance – rather than the last tool of dance as an aesthetic genre that is given to dancers the last days of their rehearsal before a performance, as if it had nothing to do with corporeality, discovery, or movement.

### **Ornamentation**

I now define what I mean by ornamentation. In *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2004), art historian David Summers describes ornamentation as “one of the major forms of elaboration” in world art. “Much of the art of the world – and much of the most splendid art in the world – is ornamental” Summers writes (Summers 2004, 97). Here, without yet defining what he means by ornamental, the art historian argues for the attractiveness of ornamentation as a tool to create “splendid” art. Next, Summers critiques the associations and debates within art history about the role of fine art to establish social hierarchies and an “elite” through the circulation of notions of artistic refinement. He writes, “...there are decorums determining what is an appropriate artistic performance and what is not, and those bounds are seldom transgressed” (98). It is within these elitist boundaries that Summers locates the discrimination against the ornamental.

Davis Summers argues that practices of decorum in the production of Western art history and criticism establish and inside / outside set of art practices and projects that become marked as art. He suggests that the elaborations of the surface –

dispensable flourishes, insignificant gestures, ‘the superficial’ – threaten Western notions of the substantive, the material, and Western knowledge. In this view, not only extended dance releases, but dance itself is understood as a superficial elaboration of the body, an extraneous element of the otherwise well-functioning march towards progress and a Western-centric aesthetic economy. Dance would be considered a splendid but none-the-less insignificant flourish to the production of space and place, to history and normative temporality, and to nation-building. In addition, via this line of thinking about what qualifies as “real” progress and a site of knowledge production, clothing would be considering the surface of a dressed body, inconsequential to the production of the body and history.

David Summers traces this unfortunate hypocrisy as a result of an initial concern about what has been considered truth or a real “thing,” and rhetoric, a stylistic and persuasive project. He writes,

“In classical rhetoric, the art of persuasion, a distinction was made between subject-matter and style, *res et verba*, thing and words. Since words are *not* things, it is necessary, so the argument went for some two thousand years, to use language so vividly and pleasingly that subject-matter is set irresistibly before the mind’s eye. The ‘ornaments’ and ‘colors’ of rhetoric, the ‘figures’ and ‘tropes’ ... of language were artfully manipulated in order to sway the hearer by appeal to sight ... or to a kind of remembered or imagined sight” (98-99).

Summers establishes both the use of ornamentation in this short history of rhetoric, and its devaluation as a “manipulative” tool to “sway the hearer by appeal.” Ornamented “truth,” Summers suggests, is understood as an “art of persuasion” within classical views of rhetoric, something developed to trick a listener into a desire for something they might otherwise ignore, not see, devalue. Herein lies the crime of rhetoric (commonly

described as “the harlot of the arts), and so, too, of ornamentation. Through this navigation, Summers draws out the queer aspects of ornamentation. He opens up the fantasy places, the emotional tenors, the sensualities, the corporeal play, the colors of a knowledge based in reason and sense. Thus, herein lies the crime.

In choosing clothing, which is to say *to adorn oneself on stage or for the studio*, I intend to draw attention to a physical, psychic, and political practice that has buoyantly survived eras of academic neglect, with exception. I assert that clothing is a site where notions of the self and agency are conversant with overriding concepts of conformity to state sartorial policies and social codes, aligned with the production of a white supremacist, heteronormative, trans-phobic U.S. nation. I suggest that state discourse does not make itself accountable to this practice of control, leaving that task to the collaborative project of 21st century advanced capital in the state’s service.

There is something that happens to both a performer and an audience member during drag king shows that compels the senses to stretch and morph, like the actual costumes used by the performers. It is in this sensory rich space that drag kings transform conventional conceptions of the fleshy body into a sartorially splendid, dancing body. I am looking at a picture of a group of drag kings posed for the drag king magazine *Kingdom*, for a fundraiser in Minneapolis, Minnesota (August 17, 2002).<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> *Kingdom International Drag King Magazine* was a bi-annual publication (May & October) published by Kingdom Publishing by co-publishers Carlos Las Vegas and Ken Las Vegas. *Kingdom* was an international site for king community participation and provided inspiration, support, and the flavors of king cultures during its tenure and received international public press attention instantly, including press in the *Washington Post*, *Swerve Magazine*, an interview on CDC national radio, and elsewhere. Published from 2001 to 2003, *Kingdom* took a rigorous stance towards fulfilling its mission “to provide drag kings, male impersonator, gender-benders, illusionist, deconstructionists, and all those interested in the art of male mimicry a positive, proactive, and supportive venue for expression. *Kingdom’s* goal [was] to arouse, entertain, and

the image, Vancouver-based drag king Carlos Las Vegas<sup>7</sup> leans in a sitting position against the king beside him, dressed in leatherman gear or “fag drag” as Jack Halberstam once suggested (Halberstam, 1998, 253). Vegas wears black leather chaps, a stuffed thong, black shirt, black cap, boots, and a nicely-trimmed goatee. Behind him, Florida-based drag king Dante Difrancio wears his characteristic white head-kerchief and spiky dishwater blond hair in the second row. Many of the kings lean against each other, creating a cohesive group identity as if for a promotional portrait. While the clothes themselves are only a part of the assemblage of codes that make these bodies into male impersonators, I draw attention to this image to introduce the vast arrangement of styles and sartorial details engaged by drag kings in their productions of masculine identities and desires for drag king performance.

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to promote drag king culture” (*Kingdom* mission statement, p. 6, Fall/Winter 2002. *Kingdom*, Vol. III). In November 2009, *Kingdom* the Las Vegas co-publishers decided to raise the publication up again, this time for on-line publication. The inspiration for this revival was the protest of a song by a New Orleans drag king troupe at IDKE 11.

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Las Vegas established the Dynasty of Las Vegas, a drag “house” carrying on the tradition of being a homebase for members, much like the ‘houses’ documented in the film *Paris is Burning*. As the anthropologist David Schneider suggested, those in the Vegas Dynasty (such as Carlos and drag brother Ken), would form kinship ties based on notions not of blood-lines, but of “diffuse, enduring solidarity” (*American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, David M. Schneider 1968/1984. University of Chicago Press). I take note of the presence of this revised notion of family in drag king communities, as the practice more common in this second wave of kinging. Schneider suggests that these notions of “family” formed through symbolic ties expressed and found in / through language and the temporality of ‘diffuse, enduring solidarity’ are a useful framework for understanding kinship and family, outside of biogenetic blood lines. I extend Schneider’s focus on American cultural formations of these concepts (and am hardly the first) to include non-US, diasporic geo-political kinship ties that (as evidenced by Winnepeg, Canada-based Carlos’s *kin(g)ship* with Washington D.C.-based Ken through the Dynasty of Las Vegas) cross international borders. For more on queer kinship, see the discussion by Kath Weston “Forever is A Long Time: Romancing the Real in Gay Kinship Ideologies” in *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (1994).

## Choreographing Silk - Loie Fuller

According to dance historian Helen Thomas (1995), it seemed to be both monetary circumstances and chance that led dance pioneer Loie Fuller to the fabric that would eventually become her signature costume and a hallmark of her *Serpentine* dances at the turn of the century. Fuller was in London with her mother preparing to go to the United States to perform a leading role in a play called *Quack M.D.* in 1889. Funds had been provided for the costumes of the other two actors, Will Rising and Louse de Lange, but Fuller's costume for the scene had not been decided. According to the choreographer's remembrances in her autobiography, *Quinze Ans Dans Ma Vie*<sup>8</sup> (1908), Fuller needed something to represent a woman under hypnosis (Fuller, 1908, 22). Standing in the theatre, she looked around for ideas; a small case grabbed her attention. In it, Fuller found an abundance of silk fabric; she took it out immediately and started to play. She decided to use it as a costume. This decision proved to be right on. Fuller described,

J'en tirai une étoffe de soi légère commue une toile d'araignée. C'était une jupe très ample et très large du bas. Je laissai couler la robe dans mes doigts et, devant ce petit tas d'etoffee, tout menu, je demeurai songeuse un long moment. Le passé, un passé tout proches de déjà très lointain, s'évoquiat devant mes yeux (22).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An English translation of this title is *15 Years of My Life*.

<sup>9</sup> Translation: "I drew up a fabric of that was like a spider web. It was in the shape of a very broad and full skirt, hanging low. I let the fabric sink into my fingers and, before this small pile of etoffee, I rested, pensive for a long time. The past, close but distant, unfolded before my eyes."



Unbeknownst to Fuller her explorations while enacting her character effected a marvelous visual form on stage, to which her audiences responded fantastically. As her autobiography recalls, they cried out loud in delight: “a butterfly!” (“Un Papillion!”), “an orchid!” (“Une orchidée!”). To her surprise, the applause went on. Historian Helen Thomas notes, “And thus, [Loie Fuller’s] famous *Serpentine Dance* was born” (Thomas, 1995, 55). Fuller was elated. “J’allais créer une danse! Comment n’ya avais-je encoure jamai pensé?”<sup>10</sup> (Fuller, 1908, 28).

Like Loie Fuller’s unexpected butterfly costume, this dissertation asks the reader to suspend disbelief in order to see relationships between kings and dancers; butterflies and prisoners; movement and dress; and in the last chapter, sound and touch.

## **Contributions, Methodology**

In this dissertation, I look at drag king performances in the media, on live stage, and in television, and from photos and memory of the *International Drag King Extravaganza* (IDKE) held in Columbus, Ohio (2008). Yet, while I focus on drag king performances and the subject of costume, the dissertation’s inquiry is not only about performance, but also about masculinity as an incarnation of power. I contextualize drag king in the current climate of masculinity expressed through the U.S. prison regime. In specific, I look at high-security solitary units in U.S. prisons occupied by female political prisoners and women in protest. The overall weaving (like a tapestry) of the dissertation enacts a choreography that gives reality to the material economy

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<sup>10</sup> Translation: “I was creating a dance! How had I never thought of this before?!”

bearing down on drag kings and women who speak up against the state.

Following are some firm borders of my analytic. In this dissertation, clothing is not seen primarily as a holding-cell for capital's desires where clothes 'signify' culture and power, to lay out the nation's home address. Clothing is not presented as a literary metaphor: something that holds the room via language for something else "more important," "deeper," that "hides" or "lurks" behind or beyond logocentrism. However, the slivers (and shivers) of my physical body kept warm by clothing and costume tells me that the sartorial's function as a resistant discourse to phallo-centrism and hierarchical class relations does push against and through the stronghold hegemonic language (and the literary) has on alternative histories, economies, and so on. In this lens, clothing is a 'matter' of economy, and "the" matter.

I will next discuss the analytic practice relevant to the critical perspective towards costume I am recommending in this dissertation. Film scholar Akira Mizuta Lippit writes in the inaugural edition of *Octopus: A Visual Studies Journal* that "reality takes shape in a grasp" (Lippit, 2005). His analysis is placed at the cusp of the emergence of Visual Studies, a "new" interdisciplinary methodology for analyzing film and art that departs from the conventional methods and tools in art history as a discipline to deal with contemporary art practices. Indeed, Lippit's position is not the reflection of a solitary, lone voice; rather, he advocates for Visual Studies as a key player in the many debates at the time about how and where visibility is and is not connected to the body, to culture, and to knowledge-production. Lippit's claim that "reality takes shape in a grasp" then is meant to provoke and incite his readers into shifting their analytic lenses away from strictly visual devices (and thus away from the foundational

tools of art history and film studies), and towards more sensual, embodied analytic tools. In this essay, Lippit's analytic is a synaesthetic creature, one that physicalizes thought as it produces knowledge. Lippit calls this creature an "oetopus," building on the figure of the ocean octopus who tastes (a.k.a produces knowledge) while it touches (a.k.a has sensual encounters) as a knowledge-seeking creature swimming "within" a world of shifted boundaries, unearthly forces of gravity, and so on. For Lippit, this octopus also becomes a literary style: a way of saying things based on inscription as a subject *and* method of passing through history and leaving a ink mark, as the ocean octopus does. Lippit comes up with the name "oetopus" from two word roots: 'octopus' and 'oedipus.' He combines these two words into one term, queerying their individual spellings and boundaries to produce a figure that is reproductive, anti-oedipal, and marked by desire in its reference to the shape and many hands of two or more melded in sexual union.

For this dissertation's purpose, Lippit fathoms an analytic framework and physicalized analytic practice that resonates with the goals of an embodied study of dance and costume. In this way, Lippit's suggestions that "reality takes shape in a grasp" has a literal translation; his use of the word "grasp" is not metaphoric, but rather one that seriously invokes the perceptual and physical reaches of the body as a live, sensing organism. Lippit's argument in this way inherently subverts the mind-body disconnect in interpretative literary and other acts, where kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and other sensual tools are banned from the production of scholarship. The embodied, costumed intervention(s) I make in this dissertation rely on the gamut of perceptual tools in producing interpretation, inherent to the fields of dance and costume. Finally, invoking a creature reputed to be one of the most intelligent of all other sea creatures,

the octopus can be figured to be an ideal figure of an emerging disciplinary practice where mind and body are connected, and more than just the visual sense is utilized.

Finally, in this text, I will describe the importance of the sonic to drag king performance both as a new way of looking at kinging, and of wielding interpretations of costume in performance. I do so as a reparative and creative gesture, to add sound to the scholarly and popular conception of kinging as an aesthetic genre. Taking my departure from the scholarly work done in the 1990's and early 2000's on drag kings, I seek to extend the reach of and attention to drag king performances and costume away from the contexts that have historically "grasped" them, and call out those fields that have, for one of many reasons, not recognized either drag kinging or costume as ripe areas for critical attention. As reparation to these erasures, I suggest that octopusal grasping applied to costume yields a unique analytic perspective. While clothing as a material lies close to the skin, ears, noses, eyes, and fingertips of not only drag king performers, it touches the body literally, calling on a sensual perceptual activity to register its presence in the symbolic. This site of touch has resonances with a maternal mythology of an ideal romantic embrace that are important to a study of costume. Yet, while the octopus tastes while its arms touch that which it encounters, the touching in this dissertation combines with a different sense perception -- *hearing* -- to form its synaesthetic reading. With this translation, the touch of the mother turns to a sound and through sound, the body is registered self-referentially.

Making this synaesthetic connection between listening and touch calls on a methodological practice that queer/trans theorist Jack Halberstam (1998) describes as "a scavenger methodology." Halberstam writes: "a scavenger methodology that use[d]

different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (Halberstam, 1998, 13).

While Jack Halberstam’s method might conjure up the image of a furry animal scuttling around urban culture, searching for respite, portals, for knowledge – in the form of food, shelter, access to water, the air, sunlight, privacy, and the social, it is not the creature but the scavenging that is most relevant to my final claim about the methods and analytic lens deployed in this chapter. For Halberstam, “scavenging” meant departing from a formal discipline (English literature) to find a new analytic position in the dark theatres of film screenings. The furry analytic of this dissertation is not the rodent of the urban core, but instead the octopus of the sea, swimming around in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ocean of multiple temporalities, post-modern conceptions, and informed and created by frameworks that are never static, like in the ocean. In that regard, *oetopusal scavenging* has amounted to crossing disciplinary boundaries and stylistics to actualize a cross-nodal perceptual system as a political terrain. Oetopusal scavenging has meant not stopping at a brick wall, but finding the porous nature of brick as a material, and seeping through the pores like water or music. It has meant singing along to pop songs. It has meant de-centering the visual lens in practice and theory to foreground and utilize hearing as it is engaged across the body, in practice and theory. Finally, it has meant learning to acknowledge, critically, how the senses overlap in corporeal perception. This last effort describes the fundamental contribution the dissertation seeks to make: topping a Western hierarchical organization of the senses and therefore knowledge, to give way to the complicated ways that the dressed, dancing

body actually is animated, functions, and creates knowledge.

### Sensibility, Physical Practice, Gender Identity

While Jack Halberstam makes a claim for his own embodied practices in *Female Masculinity*, the scholar of literature and university education is not a dancer, in the traditional sense. However, Halberstam's relationship to stage work and physical practice at the time of the book's writing is evident in the pages of his ethnography. Halberstam describes feedback he receives from king performers during his fieldwork. Halberstam says the kings accuse him of being stiff, teasing him to "loosen up" and take to the stage as a drag king. Indeed in the companion art book Halberstam produced the following year with London-based photographer Del LaGrace Volcano (2003), Halberstam responds to these pokes: "By presenting my thoughts here, I am finally on stage" (Halberstam/Volcano, 2). In the last chapter of the book, Halberstam reflects on his youth in regards to physical practice and clothing. He writes,

I personally experienced adolescence as the shrinking of my world....When I was thirteen, I wanted a punching bag and boxing gloves for my birthday. I believe that these accoutrements of masculine competition signified for me a way to keep adult womanhood at bay. I think I also saw boxing as a way to fight back against the boys of my age, boys I used to beat up easily but who now easily beat me up as they experienced their first adolescent growing spurts. I was told that boxing was not appropriate for a girl my age and that I should pick something out more appropriate (267).

Halberstam's remembrances of his youth suggest a person who had preferences for specific sport activities for important reasons of female development. Yet, to the ticking of a clock, he experienced the formation of his role as "female" through the removal of

embodied privileges and access to physical training. Naturally, this crashing wave of hetero-patriarchy did not leave the clothes on his back unscathed. “Next came gender appropriate clothes and all manner of social prohibitions” (267). In these narrative asides of *Female Masculinity*, one witnesses a story of butch identity-in-formation that links up bio-political control of the body to discourses of gender and sartorial normativities based on gender-appropriate participation in sport. In this story, Halberstam links up the larger pressures of gender-normativity with the sartorial limits he observed being placed on him as part of his shrinking “female” world.

Unlike Halberstam, I have performed drag king numbers on stage. This alone has pushed my intellectual work into a different direction than Halberstam’s, while also being produced at during a different era of drag king performance. In addition, I consider my queer, trans butch sensibility and dress style to be a different expression of my masculinity now than at the time of Halberstam’s book publication, when I was deeply lodged in drag king and queer community, and when politics around sexuality and gender identity confronted nation-hood, as opposed to the current climate which celebrates the nation by vying for marriage as a right of all citizens. As kinging faded from everyday media parlance by 1999, so too was the tangibility of its identity to me due to a family tidal wave that brought me far away – geographically and affectively – from the hot spots of drag kinging and queer performance. There was the loss of both parents, the closing down of homes, caretaking my mother through cancer, adopting the care of my disabled brother. Likewise, in 2001, the World Trade Towers were destroyed as was the queer/drag and dance scenes in San Francisco and New York, scenes already decimated by the Dot Com revolution and urban gentrification. In these

ways, the dissertation affectively comes from the rubble of decimation, reaching out to rekindle old sites with new tools. The work is for kings like myself who may have fallen off the boat and been lost, as it were, at sea.

## **Dress Histories**

Finding critical dress histories that account for lesbian, queer, trans, or drag king lives has been a challenging aspect of the dissertation, even though clothing has been adorning human bodies as early as humans have walked. Some asundry essays in lesbian popular literatures exist that foreground the question of queer dress, and the ‘queerness’ of dress as a topic. For example, Journalist Liza Cowan writes in *“What the Well Dressed Dyke will Wear: History of lesbian clothes part 1: Amazons”* (1974, 7)<sup>11</sup> that relics of the Amazon clothing practices can be found on Greek vases. Cowan writes about the visibility of Amazons – the mythological ancestors of “all lesbians” – in a frank dialectic. Cowan writes, “Look at Greek vase paintings in a book or in a museum, you can always spot an Amazon by the way she looks. Greek patriarchal women are very femme, they wear loose, flowing chitons and are very nice to the men who share their space on the vases. The Amazons wear bold, striking pants, tunics and weapons, and are busy killing the men” (7). Cowan makes an assertion in her essay that even though she found some material about Amazon history in her research, for the most part her research turned up very little actual material still in existence related to the Amazons.

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<sup>11</sup> *Cowrie: Lesbian Feminist Liberation* 2(2) June/July 1974. “What the Well Dressed Dyke will Wear” was an ongoing column in *Cowrie* from 1973-74.



“Our history is denied to us,” Cowan writes. “There are no remnants of Amazon art or artifacts (That I have found, anyway). Probably everything was destroyed” (Cowan, 1974, 4). Cowan offers her own narrative about Amazon clothes, arguing that there is “no one Amazon clothing style.” Cowan suggests that Amazons wore tunics “made of leather, and sometimes wool” with a “single seam in the arms sewn on the undersides” and wore “tight fitting knit hose bold with geometric designs, checkerboards, stripes, circles, and zigzag” (2). As a journalist, Cowan concedes to the humor her medium allows. She makes cutting comments, leaving the mark of her lesbian voice in the text. She writes, “Some pictures show them wearing no trousers, though I tend to doubt that any self-respecting Amazon would ride into battle without her pants” (Cowan, 3).

I bring in Cowan’s history because it is such an important essay, but poorly circulated in academic scholarship. For the dress historian, the essay establishes a lesbian voice and lesbian narrative about dress. In so doing, the discourse of Cowan’s essay provides a historical reference point for drawing out a genealogy of drag king costume that is landed in a feminist and lesbian-centered perspective. What little there seems to be known about Amazon dress, Cowan provides. She writes, “There are no pictures of Amazons alone with each other, having fun, making love, eating, sleeping, building houses, training horse, playing with the children, or doing anything else but fighting. After all, men were not allowed to hang out with the Amazons, so the only way they would have been able to see them would be in combat” (4). This short history of the Amazons offered through Cowan’s writing is an example of just another debate about where uppity women of all kinds came from, and how dress informed their mobility as differently-ennobled insurgent objects.

If from Cowan one pulls forward a lesbian phonic and narrative about Amazon dress into a theoretical consideration of drag king costumes, then from *love to know*<sup>12</sup> I pull forward the shift in hem-length and dress style fought for by early suffragettes and film stars in the dress reform movement that began just before and after the turn-of-the-century in the U.S. In this history, a tale of lesbian or ‘queer’ dress can be found in a history of who gets to wear pants. *Love to know* links up the turn-of-the-century American suffragette Amelia Jenks Bloomer with advocacy to wear bloomers in everyday use. The article suggest that “dress reform” articulated women’s wishes at a public level to choose their own outfits not only for themselves, but for all women. *Love to know* writes, “it was most likely Fanny Wright who was the first woman to wear pants. Wright was a Scottish woman who became a U.S. citizen in 1825. She is known as a writer, feminist, abolitionist and social reformer. Wright was the co-founder of the *Free Inquirer* newspaper, which she used to share her views on society.” While this account certainly points to one vocal woman who was in the public eye for speaking up on issues related to women’s emancipation, clearly neither Fanny Wright nor Amelia Jones Blummer were “the first” to wear pants in history. Yet, their stories point to a genealogy that creates a sartorial history out of these recorded stepping-stones.

I move next in this discussion of lesbian and feminist histories of dress to the silver screens of Hollywood. Going there will lead me, I suggest, towards the spot where women on stage claimed the right to wear pants. In the United States, the film star Katherine Hepburn fought for and won the right to wear pants in Hollywood

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<sup>12</sup> See on-line at [http://womens-fashion.lovetoknow.com/First\\_Woman\\_to\\_Wear\\_Pants](http://womens-fashion.lovetoknow.com/First_Woman_to_Wear_Pants)

famously in the 1940's. Yet, before her European cabaret star Marlene Dietrich made slacks on women popular by Dietrich's appearances on stage, recorded in the film "Morocco" (1930). *Funtrivia* recalls the performance: "Dietrich's character, a nightclub singer in glamorous tails-and-top-hat drag finishes up a number by kissing a female audience member on the lips."<sup>13</sup> While the affront to audience sensibility is the sexual kiss between two women, *Funtrivia* suggests Marlene Dietrich "shocked and titillated audiences with the scandal of wearing pants with "continental" flair.<sup>14</sup> With this narrative of Dietrich's tuxedo-wearing, *Funtrivia* articulates the hegemonic undermining of clothing as an alternate economy, due to a psychological state of shock from experiencing a woman's swagger in deploying of men's wear on stage. This image returns me to the spotlight I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, where women claimed the right to wear pants in staged performance.

One final location where many histories of women's protests and gains in clothing have been made are in the scholarship of feminist histories of women. Women's studies student Rebecca Widom (1994) discusses the subject of pants and lesbian social histories in her master's thesis. Widom provides a historical context for the development of pants as a gendered option for lesbians in the U.S. and Europe. She writes: "The end of World War II found more young lesbians and gay men in larger urban areas, and employment in factories during World War II made pants somewhat more acceptable clothing for women" (Widom, 1994, 13). Widom's writing creates an economic context for the emergence of butch-femme identities in the 1940's, 50's, and

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<sup>13</sup> Citation at <http://www.funtrivia.com/askft/Question3845.html>

<sup>14</sup> Citation at <http://www.funtrivia.com/askft/Question3845.html>

60's in the United States and Europe. Widom's argument makes visible the importance of clothing as a cue to sexual and gendered identity in the communities she studies. Widom writes, "Lesbians were expected to be able to differentiate butch from fem on sight, and to provide enough clues in their clothing for others to do the same" (15). These cues came in specific cultural forms, equipped with a vocabulary (spoken and written), sartorial cues about where and when she liked to get it on. "Whether a shirt was starched or soft, whether pants zipped on their side or the front, and whether a woman wore argyle socks and/or men's underwear were important indicators for some lesbians, although they may not have been as meaningful to straight people" (16). Widom's focus on butch-femme couples in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, makes a link between clothing and the survival of lesbian communities, through their adoption of rigid gender codes. These codes were a form of literacy training lesbians and gays of these times went through in order to be able to detect each other to see each other. Widom describes the gendered terrain she encountered:

Although butch and fem were common terms in gay bars through the forties, fifties, and sixties, the meanings associated with these terms changed over time. Most generally, butch and fem meant masculine and feminine appearance and active and responsive roles in sexuality, respectively (14).

The thesis also moves into the 1970s when feminism and lesbian-feminism stirred the praxis up with theories about class mobility, race, and sexual identity specifically. "In addition to industry cooptation, downward mobility was an important aspect of anti-fashion fashion" (16). Widom writes about the post-Stonewall influx of college students to the movement. What matters in my deployment of this short history of pants-

wearing and lesbian histories is to evidence the embodied discourse of women's transgressions of femininity through the sartorial, through clothes. While most histories of pants look at the representational histories of women who dispelled of social mores about mandatory ways of dressing and grabbed a pair of slacks, few frame this history through a bio-political or embodied lens. Yet how might getting dressed implicate the corporeal at a fundamental level? Might it be an embodied physical practice?

Although there is some attention to the arts in these histories of pants-wearing as it opens up the door for lesbian and queer sexual desire, one need not be shocked by the lack of attention to dance in the production of these histories. The bodies in Widom's history are Levis 501-wearers, others S/M practitioners, others still activists, working class bar patrons. But the history there leaves out dancers – club kids, femme performers, masculine performers, kings. “I think that the debates must continue” Widom concludes (47).

### Drag Kinging and Dress

There is a good deal of controversy about who pioneered “drag kinging” in so many words and what date can be marked as an originary moment of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century wave. Jack Halberstam (1998) gestures to this rumble in his discussion of performance artist Diane Torr, a New York City performance artist (now based in Scotland) who became well-known for the “King for a Day” workshops she began offering to the public in 1989. Halberstam noted, “Diane Torr goes so far as to claim

that she invented the term 'drag king' and she tells interviewer Amy Linn, 'It came to me in about 1989 ... It was a day I had done a photo shoot in male clothes, and I had an opening to go to at the Whitney. I decided to go dressed as a man' " (Halberstam, 1998, 252). Numerous sources cite the infamous beer-bottle jack-off performed by Shelly Mars (in character as drag king Martin) in *Virgin Machine* (1988) as an originary moment where Mars' talents at masculine performance prior to the film shoot are captured and broadcast widely through cinema. Yet, in pounding the pavement with drag kings, an even longer genealogy of staged performances of alternative masculinities are claimed by kings themselves. Susan Scarf, a Minneapolis-based drag king shot in the 2003 documentary *Dykes Do Drag*, describes that she "has been doing drag for ten years, long before everyone else started doing it." Though this comment ostensibly only places Scarf's early performances at 1993, the rub of Scarf's assertion is one of due credit and/or ownership of kinging as a form. Scarf and other's kings' comments in the field suggest that practices and desires to cross-dress and confront hegemonic masculinity through performances of alternate masculinities existed long before the boom of 'female'-to-masculine king cabaret in lesbian and queer cultures in the U.S. in the 1990's.

Halberstam's 1998 text set a standard for the inclusion of work on non-normative masculinities in the broader field of Masculinity Studies that blossomed in the 1990's academy. His book combines interviews with kings at clubs with an attention to the cultural impact and work of drag kings as artists and genre. Halberstam proposed "kinging" as a distinct sexual and gendered location with its own

unique genealogy. While the term does not settle the debate about who, specifically, originated modern drag kinging, Halberstam's text does identify an originary moment in marking a genealogy specific to drag kings. Halberstam wrote:

I want to propose the term 'kinging' for drag humor associated with masculinity, not because this is a word used by drag kings themselves but because I think that a new term is the only way to avoid always collapsing lesbian history and social practice associated with drag into gay male histories and practices. Accordingly, femme may well be a location for camp, but butch is not. For drag butches and drag kings who perform masculinity from a butch or masculine subject position, camp is not necessarily the dominant aesthetic (238).

For Halberstam, using the term "kinging" serves the function of referencing a historical genealogy that connects female masculinities and other alternatively-gender masculinities into an economy of their own. I take up this use of *kinging* to likewise keep the focus on drag kings and our specific histories through the bodies of men, separate but overlapping with drag queen, queer femme, feminist lesbian, and other performance discourses.

U.S.-based punk rock king musician Anderson Toone created a *Drag King Timeline*<sup>15</sup> early in the boom of kinging, a timeline that now exists as an interactive project open to additions, editions, and contributions. Toone's *Drag King Timeline* covers the years 1980-2002 and highlights of kinging in Europe and the U.S. Toone places two king performances at the beginning of his timeline, both which occurred at New York City's 1<sup>st</sup> *W.O.W. Café Theatre Festival* held October, 1980. Toone marks down the performances: musicians Jordy Mark and Annie Toone "sing songs as men

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<sup>15</sup> [www.andersontoone.com/timeline/dktimeline.html](http://www.andersontoone.com/timeline/dktimeline.html)

and women, crossing gender on-stage” and queer performance artist Peggy Shaw “does a scene as James Dean.” In the *Timeline*, Toone provides archived images of early kinging in an effort to produce a multi-medium format where the linguistic complications of describing cross-dressed, female-to-male, and/or queer/trans drag kinging is contextualized and expanded by photographs, theatre adverts of shows, alternative magazine press images, and more. Toone suggests of his historicizing efforts:

This is not a comprehensive timeline, but is accurate as far as it goes. It's a record of *this* King's road and is my attempt to document key events that were formative in the emergence of the modern art of Drag King in the cities I've lived, toured or have friends in from 1980-2002. As this has been primarily San Francisco, NYC and London, UK - that's who's scenes are chiefly represented.

What is important to me about Anderson Toone's effort is not only the minute historical details the king provides in his *Timeline*, but also that the contributions of the musical community to drag king history, including Toone and his punk rock band members.<sup>16</sup> These contributions are often left out of the common histories of drag kinging, ones that usually focus on the work of performance artists or gender-variant public figures such as Shelly Mars' piece in *Virgin Machine*, Elvis Herselvis performances in San Francisco in 1993 or the formation of San Francisco's Club Confidential by visual artists and queer organizers Stafford and Jordy Jones in 1994, or Mo B. Dick and Dred King performances at Club Casanova in New York City around 1995. Highly notable is also the inclusion of theatre / performance art star and butch

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Toone note in the *Timeline* that his band The Bloods (“an all-butch cross-dressed rock band” composed of guitarist Kathy Rey and Annie Toone) open for mega punk rock star band The Clash in 1981, and include Iggy Pop, David Byrne, and Brian Eno in their fan base.



hero Peggy Shaw, who from her 1980 performance at W.O.W. (a theatre she also co-founded with other lesbian feminists in New York City) to her work with femme partner Lois Weaver under the rubric of *The Split Britches Theatre Company* set a high standard for butch/drag king performance and identity.<sup>17</sup>

In the academic circuit, gender studies and English literature professor Jack Halberstam focused on masculine women in literature, film, photography, and performance (1998). Halberstam's interest is not only in making a legible historical narrative out of the stories about the many wo/men who adorned themselves in 'male clothing' or lived as men, but also in the profound exclusion of female masculinity in an understanding of society, power, and culture. He writes:

The continued refusal in Western society to admit ambiguously gendered bodies into functional social relations (evidenced, for example, by our continued use of either/or bathrooms, either women or men) is, I will claim, sustained by a conservative and protectionist attitude by men in general toward masculinity. Such an attitude has been bolstered by a more general disbelief in female masculinity. ... Somehow, despite the multiple images of strong women..., cross-identifying women..., masculine-coded public figures..., butch superstars..., muscular and athletic women..., female-born transgendered people, there is still no general acceptance or even recognition of masculine women and boyish girls (Halberstam 1998, 15).

Halberstam's 1998 efforts provided a framework for seeing clothing and costumes of female masculine by filling the book not only with photographs, but also with descriptions of these figures, via costuming. Yet, it takes a while to find these costumes.

While Halberstam addresses a number of theatre and film stars, as well as sexual

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<sup>17</sup> Shaw's roles as the Stanley Kowalski character in the Split Britches production *Belle Reprieve* (1993) and as herself in *You're Just Like My Father* (1994) were two extremely popular productions for her butch and queer audiences where Shaw's drag king and female masculine identities formed the basis for each show's narrative.

identities<sup>18</sup> whose work greatly influenced the production of drag king cabaret as a performance form, it is the last chapter that holds my keenest interest for this dissertation for its direct focus on drag kings.

In the final chapter of the book, “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” (231-266), Halberstam documents a slice of the late 1980’s-1990’s gender revolution marked by the visible emergence of female masculinities across the globe. Beginning with “deposing one of the most persistent of male heroes: Bond, James Bond” (3), Halberstam describes this gritty task early in her introduction. He writes:

This book seeks Elvis only in the female Elvis impersonator Elvis Herselvis; it searches for the political contours of masculine privilege not in men but in the lives of aristocratic European cross-dressing women in the 1920’s it describes the details of masculine difference by comparing not men and women but butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals . . . it finds, ultimately, that the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity (3).

Halberstam situates modern masculinity besides alternative masculinities in a redress to the normativizing power of hegemony. Symbiotically-located in relation to each other, the author argues that masculinities of all kinds are in clearest focus. Jack Halberstam paved a way for those in dance and performance studies to write about drag kings in what became a landmark book. Halberstam rightly identifies the trans-, lesbian/gay/bisexual, queer- and gender-queering-phobic climate in which female masculinity’s absence appears. Halberstam writes, “...mature masculinity once again remains an authentic property of adult male bodies while all other gender roles are

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<sup>18</sup> Halberstam mention butch performer Peggy Shaw’s publicity poster for her solo show, “Just Like Your Father” as well as Queen Latifah’s role as Cleo in the film “Set it Off.” Halberstam also addresses tribadism, female husbands, and other pre-twentieth century gender identities as important to her focus on the concept and performative of female masculinity.

available for interpretation” (233).

Halberstam’s awareness of garb remains a consistent element of his querying of normative gender and drag king performances. Halberstam’s analysis rightly points out that kings, queers and those scripted into minor masculinities are well aware of the psychic and corporeal labors of these shifts in the context of their effacements from the historical register. This awareness suggests that the simple slipping off of ring from finger – or removal of facial hair and spirit gum; crotch bulge and sock -- is far from emotionally, physically, or intellectually easy, far from ‘simply’ a costume change for drag kings. Rather, this awareness gives way to a recognition that clothing is far from ‘simple’ as a medium and material discourse.

### **Drag Kings and Dance: Boxing Hegemony**

Drag kings are dancing men. Some are (indeed) gay, some queer, and some heterosexual. This fact alone makes kings provocative subjects of study for dance scholarship. Through such formal structures as dance, theatre, visual art, music, and performance art, contemporary drag kings have been able to establish a recognizable physical practice of performance, based in a multi-disciplinary integration of aesthetic genres. The performative of drag, as Jack Halberstam (1998) and other have suggested, was most potent in the 1990’s as a way to negotiate queer identities, feminism, public policy, and civil rights through deconstructing male identity into an assemblage of affective, sartorial, gestural, and narrative circuits, exposing the apparatus that privileges bio-males, and trumping it. In this way, dance studies is an important

component in analyzing and interpreting kinging as a physical practice and movement genre. It is with this goal in mind, to wed dance's focus on corporeality and the body to kinging's intimate knowledge about and deconstructing of the apparatus of identity construction, that I perform my cowboi dance in this dissertation.

Dance theorist Susan Foster's essay "Closets Full of Dances: Modern Dance's Performance of Masculinity and Sexuality" (Foster, 2001, 147-208) addresses the uncanny paradox in modern dance where fantasies of humanism become homophobia, in practical terms. In the essay, Foster establishes that modern dance has "closet[ed] homosexuality throughout this century" (149). Foster bases this claim in the industry's denial of queer/homo sexual erotics, as agents of choreographic production in modern dance. Foster's observations point to the homophobic process of building national narratives through the repression of homo/queer affect (by which I mean: homo/queer feelings in both meanings of the word; perceptual hierarchies; psychic fantasies, thoughts, and social/erotic allegiances), even while gay/queer identities or narratives might be apparent in a dance. This de-sexualization of dance at a fundamental level achieves the erasure of homosexuality/queer corporeality, according to Foster's reasoning. Foster writes:

Modern dance elaborated an anti-sexual environment in which choreographers and dancers formulated alternative identities, both aesthetic and physical. Thus modern dance's closet, even as it allowed viewers to project a sexualized identity onto the dancers, assured them that the choreographic basis for such fantasy did not exist because dance and dancers resolutely pursued a non-sexual investigation of human movement (150).

Foster's understanding of modern dance's "homosexual closet" is deft in its pinpointing

of the fantasy that there could be such a thing as “non-sexual” movement exploration in dance, or anywhere.<sup>19</sup> Foster suggests that this belief is far from unique to a single choreographer or dance performance. Rather, Foster suggests that this desexualization of the body is ubiquitous to the genre of modern dance. Foster writes,

For one hundred years, modern dancers and choreographers have resisted allegations that their art alluded, however discretely or remotely, to sex. Early American luminaries in the new genre, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, went to enormous lengths to elaborate in and for dance a nonsexualized choreography. Subsequent generations of choreographers and dancers likewise cultivated the body as a musculoskeletal system that responded to emotional but never sexual impulses” (149).

These ideals pinpointed by Susan Foster resonate with the claims made by Martha Graham excerpted at the beginning of this chapter, that “the body never lies” and that celebrating “the miracle” of the human body is dance’s primary goal. Foster does the work of wrangling homophobia’s particularities in dance to the ground by linking up these “chaste” (152) wishes with a latent avoidance of sexuality based, for some, in racism. Foster writes, “Duncan asserted her own cultivation of the body ... to distinguish her new danced vision, effectively organizing racist and nationalist sentiments to reinforce one another” (153)

I bring in the writing of Foster to make visible the stakes of drag kinging as a performative within the context(s) of modern and post-modern dance. Set within these histories of erotic repression and disavowal, kinging represents as many “out” LGBTIQ or queer performance genres an affront to utopian dreams of non-sexual, fleshy-body

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<sup>19</sup> This idea of “non-sexual” movement exploration is taken up, at least in part, by the generators of Contact Improvisation (CI) as a “democratic” dance genre in the 1970’s. For more, see Cynthia Novack (1990), *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. University of Wisconsin Press.

movement explorations.

But there is a second level of exclusion operating against kings as movement practitioners. In *Dancing Desires* (2001), lesbian theorist Ann Cvetkovich describes the exclusion of dance and other movement forms in queer academic theory. Cvetkovich writes of this second exclusion as an advocate and historian:

Queer politics has found particular ways of combining style and militancy that point to the power of dance and movement in the political arena. Along with other ephemera such as banners, speeches, slogans, chants, and meeting minutes, the archives of activism should include the styles of movement through which political positions and goals are made manifest (320).

Cvetkovich starts off simply in this statement, suggesting that along with the artifacts that are understood art/historically as props of activism and political history, so too should movement practices. Indeed, Cvetkovich's articulates a thoughtful and theoretical remembrance of her life as a lesbian go-go dancer at pride events and marches in *Dancing Desires*. In her chapter and equipt with what Lauren Berlant describes as a "diva citizenship" (see Berlant, in Albright, 2001, 318), Cvetkovich situates her dancing and gay/lesbian dancing at pride marches as the site of power, representation, and surveillance. Recognizing the importance of dance in Cvetkovich's thinking, is crucial to tell a relevant history of gay/lesbian social activism and movement practices. Cvetkovich writes, "The dancer is a microcosm of the forms of embodiment central to all large demonstrations...." (318). Cvetkovich acts as historian and dance theorist in noting the rampant use of the body in gay rights events, yet its disappearance in writing. She proclaims, "The specificity of dance and the moving, not just speaking body in the production of public power demands attention" (320-21).

Indeed, Cvetkovich's own body is invoked in the essay, "My experiences as a dancer have given me unprecedented access to key moments and spaces in lesbian culture that scholarly research would have trouble investigating" (321). And, wonderfully, it is Cvetkovich's go-go boots in specific that binds her argument together. She writes, "Even when they're not classic white vinyl, a lesbian go-go dancer's boots are one of her most important fashion statements" Cvetkovich writes (315). This idea about a lesbian go-go dancer's boots provides able footing for my own call for a renewed form of critically analyzing costume in performance, and for considering the significance of costume to the production of choreography.

The third layer of interpretation necessary to get to the drag king dancing body is an analysis of how masculinity and dance have historically been set up as diametrically opposed projects. As Ramsay Burt explores in *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (1995), there seems to be some "trouble" (Burt, 1995, 10) associated with men who dance, especially beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century European canon. Burt parses out the challenge dance as a discourse poses to the production of masculinity, with dance's association with emotion (19), permeability (18) and exposure of the "inner life" of feelings, etc. (21). Beyond these feminine threats to masculinity (in a hegemonic world which conceives of the two in binary terms), Burt situates the immense homophobia linked to the rejection of the male dancer, especially under the ruses of class relations and capital. Burt writes,

The male ballet dancer came too close for comfort to the blurred and problematic line that separates, or as Sedgwick implies, fails to separate, necessary and approved homosocial male bonding from forbidden homosexual sexuality (28).

Burt's analysis is astute in its focus on the structures of homophobia that exist in dance, rather than on individual expressions of homophobia. This, he suggests, sets up the context for homophobic control of a (gay) man's dancing, regardless of his actual sexual or gendered identity. Burt writes, "When...gay men did become involved in dance...the homophobic structures were already there to police any infringement of heterosexual norms" (28).

The subject of men dancing and how drag kings fit into this formula deserve a chapter of their own. What I would like to do for now is suggest that my intervention as a dance/performance scholar studying costume and kingly necessarily draws on and is situated in the various sites of exclusion that forbid men from dancing, queers dancers from being recognized for their political work through movement, and LGBTIQs from rightly taking up a fully-articulated, affective place in the canons and annals of dance scholarship and classrooms.

For certain, dance scholarship is not without nuanced understandings of how sexuality, affect, and gender identity(ies) have been handled by LGBTIQ choreographers, especially in the post-modern era. Dance scholar David Gere introduces affect into the formula of making visible the erased dancers and stories in dance history in his essay, "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy" (2001). Looking at the post-modern choreography of gay male dancer Joe Goode, Gere argues for the potency of effeminacy made into felt material in Goode's 1987 "29 Effeminate Gestures." Gere describes the piece, "A gangly man in his late thirties stands at the head of the room, preparing to deliver a lecture. After a pause he adjusts his lanky frame, swallows noticeably, and commences to speak in a soft,



deceptively caressive voice” (349). As Goode delivers a speech on effeminacy, “a subject about which I am, uh, something of an expert,” Gere describes the transitions in the dancer’s body to emphasis the words. “Any boy in American could tell you, if he dared talk about it at all,” Goode continues, “what he has learned concerning the ways in which a man or man-child ought to move his arms and hands—and, more important, how he oughtn’t” (349). Soon after, Gere describes the first appearance of an effeminate gesture, the broken wrist, performed by Goode. Gere writes, “The head tips back slightly, lips smiling coyly; the arm previously thrust in the air is now broken at the wrist, fingers fluttering in a perky 1940’s wave” (357). Gere’s verse performs Goode’s dance, as a conscious writing practice. He concedes that in pursuing his own agenda to theorize “the efficacy of effeminacy,” he does so by way of extending Goode’s commentary into verbal discourse, thereby giving it life in a new medium (352). Gere’s commitment to linger on the excessive gestures of stereotypical gay male embodiment marked by Goode’s performance is not without its basis in a combined look at dance and sexuality together, to produce a more accurate history of dance studies inclusive of gay themes, dancers, feelings, and fantasies.

The histories of exclusion and pleasure articulated in the performances explored by Gere, Foster, and Cvetkovich put dancing at the helm of their descriptions of GLBTQ cultures and circulations of desire. Halberstam, Cowan, and Widom’s frames of analysis, recognize the circulation of clothing as a signifier of desire and same-sex communities. Putting the two “exclusions” together and making them visible, for my purposes, articulates a subject of a dressed, dancing body no longer excluded from queer theoretical prose or dance history.

## The Importance of Sound in Drag King Performance

Each king has his own heroic tale about what makes us who we are. While my current favorite is Adam Lambert's rendition of "What do you Want From me" for the kind of shifts in gender-identity and sexuality Lambert actualizes in the performance, it is not the personal but rather the historical that I draw out in this final section of the chapter. 90-year-old lesbian Stormé DeLaverie recently spoke at the Homo-Harlem Film Retrospective<sup>20</sup> about the night she fought back against police brutality at the Stonewall Inn<sup>21</sup> June 28, 1969. A New York butch dyke, MC, and the only male impersonator of the infamous Jewel Box Revue,<sup>22</sup> DeLaverie had had enough of routine police harassment that night on Christopher Street.<sup>23</sup> DeLaverie returned a police wap

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/07/20/homo-harlem-film-retrospective/>.

<sup>21</sup> Most of the other patrons of the Stonewall Inn were gay men or run-away gay youth, plus a few lesbians and/or butch dykes. Sources suggest that as same-sex dancing and cross-gendered dress were both illegal during this era, the particular draw of the Stonewall Inn were its two dance floors, and one room reserved for female transvestites and drag queens, among other things.

<sup>22</sup> The Jewel Box Revue was a successful, traveling 'drag' troupe of the day.

<sup>23</sup> Police raids were a customary practice of gay bars in the 1940s, 50's, and 60s in the U.S. Stonewall was one of many incidents of resistance, though it has thus far received the most visibility. The topic of who the nameless butch dyke was that threw the first has, until recently, been shrouded in mystery, debate, and a fair amount of trans/butch phobia and misogyny. In a 2008 ground-breaking interview in *Curve*, a popular lesbian magazine, DeLaverie came forward to interviewer Patrick Hinds as that butch, throwing a punch in effort to free a gay youth who was being pummeled on the ground by police. See "Uncovering the Stonewall Lesbian: Stormé DeLaverie was there that infamous night. Now she's coming clean about it" (by Patrick Hinds, January 1, 2008, *Curve Magazine*). Hinds addresses the early citation of this mystery in historian Martin Duberman's book on Stonewall (*Stonewall*, 1993, Penguin Books) and David Carter's later follow-up (*Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, 2004, St. Martin's Press). These historians account for a 'woman dressed in man's clothes' who got 'lippy' with a

on the head with a punch back. This punch opened the flood-gates for what became a world-wide known riot – the Stonewall Riots –, quickly birthing the modern gay, lesbian civil rights movement in the U.S. As the story goes, 500-600 sissies, swishes, flame queens, butch dykes, femmes, homosexuals, and some tourists followed DeLaverie in suit with kick-line dancing, singing, resisting arrest, throwing coins (while shouting “pay them off”), overturning cars et al., to form a massive, unified force of resistance to homo- and trans-phobic brutality in the production of the U.S. state.

DeLaverie wore her customary green fishing cap and a loose long-sleeve open sweater to that night. Her garb and answers to a few interview questions are captured in a digital documentation of the event, released by the Maysles Institute ([mayslesinstitute.org](http://mayslesinstitute.org)) and entitled “Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box” (June, 2009. 3:44 min., digital video). The video opens with the sound of audience chattering, moving from the title page to a black screen with the time (7:08 pm), date (22 June 2009), and address of the event (343 Lenox Avenue) flashing in white letters onto the black screen. After introductions, the point-of-view zooms to medium close-up of the invited guest, Stormé DeLaverie, who is sitting in the audience. The video cuts to a sequence of shots where Stormé is escorted from audience to stage. The beginning of the interview is then signaled by a full-body two-shot of an interviewer and Stormé sitting on chairs facing each other. The woman asks Stormé “What happened that night that made gay . . . you know . . . lesbian and gay history change?”

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cop either because her handcuffs were too tight (Duberman, p. 196) or she was being asked to ‘move along, faggot’ (Carter, 151-2) with the aid of a billy club.

As an audience to this scene interested in the dressed, dancing body, I make a connective leap between the interviewer's corporeality and DeLaverie's. What I notice about the interviewer here is her use of voice and breath in engaging Stormé. The interviewer's hands gesture, while Stormé's remain still. The interviewer leans forward inviting a spectatorial identification, while Stormé remains quiet in the identificatory phrase. My eyes shift internally to perceive a long-shot of this moment, taking in the full body of Stormé DeLaverie. She wears two layers of shirts (a sweater, and a shirt underneath), tan in color. Looking at the video, I follow the fold down her torso to her hands and fingers, wrist, knees, legs, feet. In comparison to the round, youthful figure of the interviewer, Stormé's embodiment strikes me. She is thin, reserved, listening. "So this is what a historic butch dyke, male impersonator looks like. Finally I have found her" I reflect to myself. Stormé answers the question:

Well he hit me on the back of my head ... You know, I don't care if he hit me when I am looking. He hit me upside the head and I wasn't looking.

This tone by which DeLaverie detaches masculinity from a stable position in her storytelling creates an image for me of tossing a hat onto its hook after a day at the office. The fact that she (off-stage) smacked a police man back because he was a chicken-shit and hit a bull-dyke when she was not looking reveals DeLaverie's mastery over the masculinity she has performed on-stage as the legendary Jewel Box Revue male impersonator. Yet, her body language hardly changes; she does not reenact the physical moment, but instead returns to the affective site of outrage. DeLaverie's deliverance of masculinity distanced from bio-essentialized male bodies performs a "detachment," all through voice and gesture.

I retell the story of Stormé DeLarverie to make a proposition about the sounds that resonate in kinging as a performative. Culling up the “smack” of DeLarverie’s fist as she hit back in a moment of police brutality, I intend to raise a sound of great historical significance onto the stage, one that is *particular* to drag kings. As a site of encounter, a moment of resistance, and an expression of female masculine, butch dyke, male impersonating agency, it might be productive to think through the layers of the choreographic and sonic in DeLarverie’s survival and response to state violence, as emblematic of the social and political location drag king/s have and do occupy, historically.

As singing, non-singing/lip-synching, dancing male impersonators, entertainers, and performers, there are a number of ways to stitch in my theoretical argument about the importance of sound in the interpretation of drag king performance and histories. I choose a moment in the Homo Harlem video, where Stormé’s identity from “the butch dyke who bashed back” shifts to a back foot, to bring forward Stormé DeLarverie, one of the first drag kings recorded in U.S. history. In the video, DeLarverie sings a song in response to one of the interviewer’s questions.<sup>24</sup> Listening to her there on screen effected shock in at least one audience member (myself), transporting one across time and history as a member of Stormé’s captive audience listening to her crooning voice. This second sound in the story of Stormé DeLarverie, marked a very particular kind of survival for butch dykes, male impersonators, and gender-bending performers of all

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<sup>24</sup> My thanks to British filmmaker Campbell Ex for bringing this video to my attention October 2009.

kinds, I would propose: a kingly kind of survival, archived in carrying a song across gigs, geographies, generations, and mediums.

## **Dissertation Chapters Breakdown**

While putting ‘dress’ before ‘choreography’ might raise an eyebrow in traditional dance studio settings where training is purported to be based on the disciplined learning and materialization of genre-specific gestural vocabularies and orientations of choreography, the importance of studio wear is well-known by dancers far and wide. Whether through formal ‘dress policies’ in jazz, ballet, and tap or through informal recommendations and pressure through the social cultures of studios, dancers-in-training are asked to wear certain clothes to the studio. An example from the website of the *Chesterfield Dance studio* (“the place to dance”) <sup>25</sup> serves as an example. Under a description of a ballet class, the studio identifies the Dress Code for 2009-2010 Ballet class. It reads: “pink tights, black leotard, pink ballet shoes, alignment belt ... and hair back tightly.” Remembering my experiences in wildland fire uniforms, this request strikes a curiosity in me. What negotiations of agency and notions of the material are being exchanged in student responses to adorning studio dress codes? What are these clothing policies enabling and disabling of and through the performing body?

In this introductory chapter, “Sexuality, Dance, Costume,” I have asked what it means to approach clothing as an analytic. I offer up a the notion of an octopusal “grasp” as a productive analytic, tied to the figure of “the octopus” in a 2005 essay by

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.chesterfielddancecenter.com/page7.shtml>

film scholar Akira Lippit. As I suggest, this “grasping” restructures conventional notions of time, agency, and the body in its reach. I propose that the “scavenger methodology” developed by Jack Halberstam in his 1998 project *Female Masculinities* provides a useful modeling for the octopusal “scavenger” I enact in the dissertation. I offer up histories of feminist, lesbian, and drag king dress to mark a genealogy and critical approach to dress in performance, one inclusive of historians both inside and outside the LGBTIQ community of scholars, performers, librarians, and texts. Finally, I address the elision of LGBTIQ sexuality as affect and kinging as a performance genre in dance studies, while simultaneously noting how queer theoretical production has historically devalued dance as an agent of history and politics. I bring these three interests together in a story of Stormé DeLarverie, proposing that DeLarverie’s “sounds” as a singer and person whose “smack” against policed brutality evidence the significant and specific place of the sonic in interpreting drag king performance.

Chapter 2, “Ornamentation and Imagination: Philosophical Baggage in the Wake of Drag King Performance,” is the quieter chapter in this dissertation. In it, I invoke dreams, dreams of dreams, and performances of or about costuming. In these efforts, I take on “ornamentation” as a subject of philosophy and as a performative. The goal of the chapter is to sort through some of the philosophical baggage present in wake of drag king performance – namely the question of what costume and clothing is as a medium, and how this relates to the fleshy body. I specifically focus on the subject of “imagination,” following in the footsteps of American Studies scholar Robin Kelley, who proposes that dreaming and envisioning a just world has been and remains a crucial element of liberatory struggle in his book *Freedom Dreams* (2003).

In Chapter 3, “Prison Wear, Solitary Confinement, and An Upturned Collar,” I suggest prison uniform policies and practices expose the sartorial investment of the state in creating and controlling bodies – and punishing all non-normative bodies – as a project of U.S. nation-building. I take the time to belabor this point in order to provide the larger context of power, violence, and surveillance of the U.S. nation-building project within which all dancing, dressing bodies are subjected. By focusing on and in the prison, I am updating the political climate in which contemporary kinging emerges. In the chapter, I draw out a history of prison wear based on the writing of art historian Michel Pastoureau (2003). This analysis of prison wear is further contextualized in relation to the discussions of prison uniform policy evidenced in Nina Rosenblum’s film “Through the Wire” (1990) and in relation to Colin Dyan’s discussion of punishment as a juridical term. I conclude the chapter with an embodied narrative of finding a very soft pair of jeans at a thrift store, and unfolding the archive of genocide archived on and transported by the jeans.

Having thus contextualized and drawn up an image of the drag king as a technological body that utilizes dress, dance, and desire to manifest his subjectivity even while risking his safety as a subject of the state, in Chapter 4, “Sound and Drag King Performance” I finish the dissertation by forwarding my own utopian reading of the drag king lip-synched performance as a kind of queer speech act, reliant on new modes of listening and recognizing sound. In so doing, I participate in a discussion of feminist agency and queer ways of knowing, by “listening in” on the sounds drag king costumes make when touching the fleshy body in performance. This “listening” is an imagined activity, set to demonstrate the physicality of a thinker who is not turned inward in



contemplation and thought, cut off from others; but, rather, it forwards a model of thinking that accentuates an engagement with the body foregrounding sound over vision. By making this shift in sensual perception, I am achieving a two-fold task. First, I disable Western knowledge production by devaluing the role of visual apprehension as the primary site of knowledge in drag king performances. Secondly, in this state where hegemonic processes of power are destabilized, I draw attention to the importance of sound and the sonic in the interpretation of drag kinging as a genre. This new analytic I call “listening to drag kings,” deploying a psychoanalytic fieldwork practice established by anthropologist Stephania Pandolfo. I rework Pandolfo’s “listening” discovery in her fieldwork on psychiatric subjects of Moroccan traditional and Western medicine.

### Situating Kinging Today

The late 1980’s/1990’s were a time when queers established drag kinging<sup>26</sup> as an important genre of performance, entertainment, and community building within and outside of LGBTIQ social and political community. In the 1990’s/early 2000’s popular media began to capitalize on the excitement, writing and airing stories on the shiny, new topic. Drag kings such as Mo B. Dick, Stafford, Jordy Jones and others began to receive invitation to appear on American TV talk shows. For example, the popular HBO situation comedy *Sex and the City* picked-up on the scene, creating a full episode

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<sup>26</sup> Provisionally, here, I am making the distinction between what was called “drag kinging” in the late 1980’s/90’s, and the male impersonations of 1920’s - 40’s entertainment stars such as Marlene Dietrich and Storme Delarverie. See Judith “Jack” Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* for an historical account of passing women, male impersonators, tom boys, butches, et al who have appeared in literature, film, cabaret, and LGBTQ club scenes over roughly the last century.

entitled “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” which featured drag kinging as its major theme.<sup>27</sup> In the episode, *Sex’s* character Charlotte exhibits a series of riveting drag king images by photographer Baird Johnson at her gallery, to great acclaim. Baird is unfortunately male and heterosexual and not anything like the actual photographer of the photographs, Del Grace Volcano.<sup>28</sup> In the episode, kinging (or rather, the sock in a king’s pants in one of the images) does the bridgework of inspiring Charlotte to engage her sexual prowess, break out of her polite feminine mode and initiate a hot sexual encounter with Baird. Post-drag-king-inspired-eros, Charlotte never speaks to Baird again because she is embarrassed by having stepped out of her usual adherence to conservative, normative gendered decorum. In her 2005 book *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005), Jack Halberstam comments on the dynamic of mainstream media sucking the counter-hegemonic power out of subcultures by bringing visibility to a sub-cultural product (be in punk music, a way of wearing sneakers or jeans, or drag kinging) by dismantling the capacity of the product to threaten mainstream culture. This neutralization of power is achieved by appropriating sub-cultural processes without linking them up with the cultural meanings and choreographies of importance to the subculture. Halberstam discusses this dynamic, noting:

As the talk show phenomenon vividly illustrates, mainstream culture within postmodernism should be defined as the process by which subcultures are *both* recognized and absorbed, mostly for the profit of large media conglomerates. In other words, when television stations

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<sup>27</sup> “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” was directed by Pam Thomas and aired on HBO June 25, 2000 (Season 3, Episode 4). Clips of the episode with kings can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juEgX1FSzUE&feature=related>

<sup>28</sup> The images in the *Sex* episode are taken from *The Drag King Book* (1999), a collaborative photo-essay book by Volcano and Jack Halberstam.

show an interest in a dyke subculture like drag kings, this is cause for both celebration and concern. ... most of the interest directed by mainstream media at subcultures is voyeuristic and predatory (Halberstam 2005, 156-7).

This critique of mainstream media's appropriations of drag king rightly describes the use of kings in the "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" episode. This agenda is clearly evidenced by the most sexual moment of the Charlotte-Baird homo- and trans-phobic narrative, where, after Charlotte has made her sexual interests clear, Baird lustfully peels off Charlotte's moustache, evacuating the 'man'-on-'man' gay, trans, and queer erotic layers of the piece from the scene.

There are a few productive lines in the episode worth noting, such as when main character Carrie Bradshaw makes a blatant cut at conservative then-NYC mayor Giuliani (who she suggests would be offended by the bulge in one of the king's pants). Elsewhere, the Samantha character exclaims "I bet being a drag king would be fun" to which Miranda responds "Oh please, I have enough trouble figuring out how to be woman in a man's world, without trying to be woman pretending to be a man in a man's world." With the obvious exception of the transphobia within the verb choice of the sentence ("pretending" does no justice to the stakes of kinging; at best, the choice creates a freeway out of the intricate network of desires in kinging), these statements do express some knowledge of the pleasures and pains of living or entertaining as a drag king.

What is notable about the episode is its use of numerous images of kings from the book of photographs collaboratively produced by Halberstam and Del Grace Volcano, *The Drag King Book* (1999). The images are reproduced in 4 x 8' format for the

episode, thereby giving unprecedented screen and air-time in its global circuit to actual drag kings, dressed and standing exactly as they did for Volcano rather than neutralized by a *Sex and the City* costume designer in the form of a make-over. Still, the episode deserves ample critique for clear deployment of trans-, butch masculine-, and homophobic narratives under the ruse of neo-liberal liberation. In sum, however, I begin with the images of the *Sex and the City* “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” to visually situate the entire package of the drag king technological body -- from his shoes to his stance, from his bulge to his beard, from his soul patch to his suit. But where is kinging today? What use is the king performative in 2010, suited up and ready to go? How has or does kinging address the current versions of hegemonic masculinity in dance and in the world, in the post-terror, globally capitalistic, unsustainable, misogynistic, transphobic and racially violent context of U.S. nation-building? Proposing kings and would-be kings as dancing, dressing bodies who articulate a ubiquitous relationship to costume as an agent in the production of choreographies of gender, sexuality, and racial formations, kinging as a performative challenges an essential understanding of masculinity as non-performative, un-ornamented, un-stylized, and ontologically grounded in biology. Yet there is something more.

## CHAPTER 2

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### ORNAMENTATION AND IMAGINATION: Philosophical Baggage in the Wake of Drag King Performance

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*“I am knitting a something. It’s a scarf, a sweater, it’s a ... it’s going to be a scarf-sweater-turtleneck”*

Sean Dorsey (2005)

*My mother taught us that the Marvelous was free — in the patterns of a stray bird feather, in a Hudson River sunset, in the view from our fire escape, in the stories she told us, in the way she sang Gershwin’s “Summertime,” in a curbside rainbow created by the alchemy of motor oil and water from an open hydrant.*

Robin Kelley (2003)

#### **Knitting Dreams**

In *The Outsider Chronicles*, a full-length dance concert by San Francisco-based transgender choreographer Sean Dorsey, a solo dancer performs a story about a trans youth pulled from his high school dance class by the school psychologist to discuss his perceived “gender identity disorder.” The piece, “Creative,” is cast in dramatic side lighting with a brick wall as the backdrop and features Dorsey as the solo dancer of the piece. The character is a youth, a dancer, and a knitter. Starting with a bell chime, a voiceover follows, setting the dominant conceptual timing and movement of the piece. Dorsey dances the role of the transgender youth, physicalizing the story via a combination of jazz, ballet, and modern dance choreography. The voice-over begins: “I

am knitting something...[three bell chimes]...it's a scarf, a sweater...[three bell chimes]." Starting first in silhouette, then moving into full-light, the dancer establishes a spritely pace and physical palate to accompany the voice-over narrative. He bends his arms in turn over his head, moving stage right via small leg sweeps as the vocals play out. "It's a scarf-sweater-turtleneck" the narrative continues, with vocal echoes of other possibilities in quick succession; here, the dancer jumps from leg to leg with arms bent and outstretched, as if ready to catch a basketball. The voice-over then comes to a repose, "...or, a hat. [pause]. It could be a hat." As the teen youth is moved out of dance class and into the psychologist's office, the lights change overhead to a harsher glare. Dorsey's movements are entertaining and rhythmic as the story continues. At times he shapes himself into a cute flapping bird and he performs plies; at other times, he swings his right arm like the second's hand on a grandfather clock. Knitting an object that has both recognizable characteristics as a "scarf," "sweater" and "turtleneck" (all essential clothing for a dancer in the studio and in lecture classes), the young dancer's gender and sexual identity is unclear to the school psychologist. He elaborates to the doctor: "Did you know that the turtleneck is one of the last remaining truly unisex garments?" The psychologist responds, "Sean, I don't care. Put down the knitting and answer the question." Authority slaps the hands of the young knitter, committing him to ten weeks of talk-therapy at the cost of the young dancer's excision from jazz choir and other chosen activities.<sup>29</sup> What was the youth making? Was knitting an

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<sup>29</sup> Dorsey's tale in "Creative" provides a critique of the under-age context and logic of this particular brand of transgender and homophobic discrimination. Dorsey's character is an under-age person who has no rights to claim his gender and sexual identities in the high school setting. Thus, the character is obliged to follow the demands of the school system and their

appropriate activity for a trans-youth and/or queer teenager? Were the gendered allegiances and erotic circuits running through this youth indications of a troubled kid; or was he, rather, trouble with a capital T?

I begin with an image of Sean Dorsey's high school male dancer/knitter, to establish the subject matter and method of this chapter. The focus of this chapter is on ornamentation, a subject with an important history in the production of Western knowledge. I look at ornamentation's foundations, both as a concept and a process (a noun, and a verb), in histories of philosophy and architecture. To make evident the stakes of ornamentation, I also offer a performative mode of delivery in this chapter as a way of wedding theory and practice to make these stakes clear. The transitive nature of the medium of costume, I suggest, demands both this grounded focus and performative departure into and through style. I consider this a quiet chapter, a flourish that is the ornamentation to the formal analysis of the dissertation, a way of remarking upon history by drawing attention to writing as a stylistic mark linked to imagination, to dreaming. With this mention of quieter sounds, I evoke a morning sun glow, spread down onto the subject of drag kings and costume. This evocation of dawn and quiet is a strategy to conceptually address the harsh lights and hard angles of aggressive, domineering prose and impermeable analytic boundaries. In the morning glow, softer light rays and star twinkles still pulsing from the night before shape out the corpus that binds my dissertation together in its look at dress, dance, and desire — ornamentation.

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interpretations of his behavior and interests. In this way, "Creative" functions a redress to trans and homophobic discrimination to underage people of all sorts in institutional environments. Daphne (now Dylan) Scholinski also describes this in his memoir *The Last Time I Wore a Dress* (1997).

### Shape of a Scarf-Sweater-Turtleneck

To unweave the circuits at play in Dorsey's "Creative," I pull thread one at a time. The idea of "the ornamental" or "ornamentation" brings together a number of common and scholarly traditions. At the level of common parlance, "ornamentation" suggests decoration, a second layer of something, an addition to a foundational, essential material location. In this view, "to ornament" is to self-referentially relay an aesthetic component to what is presumed to be an unornamented whole – an object, a body, a sentence, a thought. For a body, then, clothing would function to "ornament" the fleshy body with fabric, texture, color, and shape. Clothing would be understood through established and essential boundaries and notions of 'privacy' and 'decency;' a body conceived through the projection of European humanism. At the level of common parlance, "ornamentation" separates the dressed, dancing body into (at least) two separate material categories: the first is the fleshy body, and the second is dress.

In scholarly disciplines, similar distinctions are cut and debated, marked by their rigorous philosophical and political allegiances. In architectural history, for example, the "ornament" marks the style of a structure, its specific distinction within architectural traditions – the design patterns of Muslim tiles of the Alhambra Palace in southern Spain (originally built during the Islamic Umayyah Caliphate dynasty, 650 – 750 A.D.), or the 12<sup>th</sup> century pillars of Notre Dame during the French Gothic revival. Proponents of European modernity, however, made a point of determining the use and relevance of "ornamentation" in its steady and aggressive climb to control aesthetics



and notions of proper progress for the nation. Therefore, such styles as the French architect Le Corbusier's sleek modern structures built their foundation on the modernist "unsuitability"<sup>30</sup> of certain modes of ornamentation to modern notions of desire, economy, and notions of beauty.<sup>31</sup>

In this chapter, I establish a context for some of the discriminations against ornamentation. First, I cull forth the racist critique by architectural critic Adolf Loos in *Ornament and Crime* (1908). In the essay by the same name, I argue that Loos set a standard for the chic devaluation of ornamentation in modernism, a devaluation that carried great power in its alignment with Western progress and the fantasy of European, white imperial cultural domination. Set against Loos' argument I position a response: that ornamentation's excision from Western modernity marks its power as a medium. Riddled with conflict and invoking both disgust and anxiety to "proper" "modern" subjectivity, I suggest that ornamentation upsets the stability of Cartesian space, time, and progress, residing within different sensual registers and logics of the social, of economy, and of the body. Looking at feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed's notions of "orientation," I parse out the "disorienting" effects of the sartorial in trans choreographer Sean Dorsey's 2005 solo, "Creative." In the analysis, I suggest that the

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<sup>30</sup> The double-entendre of "unsuitability" is an intentional gesture. It marks the sartorial investment of this dissertation and the traces of the sartorial always and already present in the discussions of art and architectural history.

<sup>31</sup> A critical discussion of architecture and value falls way beyond my own expertise and is hotly debated. I mention it now as a stepping-stone in my discussion of excess and clothing, claiming that these philosophical and political debates are similar in the realm of costume and adornment.

dance's "orientation" towards ornamentation is a source of alternative reproductive power and a queer redress to the trans, queer discrimination in the piece.

The second gesture of this chapter draws on different elements of the ornamental, namely its performative and immaterial aspects. First, I invoke the "dress dreams" imagined in the children's book *10,000 Dresses* illustrated by Rex Ray and written by Marcus Ewert. By invoking this text as a legacy of the many childhood practices debunked in the production of "proper adulthood," I argue for the important role of imagination in pursuing queer liberation, through costume designs and drag performances. Next, I discuss the importance of envisioning ideal worlds and enacting love in liberatory struggle, analyzed by Robin Kelley in his text *Freedom Dreams* (2003). Then, to parse out a relationship between love and desire in drag king performance, I look at a recent improvisation by San Francisco drag king Rusty Hips, at the 15<sup>th</sup> annual San Francisco Drag King Contest. Finally, drawing from these assertion that dreams provide an important service to both children and adults, I invoke a dream of my own about a drag king landscape that exists only in my imagination.

### **Ornamentation as A Crime**

Austrian architect and critic Adolf Loos made the claim that ornamentation thwarted European progress, economically and aesthetically: he proposed the eradication of ornament. In Loos' 1908 treatise *Ornament and Crime*, he writes: "I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects" (Loos, 1908, 19).

Couching his verdict in the form of an earth-shattering discovery, Loos' prose makes a masculinist declaration about a very important concept for intellectuals at the time: evolution. In Loos' theoretics, this concept is equivalent to economics and finances.

Loos writes:

“Ornamented plates are very expensive, whereas the white crockery from which the modern man likes to eat is cheap. The one accumulates savings, the other debts. It is the same with whole nations. Woe when a people remains behind in cultural evolution! The British are growing wealthier and we poorer ....” (21).

Loos' formulations make broad strokes and are set to appeal to a sense of competition based in national identity. He simplifies a solution in terms of a math formula. Should “modern man” like to eat, Loos suggests, then “white crockery” would be the preferable material on which to do so rather than on “ornamented plates.” The former produces accumulated savings, while the later produces debts according to Loos. Yet beneath the concern about budgeting reside Loos' investments in cultural whiteness and European progress on the whole. “Woe when a people remains behind in cultural evolution!” Loos exclaims. The woe calls for an identification in the narrative, hailing a citizenship to an affective order ready to rise up against the common enemy that thwarts progress. As Loos' manifesto continues, the author's logic focuses more specifically on issues of time management and labor. Loos writes:

“Ornament is wasted labor power and hence wasted health....The Chinese carver works for sixteen hours, the American worker for eight. If I pay as much for a smooth cigarette case as for an ornamented one, the difference in working time belongs to the worker” (22).

For a post-modern, post-terror, feminist, queer reader, encountering Loos' theoretics

sets off red flags. That the author's mathematical fodder successfully invoked national identity and competition based on this question of ornamentation is both alarming, and telling about how racism and an imperialist mentality co-exist within cultural and economic processes. As Loos builds his argument, the essay reaches an obnoxious level of racism that seems almost unparalleled in scholarly pieces about dress and ornamentation. In this way, Loos' essay functions as an extremely important moment in intellectual production for noting how scholarly conversations about aesthetics combine with hegemonic circulations of power and masculinity to wield an image (in the form of a *dressed, dancing body*) of the nation through costume. Loos writes:

“The child is amoral. To our eyes, the Papuan is too. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is not a criminal. But when modern man kills someone and eats them he is either a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddles, in short everything he can lay hands on. He is not a criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the inmates show tattoos. The tattooed who are not in prison are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats.” (19).

In this section, Loos has shifted from his deductions about budgeting time and money, to his concept that criminality is inherent in practices of ornamentation. The paragraph is one of the most-cited excerpts of Loos' writing because of the author's wild leap from notions of taste to crime as the platform for discussions of aesthetics. In Loos' foreclosure, one has only three choices: shed ornament; be a criminal; or be a degenerate. By conflating evolutionary biology and primitivism with a school of thought (modernity) seeking to distinguish itself against and *away* from the past, Loos creates a picture of ornamentation (in the figure of the tattooed body) as morally perverse (those with tattoos also eat their enemies) and belonging to a time no longer

relevant to present conceptions of European identity. Loos suggests, at base, that falling into old aesthetic habits can only lead to amorality, criminality, and degeneracy. Thus, in his quest to eradicate the circulation of the ornamental and all who ride with it, Loos links up ornamentation with a criminality, and ornament a crime.

If we drew a parallel line of reasoning for clothing from Adolf Loos' thoughts about the ornamental in architecture, then two positions against clothing emerge. First, the line of reasoning suggests that any design not part of a utilitarian framework is an ornamental object (i.e. not a "white plate").<sup>32</sup> This suggests that clothing and costume, themselves, when viewed as separate from the dancing body are ornamentation to "the body" as a utilitarian object. Proponents of this view find disdain for dress as a superficial trade and topic because of its non-essential function in forming human identity or "the human [non-moving] body." This discrimination against clothing is also landed in an ideology that is masculinist at its core: disassociating from the subject of clothing because of clothing's intimate association with the body, and thus the feminine. The second position that Loos' line of reasoning produces about costume and clothing is that ornamentation in design – be it a tattoo on the body, a pattern on a shirt, or a frill / costume shape that does not follow the physical body's essential lines, is excessive, ornamental, and likely a mark of a criminal mind at large in the modern European nation. To speak of clothes, then, is to give voice to a regressive subjectivity

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<sup>32</sup> In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993), American Studies scholar Ruth Frankenberg analyzed the responses pheno-typically white women gave about their beliefs about race, color, and privilege. Frankenberg's analyses in this project are in alignment with what many feminists attentive to race understand, which is that white people (pheno-typically) do not see themselves as racial beings. Performance scholar Peggy Phelan (1993) echoes this analysis in her look at masculinity and whiteness as "unmarked" categories with racial privilege and easy access to the roles and benefits of hegemonic U.S. citizenship.

that honors pre-modern customs, traditions, and economies. In sum, Loos bullhorns a destructive line of reasoning that puts all forms of ornamentation into a suspect and criminal category.

### **Becoming Oriented**

From this discussion of ornamentation's blighted reputation and lack of value in European economies of progress, one might understand the trigger Dorsey's teenager in the solo dance "Creative" may have tapped, by knitting. Knitting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century middle-class context in which "Creative" is set, is an activity reserved for grandmothers or social failures who choose or are forced to step out of the dance of sex and power that produces and is rewarded by cultural cores. While in earlier frontier times or within ethnic traditions where weaving and sewing are more highly valued, Dorsey's solo exists in a space where the authority figure does reward the activities of knitting. I have suggested above that knitting falls into the general category of "the ornamental," pointing to knitting as an economy that uses tools, materials, and design patterns that thwart the stability of contemporary notions of progress. In this section, I pull out a second thread that runs through "Creative" in its address to transgender queer discrimination.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed explores how material objects "orient" beings towards and away from each other, engaging thought, physicality, and agency. Ahmed takes the philosopher's table to task (the actual writing desk as a material entity), churning out a feminist analysis of

the table and the discipline of philosophy. Ahmed writes, “Tables are, after all, ‘what’ philosophy is written upon: they are in front of the philosopher, we imagine, as a horizontal surface ‘intended’ for writing” (Ahmed, 2006, 3). Ahmed’s concern is far from apolitical; she chooses the philosopher’s table for its central position in the production of Western modernity. It is for these two reasons that I draw on Sara Ahmed’s ideas about orientation and the material world in my own look at costumes on stage – first, that Ahmed focuses on the choreography inspired by the material; and second, that she politicizes this chain of attractions between objects, bodies, and discourse.

Sara Ahmed deftly argues that a compulsion towards, or a dismissal from, the table marks a key choreographic encounter in the production of Western knowledge. She suggests that in these encounters national allegiance predominates, dissuading non-normative philosophers (such as herself) to sit down and produce philosophy. Yet rather than describe discrimination and power in terms of ideology, Ahmed focuses on the relation harnessed in the material design of an object. In this way, Ahmed’s focus is on materiality as the instigator of action. Ahmed writes: “Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others....In this way, bodies and their objects tend towards each other; they are oriented toward each other, and are shaped by this orientation” (51).

Returning to “Creative,” one can piece together a strong analysis of the threat posed by the youth who was knitting, with Ahmed’s ideas in tow. In “Creative,” Dorsey puts much of the performance’s time and movement into the subject of knitting. Dorsey’s voiceover recites, “I knit a row. I pearl a row. I knit a row. I pearl a row ...” Elsewhere, the protagonist humbly admits that by age 13 he was a “truly kick-ass

knitter.” Indeed, the subject and activity of knitting is the object that stands between the high school psychologist, and the dancer, creating tension and conflict. The psychologist asks Sean to “put down the knitting and answer the question,” yet Sean (the character, whose name is the same as the choreographer’s) has forgotten the question because he has been knitting. He asks for a reminder. What seems to be at play here is a question of how time, attention, and energy is being spent, and who gets to call the shots in the encounter between under-age high school youth, and employed, adult, high school psychologist. Sara Ahmed’s ideas suggest that this power struggle can be understood in terms not of identity discourse, but rather of physicality and orientation.<sup>33</sup> Earlier in the text, Ahmed suggests that one becomes oriented by the objects that surround us. Here, she describes what she means by this:

What does it mean to be oriented? How do we begin to know or to feel where we are, or even where we are going, by lining ourselves up with the features of the grounds we inhabit, the sky that surrounds us, or the imaginary lines that cut through maps? How do we know which way to turn to reach our destination? (6)

The last question of the excerpt could be one way of describing the struggle for power in the high school psychologist’s office of “Creative.” In the piece, two different destinations are imagined by each character. The student occupies himself with knitting as a “turn to reach [his] destination.” The school psychologist imposes a new

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<sup>33</sup> Dick Hebdige’s classic 1979 text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* looks at the production of punk subculture by post-war British youth. Hebdige’s analysis looks at the circulation of alternative cultural objects as a way that punk youths form community against mainstream cultural values. This production of a “new” subcultural object situates Dorsey’s teenager’s knitting appropriately, marking its potency as threat to the production of mainstream culture. Ahmed’s argument is in alignment with Hebdige’s ideas as well, though, importantly for dance studies, Ahmed provides a way to account for the choreographic shifts in orienting oneself around a subcultural object, culling up affective drives rather than identities.



destination – gender and sexual identity as a problem – into the high school student’s organization of a school day, imposing his questions and his office as orientation devices. Herein lies the rub. As Ahmed notes, “orientations ... take time and require giving up time” (20).

What interests me about Ahmed’s discussion of orientation and materiality is how her model pushes beyond identificatory modes (I’m gay, you’re gay; let’s all be gay together), to expose a more fundamental affective drive that orients people together and separate in the world, via objects. In asking the question “what does it mean to become oriented?” Ahmed opens up the necessity of normative orientations towards objects, presented in Sean Dorsey’s solo dance “Creative” as the brick wall and harsh lighting of the psychologist’s office. Instead, she backs up from the table to explore why she might walk towards it at all, and from what direction. Ahmed sees the quandary in terms of “knowing which way to turn to reach our destination” (6).

I suggested in the beginning of this section that this analytic thread in “Creative” might aid in an analysis of the discrimination against sartoriality as a discourse. Thinking now about this debunking in terms of orientation, one gets a clearer picture of how a turn toward or away from costume as a critical subject contains a necessary and interesting choreographic relationship. In becoming “oriented” towards costume philosophically, Sara Ahmed’s theorizations provide three ways of recognizing this. First, one can view the turn towards costume as a physical turn; this turn requires decisions about how to approach the object in very specific directional coordinates (behind, under, etc.). Second, this turn can be understood as an affective one where identification is organized around one’s interest in and orientation toward objects and

the material. Finally, Ahmed's theorizations suggest that a turn towards costume as an object is an important step in "becoming oriented," and in return rejecting those objects and spaces, such as the psychologist's office for the high school student in "Creative." It is to accentuate this final point that I return to Ahmed one last time.

Orientation for Sarah Ahmed is a specifically queer project. Her reasoning for this is based in claiming her sexual orientation (one's sex and love choices) as a valid site of carnal activity. Ahmed describes her interest in orientation in these terms:

I think one of the reasons that I became interested in the very question of 'direction' was because in the 'middle' of my life I experienced a dramatic redirection: I left a certain kind of life and embraced a new one. I left the 'world' of heterosexuality, and became a lesbian...For me, this line was a lifeline, and yet it also meant leaving well trodden paths (20).

Ahmed establishes the deep stakes in the project of becoming oriented in this excerpt. She describes her choice to follow her lesbian desires and walk the path of homosexuality a move to her "lifeline." Lingering on this seems important, in regards to the claim that I am making about the need for a shifted perspective in philosophy and politics about the subject of clothing. Am I making the claim that thinking differently about clothing and the sartorial would save lives? Would put some in alignment with a "life-line"? Ahmed discusses the idea of disorientation in a paragraph following that articulates in less existential terms what becoming oriented means. She writes:

We talk about losing our way as well as finding our way. And this is not simply a reference to moments when we can't find our way to this or that destination: when we are lost in the streets, or in rooms that are unfamiliar; when we don't know we have got where it is that we are. We can also lose our direction in the sense that we lose our aim or purpose;

disorientation is a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (20).

Ahmed describes the spatial and psychological project of “becoming oriented” as about achieving one’s sense of “who one is.” When placed against its opposite, disorientation, “orientation” is evidenced to be less about claiming truth, and more about a corporeal and grounded physical position that clarifies and organizes the psyche into a sense of “who one is.” Yet, Ahmed does not describe how it is one knows when, or how, one finds and understands this sense. As many important feminist writers have done before her, Ahmed suggests that this sense is about finding, or feeling, “home.” She writes:

Becoming reoriented, which involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently, made me wonder about orientation and how much ‘feeling at home,’ or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds” (20).

It is striking to me that with a slight shift in direction and utilizing Ahmed’s theorizations, one possess the tools to “feel at home” and make a new world. Indeed, organized by critical perspectives that deny or eradicate this feeling, a feeling of “home” seems impossible, out of reach, unknown. That this “shift” is necessarily a choreographic and embodied one is of utmost importance to my dissertation. I suggest that in its most reductive state, this world-making for drag kings is a specifically embodied and choreographic project, rendering the “feeling” of being at home into a

corporealized act of making and sustaining “a home” through a (thinking) (and physical) turn to costume or the sartorial.<sup>34</sup>

Returning then to the high school student who knits inside the school psychologist’s office, one might then understand the knitting to contain a threat not only for its abject status within Western knowledge production, but also for the high school student’s corporeal reclamation of home through the act of knitting in the office. Summoned to the school office, the student orients himself towards his knitting. This rejection of the space and objects of the psychologist’s office is crucial. The high school student’s choice to participate in an on-going, time-based project of world-making (knitting), serves to disorient and dislodge the world-making of the psychologist. But most importantly, by working with a knitting design that will materialize a *very* queer object (a scarf-sweater-turtleneck-and-maybe-a-hat), the world of the student remains beyond the grasp of the rigid, normative framework of the institution represented by the school psychologist. In this way, the odd bird forms and post-modern mix of traditional jazz, dance, and ballet movement in Dorsey’s solo help piece together, like a queer knitting project, a place of home for transgender redress (literally) and justice to reside.

What I have intended to do in this analysis of the subject and corporealization of knitting in Sean Dorsey’s 2005 solo “Creative,” is establish the idea that analyzing the sartorial in performance requires a philosophical reorientation in critical thinking. Deploying the ideas of Sara Ahmed, I suggest that this reorientation is not only

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<sup>34</sup> This suggestion echoes the theoretical argument I make in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, that “the body” as such might better be described as a *dressed, dancing body*, always and already.

ideological, but also corporeal. While wedding mind and body within one analytic position nicely fits any project of dance studies, Ahmed's theorizations are of most importance to my consideration of queer costume in her articulation of materiality as an agent in choreography, via affective attractions towards or away from objects.

### The Windy City Smarmies

Sara Ahmed's ideas about orientation are articulated almost demonstratively in a performance by The Windy City Smarmies, a Chicago, Illinois-based drag king troupe, in 2008. I take up this performance to provide a bridge for "turning-towards" costume as ornamentation in the dissertation, but also to articulate one additional element of costuming as a material object: its density.

Performing at the 10<sup>th</sup> *International Drag King Extravaganza* (IDKE) in Columbus, Ohio, the troop kinged to the 1976 Bee Gees pop song, "You Should be Dancing." In terms of stage layout, the number opens with four of the five kings standing still on pedestals facing the crowd off-center in a long U as the lights come up. Their grey pedestals create an appearance of memorial statues in a public square. Each is dressed in muted grey costumes approximately the color of cement; each character represents a statue of hetero-normative, American patriarchal history: George Washington, lady liberty, World War II soldiers. The performance uses the structure of "toys in the toy store, come to life" as its movement frame, where statues are still when being watched and "come to life" when they are no longer under the surveillance of the piece's core gaze. For the purposes of my argument, I take this shift from stasis

to movement as a key site where the kings articulate a critique of history and its relation to gender-queer survival. As the music unfolds, the statue kings begin to move at the hips, arm sockets, necks. They perform a slow movement dance that picks up on the cheery tone of the overhead “You Should Be Dancing” song. A fifth king enters after the opening lyrics are broadcast. He meanders into the performance from backstage and walks through the statue landscape with a sun umbrella in one hand, looking up and around the set as if in contemplation. This fifth king is dressed in bright colors in contrast to the graphically- unified background of the statue kings; he is styled in nymph-like clothing that fits tight around his body but loose enough to enable action. This “dandy” king opens the umbrella early in the piece and places it above his head, while his other arm rests in a sling.



*Windy City Smarmies, IDKE 10 (2008)*  
Photograph by Tania Hammidi

As the dandy king passes near each statue, he turns to look at them as one would do in a public park. When the king passes by each statue, the statues dance behind him. Audience members laugh during these moments, identifying with the joke of the

performance. But, the dandy king disregards audience responses and stays within the world of the performance. Following a hunch, he turns his head to look quickly back at the statue he has passed by, but finds the statue as he last saw it: static, non-moving, a cement mass. In the larger world of the performance, the statues stop dancing and resume their frozen poses when the dandy king turns back. Again, the dandy king turns away from the statue, and walks on to look at another statue. He does so and passes by. Again the dandy king's intuition is peaked by something beyond his frame of reference, and he responds by turning back abruptly to the statue he has just passed. The tempo of his twist triggers a sense of irony as the audience is drawn into the game or, as it were, the joke that is just behind the dandy king's footsteps. Again, the statue kings stop their silly dancing and strike still poses. The game continues as the song reaches a high point and then all fades to black.

Applying Ahmed's ideas to the turning in this Windy City Smarmies performance yields to a number of recognitions. Indeed, if as an audience member one identifies with and follows the actual turning within the world of the performance, one understands that the dandy king is turning towards a hunch, an intuition, a feeling outside the world of visual apprehension that is telling him that "something else is going on," beyond what his eyes are capturing. In conversation, the dandy king (who goes by the name Gremlin) suggested to me that the troupe intended the performance to be a meditation on happiness. Gremlin said,

Overall, the story we wanted to express was a simply one in which a person is very sad and the universe chooses to remind him that magic exists – both in the world and within himself. While he may not be able to see it, he can feel it around him – mischievously pulling him out of his

misery and into a brighter place.”<sup>35</sup>

The performance, then, becomes an enactment of a king finding his happiness. Yet, from a sartorial theorist audience member’s perspective such as the one I occupied while watching this performance live, this explanation did not address the effective tectonic shift the piece achieved artistically as a historical event of drag kinging.<sup>36</sup> I shared my interest with Gremlin in costuming, however, and then found what field researchers might describe as a “ruby” in their practice. Gremlin described costumes for the performance:

As far as costuming goes, we were each responsible for creating our own costumes. Todd [a designer] took the reigns on getting things moving, especially in terms of researching paint and make up. (We had to choose a good face paint, and then color to match it to some latex paint for the costumes – which the statues also ended up using on exposed extremities like arms, hands, and legs). I got off lucky on that one and simply had to find foppish attire with a touch of brightness (to create a foil against the gray).”<sup>37</sup>

In the performance, Gremlin wanders on the stage in campy dandy wear: bright colors, a light-weight striped pair of pants, a bouncy shirt and vest. The costume appeared to enable the fullest of movements for the dandy, located close to the body. In a final explanation, Gremlin described the dancers’ labor in navigating their costumes, “Also,

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<sup>35</sup> Email exchange with the author, January 2010.

<sup>36</sup> I would identify this performance as the best drag king number I saw during my many years of attending king events – possibly ever. While this response is determined by preference, the high production value woven into a very simple performance structure made the project memorable to me. What was most astounding was the sheer conceptual brilliance in the design and production of the dull grey statue costumes and dandy wear. The performance left me speechless, out of sorts, on my knees, full of love, never the same again.

<sup>37</sup> Email exchange with the author, January 2010.



let me just mention that those costumes were HEAVY” (ibid). Grellim here refers to the fabric and plaster covering the statue kings. From a glance it seems that it would weigh perhaps ten pounds on the bathroom scale. But most interesting are the resonances of Grellim’s description that the costumes were “heavy.” Said differently, is there a way that this notion of heaviness in weight and gravity could also apply to the effect (and affect) created by costume on stage? Though campy, could Gremlin’s dandy costume itself, also, be considered “heavy” not in its challenge to collapse muscles and movements in physical practice, but in its challenge to Western order and reason about who gets to “dress” and how?

I have suggested that through Loos’ and other modernist efforts to debunk ornamentation in aesthetic practices, costuming itself has been both limited and devalued as a critical field. Yet, taking up Sara Ahmed’s notions of “orientation” and turning-towards one’s “life-lines” as a liberatory act, I propose that kings and kinging has survived as a relic of ornamentation’s power, prowess, and magic as a medium and aesthetic practice (a noun, and a verb). In Chapter 1, I shed some light on the long historical battle between “truth” and “artifice” in Western philosophy, landed specifically on the mistrust and disdain of ornamentation as rhetoric, and therefore considered part of a tool of manipulation, harlotry, and the surface. Rhetorician Webb Keane (2006) takes these arguments one step further, arguing that the disdain for clothing lies in a fundamental challenge the ornamental makes to Western language production. In specific, Keane writes about the blighted relationship between signs and material objects in his essay “Signs are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things.” Keane suggests that ‘things and ideas’ are two separate

categories marked by the project of producing Western language, and signs. In this production, the material is excised as supplemental, and therefore deemed unnecessary, a threat, and waste (Keane 2006, 182). Yet Keane argues for the material, asking “what do material things make possible? What is their futurity?” (188). Taking Keane’s questions to drag king costumes rephrases my own question about the heaviness of Gremlin’s costume, and offers it an answer. Keane’s analysis suggests that ornamentation threatens not only the formation, but also the normative weight – its relationship to gravity, to masculine physical strength, to intellectual prowess – of the linguistic order.

### **Imagination and Liberation**

In 2008, queer illustrationist Rex Ray and writer Marcus Ewert collaborated on the children’s book *10,000 Dresses*, a text important to this chapter’s discussion about reclaiming ornamentation as a discourse through orientation. In the book, a young child named Bailey dreams of dresses, “every night” (2008, Ewert/Ray, 6). She dreams first of “a dress made of crystals...[that] clinked against each other like millions of tiny bells. And when the sunlight hit the dress just right, rainbows jumped out” (ibid). Bailey tells her mother about the dress and asks if she could buy one for the child. Her mother replies, “Bailey, what are you talking about? You are a boy. Boys don’t wear dresses” (9). Bailey dreams again the next night of a new dress, this one “made of lilies and roses...[with] sleeves made of honeysuckles” (11). She goes to her father who is weeding in the garden and asks him if he would grow her this dress. Her father replies

with the same gender-normative fervor as his wife, saying “Bailey, what are you talking about? You are a boy. Boys don’t wear dresses!” (15). Bailey retorts, “But I don’t feel like a boy” (15). As his wife has done, Bailey’s father demands that Bailey be a boy and says, “Now go away, and don’t mention dresses again” (15). That night, Bailey sleeps and in dreaming, finds herself amongst her dresses again. This time, she dreams of a dress “made of windows. One [window] showed the Great Wall of China, and another, the Pyramids” (18). Bailey discusses the dream with her brother, but has no luck convincing him that she should have such a dress. She runs away from him to the end of the block as if running to the end of the earth; there Bailey encounters an older girl who is sewing an old sheet with needles and thread. Bailey tells the girl about her dreams of dresses; this time, she is met with praise. “That’s awesome!” the girl exclaims (26). The two decide to work together. Bailey and the girl use old mirrors for the windows in her dream-dress, and make two new dresses “which were covered with mirrors of all shapes and sizes” (26). The older girl is concerned that the new dresses don’t show the Great Wall of China or the Pyramids, but Bailey is not concerned: “No, but they do show us OURSELVES” she says (28).

What interests me in this book is the dreaming Rex Ray, Marcus Ewert, and Bailey do to actualize their visions of a world – via costumes – in which it is worth living. The American fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi commented about *10,000 Dresses*, “I love this book. If I had this book growing up, I might have felt better about my dress-wearing habit.”<sup>38</sup> A book that is made for children but speaks to adults, *10,000 Dresses* stresses the importance of dreaming about dress to LGBTIQ understandings of

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<sup>38</sup> Quote on press release issued by Seven Stories Press, November 15, 2008.

ourselves. Inside academic scholarship, American Studies scholar Robin Kelley more directly hits on the subject of adult dreaming and liberation.

What dream worlds have been imagined by LGBTIQs that spell out freedom for drag king, dressed, dancing bodies? In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2003), Robin Kelley builds an argument for the practice of imagining freedom as part of the work of revolutionary activism. He suggests his goal is to “simply ... reopen a very old conversation about what kind of world we want to struggle for” (Kelley, 2003, 7). What worlds have been imagined by LGBTIQs that spell out freedom for drag king, dressed, dancing bodies? I move my inquiry on ornamentation in this chapter, here, to an inquiry about imagination to answer this question. “Imagination” I see as an irrational, immaterial space of dreams, fantasy, mixed temporality, and unmitigated play where the seeds for other worlds and brilliant models of ethicality grow and flourish. This focus on imagination is important to this dissertation because of the primary role the imagination has in the design of costumes, clothing, and performance. Yet, more importantly, I link this inquiry to Robin Kelley’s conceptions of imagination’s role in political activist efforts, as a way of making room for love, dreaming, and (a commitment to) ornamentation in performances of freedom, state redress, political protest, and other queer disruptions of normative hegemony.

Robin Kelley, not a designer but a scholar, suggests that dreaming and imagining are of absolute necessity to political liberation, moving away from rational constraints and structures of power and unleashing desire. Kelley writes,

Any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships,

with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality (Kelley, 2003, 193).

Kelley's proposal is difficult to take seriously in the context of the common-place competitiveness, cynicism, and violence foundational to global capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Love? Creativity? How can these feminine, sappy, extraneous elements possibly bear any weight, force, or long-term importance in the masculinist task of effecting change, demanding rights, and out-strategizing sadistic, power-hungry enemies to achieve basic equity and liberation? Kelley remarked, "There are very few contemporary political spaces where energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces" (4). Kelley argues that while love and creativity signal abundance, mobility, and an intimate connection with self and others, these forces have hardly been named as essential ingredients of human interaction in activism. Yet, he suggests that dreams and love need be at the core of liberation struggles if a revolutionary movement is to transform society. There is an urgency to Kelley's text, falling in the wake of the emergence of new forms of nationalism in the United States, in response to the destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York City, September 11, 2001. Kelley states, "Now more than ever, we need the strength to love and to dream" (xi).

*Freedom Dreams* is not only filled with a look at love, dreaming, and imagination as subjects, however. Kelley also is demonstrative in his attention to these concerns, showing and sharing his love, dreams, and imagination for a just world in the performative of his writing. For example, Kelley writes:

When movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the poets – no matter the medium – who have succeeded in imagining the

color of the sky, in rendering the kind of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing. Knowing the color of the sky is far more important than counting clouds. Or to put it another way the most radical art is not protest art but work that takes us to another place, envisioning a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling (11).

This verse waxes poetic and creates images of beauty in the same breath as it pulses beauty and poetry. Suggesting that knowing the color of the sky is as important as memorizing the universal declaration of human rights, for example, would otherwise read like a manifesto of the naïve. Yet Kelley fosters both “a different kind of feeling” and dreaming in his prose that effectively theorizes what he pursues, conceptually. And it is in this way that I draw from Robin Kelley’s work both an interest in dreaming and the importance of a dreamy performative, as a drag king and scholar attendant to the imaginative designs of gender-queer and other marginalized “designers” of costumes, whether for their own daily living, or for the stage.

### **A Picture of Love**

I have been discussing thus far the importance of becoming “oriented” towards the sartorial in a critical approach to costume and dancing drag kings, suggesting that the dreams of liberation kings articulate through their costumes is of particular importance to the interpretive act. Concerned less with the representative character of a costume, and more with the dream it “holds” within or incarnates on stage, I have emphasized the subject of “dress dreaming” in LGBTIQ cultural productions. In this

section, I will look at the subject of love as part of the project of imagination and dreaming.

Love is a loaded category. Yet many critical thinkers have taken time to work out its nuances and parse out how love might be possible in the tense environment of power, desire, anxiety, hatred, fragmented temporality, etc. that characterizes modernity. In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1993), French semiotician Roland Barthes debunks a particular kind of love — the discourse of romantic bliss. Barthes points to the mythology of love as a 'safe' discourse inflected by the maternal where ultimate unification is possible. Barthes describes: "Everything is suspended: time, prohibition, nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted; all desires are abolished, for they seem definitively fulfilled" (Barthes, 1993, footnote n.1, 104). Barthes describes a kind of "love" where the conflict is absent. Recalling the battle between teenager and the high school psychologist in Sean Dorsey's "Creative" solo, Dorsey established the world of the teenager by narrating the task of knitting: "knitting a row, pearling a row." In contrast, the psychologist marked time by posing questions, and getting answers. Here, time-markers created the "worlds" and orientations of each character. For my purposes here, I only cite these battles over time (and thus, worlds) without commenting on the question of love or desire in the Dorsey piece. The piece is riddled with the legal constraints of adult/underage teen encounters in institutional settings that lend the encounter. In Barthes' model of romantic bliss, there is no time at all; no conflicts over resources: "nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted" and "time is suspended." Yet, Barthes cautions against these conditions as ones that produce infantilization. He writes that in bliss one experiences:

a motionless cradling; we are enchanted, bewitched; we are in the realm of sleep, without sleeping; we are within the voluptuous infantilism of *sleepiness*....This is the moment for telling stories... this is the return to the mother....Yet, within this infantile embrace, the genital unfailingly appears; it cuts off the diffuse sensuality of the incestuous embrace; the logic of desire begins to function” (104).

Offering up first an image of the infantilized lover, Barthes dispels of the innocence of maternal love to account for the logic of desire in “love.” I bring Barthes’ distinction forward as a way to account for the desire in the utopic projects of “dreaming” and “love.” By accounting for desire, it would seem one could reach a final statement about imagination, freedom, and love.

I am looking at an image by photographer Trish Tooney taken at the 15<sup>th</sup> annual San Francisco Drag King Contest (SFDK) in 2010, hosted by an esteemed long-term San Francisco drag king, Fudgie Frottage. In the image, SFDK 7 winner drag king Rusty Hips is caught in an astoundingly funny moment of queer reclamation of the body. Hips, an invited judge for the SFDK 15 contest, is a white, retro 80’s drag king. Hips usually sports large lamb-chop sideburns, rose-colored sunglasses, and wears a bulbous wig of tight man-curls, much like the curls of Anglo pop-singer Tom Jones during his 1980’s “What’s New Pussycat” tour. Hips arrived to his chair at SFDK 15 dressed in a bathrobe, calf-length tube socks, and toting a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken in 2010, setting his audience into chuckles of laughter. In the image taken by Tooney, Hips has jumped up from his chair to turn-out the audience by flashing his body, previously covered by the bathrobe. Capturing the satire perfectly, Tooney catches Hips centerframe with his hands at the robe’s edges, pulling it back over his chest like Superman taking off his day-job attire to save the city. Hips’ legs are spread



and bent at the knees in a ready-for-action position. The key to this performative moment lies in Hips' hyper-hairy parody of the middle-aged white patriarch who believes he is god's gift to women. The parody is well-balanced through Hips' performance. His face is warped in an odd expression of prowess, yet what seems to remain stable and ideologically-disruptive is the underwear choice. Wearing stuffed gold lamet Speedo's and covered in chest and public hair from neck to navel and down the character's inner thighs, Rusty Hips' moment of exposure seems to reclaim the shame associated with the hairy mannish lesbian body in the same turn that he debunks the virility of the patriarch. This debunking is achieved, specifically, by addressing the desire of the figure (signified by his gold lamet Speedos) and turning it into a site of queer sexuality where the patriarch is toppled.



*D2X\_4018-F-cropped* (2010)  
Photograph by Trish Tooney

The performance deserves a semiotic interpretation, yet for my purposes here I am looking at the concept of love, and how desire is best joined with love (or is a part of love) as part of envisioning a free and just world. Barthes writes that an infantile love

can be discerned from desire by the “suspended time” of infantilization, where one is lulled to sleepiness and a return to the mother. It is clear in Trish Tooney’s documentation of Rusty Hips’ improvisational performance that the affective relationship between Hips and his audience is one of community. Hips offers up his body in a moment, literally, of openness and semiotic cleverness for the sake making people laugh at normative masculinity, and at him. Hips’ gesture of love in his performance evokes “a different way of feeling ... [and] .. of seeing” as Robin Kelley suggests .

### **Drag King Dream City**

I am imagining a place that doesn’t exist, a far away place where the sonic, economic, and bodily demands of text messages, phone calls, internet, toxic light, cars, and all the other chatter of capitalism are mute. It is a place where people negotiate class, gender, race, sexuality, nation, bodily ability, and non-human relationships as a critical function of survival. Although telecommunication technologies and automobiles are tools of these negotiations, this chapter focuses the site of clothing as distinct and specific from those other mediums of communication in its materiality and discursive function. Here, the harsh glare of bright lights does not mark out a Cartesian construction of space and time. Instead, the sun comes in at angle through the windows in the day. Paintings on the walls and indoor cats are hosted here, soaking up the sunlight by will or default, simultaneously recharging and deteriorating, like human history.

There are chosen sounds in this imaginary place – one’s wanted and wished for from an imagined single *utopia dream* scripted by one drag king opposed to the massive gentrification of queer identity into stable “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender” and “professionalized artist” identities. There is no drone of cars and massive pick-up trucks honking their way through concrete jungles and skidding into neat little squares of urban and suburban sidewalk to park, here. There are no chic places to see and be seen. The upper class does out-maneuver and negatively-judge the under-class in their competition for money. It is a fantasy place – one that does not exist, and never will. Instead, in this quieted place, there is a clock ticking, but time is marked by the cyclic cues of plant life, animals, the ebbs and flow of natural resources, rural social needs that decenter the human as the sole agent of history or subject of identity and identifications. And instead, people talk about how to undo the crimes of modernity on their spirits, psyches, and how to undo the capital impulses that form us. I set forth this dreamy, nocturnal world to weave a thread of possibility into the space of queer, feminist, moving, desiring bodies signaled by the drag kings, female political prisoners, and live durational queer artists of this dissertation. Far from the joyous measure<sup>39</sup> of mariachi bands in the urban core, this world is filled with the impossible silences of my queer desires.

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<sup>39</sup> Henri Lefebvre (2004) focuses on a non-linear conception of time, once he argues is traceable as a ‘rhythm.’ Lefebvre explains: “...rhythm seems natural, spontaneous, with no law other than its unfurling. Yet rhythm, always particular (music, poetry, dance, gymnastics, work, etc.) always implies a measure. Everywhere there is a rhythm, there is *measure*” (Lefebvre, 2004, 8). Lefebvre suggests that “a rhythm analyst” will be “...attentive, but not only to the words or pieces of information, the confession and confidences of a partner or client. [S/he] will listen to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning, and to the *murmurs* [rumeurs], full of meaning – and finally he will listen to silences” (19). It is with this analytic edge – of the rhythm analyst -- that one presses forward.

While in Southern California development expands ever-West, in the East is a deserted landscape unfolding an anti-progress, nocturnal scene: packs of coyotes yip in a high-pitched chorus; the scrape of boots across sandy desert ground create rustic sound scores for the 21<sup>st</sup> century modern; residents use resources sparingly, over-lap their plans, recycle lumber, share parking spaces and vehicles, participate in what Henri Lefebvre calls a “rhythm analysis” of human co-habitation of the planet with animals, the immaterial, and other forms of non-human corporeality (Lefebvre 2004, 8). Here, what predominates is the howl of wind and the wild impact of human departure on the desert sand, a shadowy world with life. In this utopia dream, drag kings will open one’s door, carry one’s bags, and kick sticks out of the way with their cowboy and dusty tap shoes, adding to the musical score of the dream. Some hold up their ends of conversation about desire, place, economy, and the body. Other kings are busy taking care of business, doing the dishes, sweeping up, cooking food. Other than that and the few morning doves hatching babies in make-shift nests, there are hardly humans at all in the picture. There is nothing to be gained here, apart from spiritual and intellectual growth. Time can’t be sped up; it is pointless; no one is driven to do so. The kings make their own hair-products, but it doesn’t cost \$38 for 4 ounces as in many trendy, urban salons. Rather, it flows freely like exilar from the trees, is colored by pomegranate fruit, and needs no preserving. It is a garden of abundance, health, and pleasure for performers, in short. Those with power, resources, oodles of money, and social capital flock to this place, to be rendered subservient in hopes of retraining their greedy personalities into more ethical beings.

In fathoming up a non-existent place wherein dwell “impossible queer desires,” one need remember that dreams – like fantasies, but different than fantasies – are birthed from a desire to disassemble the larger political context, conditions, and ideological apparatus that produces the realities of violence and historical erasure endured by drag kings as dancers and aesthetic beings. Certainly, drag kings occupy specifically different social and political locations than inmates of U.S. federal prisons. Yet, I pair the two contexts together because they do reside alongside each other when one understands that militarized hegemonic masculinity tied to the production of a classist, white supremacist nation wields its power on both the prisoner’s right to survive, and the drag king’s. This is how my longing, my dreaming of an impossible place of liberation for gender-queering performers and the female political prisoners of this dissertation are connected. As a vision of a world worth inhabiting, I imagine a place where these figures can function without the gender, racial, and sexual physical and psychic violence, where normativity does not bear down on daily existence.

#### Dress and Desire -- The Empress Stah Power

I would like to mention a few more things about my fantastical dream of utopia, as it relates to the key figures of this dissertation. In an image above my desk, the Empress Stah Power, an Australian performance artist based in London, hangs from the high chandelier in her sparkly red costume and matching high heels. This image has been a muse for the performative character of this dissertation’s writing practice: for what is possible. I will describe the image for the sake of clarity. The Empress holds a

velvet rope in her right hand and is suspended by it in the air, attached to the chandelier. The Empress is bald, unclothed on the top, a glowing contrast to the dark night sky behind her. Staring at the image, I notice that the chandelier is attached to nothing but the air. Her presence defies gravity and reason, in the absence of the spectacular architecture from which she and the chandelier are suspended. Gazing yields to the uncanny, something strange and familiar. How did she get there, the Empress – up on that chandelier? What if the wind picks up fiercely? Will the Empress sway or float away, like the character Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*? What if it rains? I imagine a shower of affect passing through the Empress, materialized by raindrop music notes; the fantasy continues with an introduction of French horns, drizzling low moans and landing on the soft earth, trickling down to the underground to the water table, and purifying the H 2 O.

The Empress Stah Power is a performance artist who creates high-production burlesque acts in the style of Las Vegas hyper-reality and glitz. A trained dancer, one of her key characters named Meep (whom she performs) arrives from outer space to comment on the world she encounters. I saw the Empress perform as Meep in a performance in an Airstream trailer in the Mojave desert, the summer of 2008. The Empress began standing inside a studio with arms to her side, bent at the elbows hands pointed up. She looks like she either desires to go back to the mother-ship or has just landed on earth, in a robe and red cap. The Empress utters words – “meep,” “meep meep meep” –, communicating her status as an alien from outer space observing the planet Earth. After sharing a few observations (“Meep, meepmeep meeeep meep. Meeeeeep meeeeeeep meepmeep,” she says), the Empresses then motions to the audience to follow

her to a nearby Airstream trailer, where she begins a burlesque. The lights are set angling low, creating shadows of her body. The reflection of lights refract off the slivers of glare and mirroring provided by the Airstream's aluminum inner surface. Stah disrobes from the costume, pulling off her hat at the end to show a set of jewels on her head underneath. Stah removes her shimmery shirt from buttons at the front, looking on. The final costume is a set of black gloves, a head of jewels, and a holster with a play gun in it.

As the burlesque continues, the Empress pulls the gun from a side-holster and fusses with it as she dances to the music. Putting the gun down, she comes to her finale: pulling a chain of faux diamonds from her vulva slowly, in a final reveal. The effect of the slow tease is comedy, effected through a sonic erasure of spoken intelligibility, and articulated instead through the kinesthetics of time as it unfolds in the burlesque. The Empress Stah combines desire and memory to push her narrative forward. Yet, the performance would not gain its meaning without the dancer's continued references to and uses of her costume, I suggest. This interdependent relationship between 'dress' and 'dance,' I contend, can be understood in Stah's performance certainly by the nature of burlesque as an aesthetic form.<sup>40</sup> What interests me here is the dancer's turning-out of costume as a discourse (by taking items of the costume off) to draw attention to the question of how the performance, finally, resides *inside* Stah's body, from which she pulls

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<sup>40</sup> Burlesque in queer performance has generally been taken up by femme dancers. However, there is much evidence to support a queering and/or butching-up of the form by drag kings, queer, butch, and trans performers. See Charlotte Loftus "Queering Feminine Performance: Neo-Burlesque, Femme Identity, and Female/Female Drag" presented at the *National Women's Studies Association Conference* in St. Charles, IL, June 28, 2007. [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p173217\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p173217_index.html)

a final accoutrement: a chain of diamonds. I find this flipping of inside and outside as a ripe expression for notions of inhabitation and dwelling: a way of blurring the lines between dress and the body. Stah's articulation as Meep pushes at the conventional boundaries that separate dress and the body, by forever suggesting that a "chain" of relationships exist between dress and body, never separated. Yet, to fully grasp this idea, one must pause on my notion that costume is a space of inhabitation, and of dwelling.

### **Building, Dressing, Dwelling**

Wherein do we dwell? We dwell in space, in spaces. Houses occupy space; floors break up a landscape in form and materiality, producing in turn new spaces. Yet "space" also conjures up the absence of bodies, even as architects design spaces for inhabitants – for dwellers.<sup>41</sup> Space in this view foregrounds the importance of measuring systems that attend to built environment: measuring units of inches, yards, sections of 4' x 8' sheetrock, stacks of 8" x 4" x 2" brick. Too, space points to a conceptual way of understanding the built environment en masse, signaling the cross-roads of land, geography, urban plans, and other material manifestations of design for social coding. In these formulations, inhabitants and their bodies exist only as placeholders for

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<sup>41</sup> Philosopher Martin Heidegger writes, "We attain to dwelling, or so it seems, only by means of dwelling. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, in mind." (Heidegger, 1971, 145). Heidegger points out the distinction of building and dwelling as two activities, at least in common usage. He also makes a distinction between 'inhabiting' and 'dwelling': "the truck driver has his home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there. The working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but she does not have her dwelling place there..." (145). I call attention to these distinctions and overlaps now, and will elaborate on their importance shortly.



conceptual and mathematical formulas for how people interact with each other and with 'space.' Bodies are fit into architectural plans, inserted as CAD stick figures, just as the trees, shrubbery, traffic flow, etc. Finally, space conjures visual perspective and the absence of material objects. While the two terms – costume and space – seem to have nothing to do with each other, I suggest that costumes, too, are “spaces” of inhabitation.

### Dwelling in Clothes

I move to the writing of Martin Heidegger (1971) to ground this hairpin turn in the weaving project I enact in this text, bringing The Empress Stah's burlesque together with my own look at kinging and costumes. Through Heidegger, a relationship between building and dwelling is first proposed. From there, I pull the strings tight, to put clothes on the concept of dwelling. Costume as a space evokes shapes, colors, smells, contours, bulges, erogenous zones, and skin. Costume points to fabric, to sensations felt against the very flesh of human beings. Costume uses concepts to design, clothe, shelter, and signify the body as a legible, historically-understood social location. In contrast, 'space' signals both a 'natural' and blueprinted point of connection with the material; it evokes sight and maps, while 'costume' signals an intimate adhesion of the body's realities in inhabitation. Clothing as a space is experience through interfaces of thread, zippers, and other suturing materials with bodies, discourse, and time.

European philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that construction and dwelling are interlaced in the production of Western cultures through the etymology of

the word “to build” in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1971). Heidegger’s notion about building and dwelling are productive in this discussion to argue for the dwelling (and thus the building; the construction; the architecture) of drag kings as inhabitants and dwellers of costume. Heidegger explains that the Old English and German word for build – ‘baun’ – is to dwell. Heidegger writes:

Now to be sure the old word ‘baun’ not only tells us that bauen, to build, is really to dwell; it also gives us a clue as to how we have to think about the dwelling it signifies. When we speak of dwelling we usually think of an activity that man performs alongside many other activities. We work here and dwell there. We do not merely dwell – that would be virtual inactivity – we practice a profession, we do business, we travel and lodge on the way, now here, now there (147).

Finding an older echo --“dwell” -- in the word “build,” Heidegger offers a way to expand contemporary notions of buildings and the act of habitation into one phrase, one move.

This notion of ‘dwelling in clothing’ only scratches the surface of “dwelling” as Heidegger means it, in finding and exposing the ghost of the word ‘build’ in Old English and German. Heidegger opens with the question “How does building belong to dwelling?” (145). Here, Heidegger pushes his conception of dwelling further into human histories, to name the production of Western language as a culprit in the foreclosure of “dwelling” as an essential human condition. Heidegger writes:

Building as dwelling, that is, as being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset "habitual"-we inhabit it, as our language says so beautifully: it is the *Gewohnthe*. For this reason it recedes behind the manifold ways in which dwelling is accomplished, the activities of cultivation and construction.

At first sight this event looks as though it were no more than a change of meaning of mere terms. In truth, however, something decisive is concealed in it, namely, dwelling is not experienced as man's being; dwelling is never thought of as the basic character of human being (148).

While there are numerous profundities that Heidegger offers in his retrieval of “dwelling” from the foreclosed use of “build” in contemporary contexts, I am most attracted to the distinction the philosopher makes about the feminine and masculine aspects of dwelling he mentions in his essay. This site brings the question of clothing as a “dwelling” into sharp focus. If one can take that dwelling is a ‘habitual’ form of the dressed, dancing body’s (Heidegger says “man’s” but I change this for my purposes) everyday experience “from the outset,” Heidegger also notes two kinds of dwelling within the act: the activities of cultivation and construction. The author goes on to explain the common conceptions of cultivation as a feminine act that produces nothing (i.e. is not productive) in contrast to the masculine activity of construction – the stuff that erects buildings and creates cities (i.e. is productive). In the excerpt provided, the two are laid alongside each other. Yet, Heidegger notes the hierarchy that informs our perceptions of these terms in everyday use. He hints at the distinction between the two in the second paragraph to his first section, where he is discussing language. Heidegger writes:

That we retain a concern for care in speaking is all to the good, but it is of no help to us as long as language still serves us even then only as a means of expression. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, can help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first (146).

Heidegger forms a relationship between language and what he calls “care in speaking.” He suggests that a limited view of care is to consider it an “expression,” something that “is only” “all to the good,” by which he means ineffectual. He suggests that language is

the goal, not so much as the fantasy of desire one pursues, but something that is of the highest order. A more direct appeal to human notions of feminine and masculine encased in 'build' come in the next paragraph. Heidegger writes:

The old word *bauen*, which says that man is insofar as he dwells, this word *barren* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord. Building in the sense of preserving and nurturing is not making anything. Shipbuilding and temple-building, on the other hand, do in a certain way make their own works. Here building, in contrast with cultivating, is a constructing (147).

Here, Heidegger recognizes in 'cultivation' etymological links to cherish and protecting, something that "only takes care – it tends to the growth that ripens into [...] fruit on its own accord" (147). To this notion of building as cultivation, Heidegger contrasts shipbuilding and temple-building as the other form of construction in the word.

If we are to apply clothing to this situation of building being both cultivation and construction in their traditional gendered senses, what comes forth are the production practices of clothing (the work of mostly young Third World women of color) as cultivation, and fashion design as the masculine opposite of this labor – the erection of material structures from a blue-printed design. But, in the case of drag king performers, this formula and engendering of dress (and costume) is mixed and matched quite a bit, spreading the contours and practices of gender, race, and transnational labor across the tile floors in a Winter storm like a flood. With clothes, who does the cultivating? Who does the erecting of the structure: the sewing of 2'-by-6' strands of fabric/wood across a threshold as the first erection of a costume to its eventual stage?

In many cases of drag costuming, drag kings are independent contractors, generally without a formal fashion designer. Kings get their costumes from asundry places like most costumers: we thrift, we borrow, we find fabric and attach stars, zippers, thread, other fabric. For those who up the ante of their work and make alliance with costume and fashion designers professionally, the relationship between sewer and drag king is as important as the relation with a fashion designer and producer. It seems that with clothing and costume, Heidegger leads one to the conclusion that clothing is a dwelling, a space of inhabitation where the building of cultivation and of erecting structures – feminine and masculine – co-habitate. Heidegger’s ideas about dwelling connect drag king’s choreographies on stage as acts of dwelling, to the world at large. Not only inhabiting cities, but inhabiting the costumes that the city inspires, kings perform a response to city (and national) citizenship, through designing and inhabitations of clothes, as cities. While this is under a Western subject formation, it points to the very undoing of that Western subjectivity as well: dwelling and undwelling – two opposites that are connected in a dance of memory and desire, love, conflict, despair.

Within the conversation about dwelling as a human appeal, borne in language, Heidegger offers a picture of the inhabitants of language, as “dwellers.” Heidegger writes:

If we listen to what language says in the word *bauen* we hear three things:

1. Building is really dwelling.
2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth.

3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.

If we give thought to this threefold fact, we obtain a clue and note the following: as long as we do not bear in mind that all building is in itself a dwelling, we cannot even adequately ask, let alone properly decide, what the building of buildings might be in its nature. We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers. (148).

By identifying the cultivators of buildings as “dwellers,” Heidegger offers a bridge of language to connect my concern with the masculine and feminine legacy of the Old English and German word ‘build’ through clothes. Heidegger’s description of humans as “dwellers” has a ring to it. To dwell, in my estimation, means to set down your feet and let your shoulders relax. To dwell means to accept and give love. To dwell means to accept differences and disabilities, to ride around on a bumpy road with a car that needs a headlight fixed. We all do it, but for whom?

Dance studies gives a productive way of thinking about the kind of building about which Heidegger is speaking. To live in one’s body would be to dwell in it, via Heidegger, and in so doing build the body from the inside out. To dance in one’s body, then, would be to dwell in it: To dance as to dwell. I respond to Heidegger with knowledge that dance is a building – a structure, a practice, a labor involving strenuous poses and muscle, like construction. Clothes sit in dialogue on our shoulders while we write, teach, dance, leap, sing, moan in frustration, sex, and sleep. Clothes hang on our shoulders as a wood sheet hangs on a 2” by 6”, and the other way around.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> I worked as a carpenter and set-designer while in school. For this reason, I thought a great deal about the relationship between clothing and building. See *Monster House: The Magician’s House* (Discovery Channel, Winter 2007).

Through dance studies, an analysis of the relationships between physical practice and discourse is apparent. Bodies negotiating the terms of transnationalism, gender, and sexuality by engaging physical force, tension and expansion in relation to not only itself or gravity, but in relation to clothing, too. These performances could be articulated at the micro and macro sites of performances of the body: technosubjectivity; a relationship producing an inter-species, a dialogue between desire and the material, moving body.

Heidegger adds a question to the essay: what is building to dwelling? “In what way does building belong to dwelling?” (151) he writes. Heidegger uses a bridge as an example of a built structure. “The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power,” he writes. “It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream” (152). The ultimate contribution of Heidegger’s theoretic is that he offers a model of subjectivity as an assemblage, created by building. He writes, “Gathering or assembly, by ancient word in our language, is called ‘thing’ “ (153). He describes the bridge as a thing and then finally offers, “We are attempting to trace in thought the nature of dwelling. The next step on this path would be the question: what is the state of dwelling in our precarious age?” (161). Heidegger’s theorizations suggest that to look at costume is to look at the “state of dwelling” in performance, rendering the discourse of costume both a “masculine” bend as constructor of structures, and a “feminine” bend as cultivator of the edifice.

Each king, before a performance, goes through a ritual act of dressing himself. The king pulls tiny cut up hairs from a plastic bag, places them on a table and pastes them to his face with spirit gum, sponges, and scissors. He reaches his leg(s) into durable pants, stuffs a sock or a packing dildo in his jockeys, and closes the zipper and top button over the bulge in his pants. T-shirts and tank tops go on, sometimes over a breast brace or wide Ace bandage stretched around his torso and chest. Performers joke with each other to take the tension off; people catch up on their lives. There is banter, silence, and respect communicated by the choreography of a dressing room, as well as other emotions. These acts of dwelling in these rituals of costume are a form of subject-formation for the king.

\* \* \*

In this chapter I presented dreams of dresses to evidence the important role the imagination has on liberation struggle. I shared a dream of a place that doesn't exist, to make present the absent bodies of one drag king economy in the record of History with a capital "H." I suggested that dreaming and imagining are key components of the cities drag kings create in their performances, following the narratives of Robin Kelly and Rex Ray/Marcus Ewert. I suggested that looking at the dreams imagined by drag king performers are a way in which kings express love and desire, together, not an infantile love (of community, self, or other), but a serious love that undermines the rational, in its vision of freedom and liberation. Then, by digging into the etymology of the word "building" provided by philosopher Martin Heidegger, I suggested that in the wake of



this excision lies a reverberation of older understandings of building as a form of dwelling, an activity that engages the body through physical practice, the pursuit of dream, and memory. Looking at Kelley's poetics in *Freedom Dreams*, I pointed to the use and relevance of ornamentation as a fundamental practice of writing. Suturing this thought with Heidegger's notions linked up my writing practice with the gestures of the Windy City Sarmies performance at the *International Drag King Extravaganza* in 2009, I suggested that dress and costuming could be best understood not only as an art historical object, but also as an orientation device (following Ahmed) and a building (following Heidegger). These costumes then become also dwellings, spaces of inhabitation where a livable life can be imagined. I parsed out the gendered valuations of "building" via Heidegger, to propose that dressing is composed both of a masculine factor (building, constructing, puncturing needle into cloth) and a feminine one (cultivating, nurturing, remembering). Finally, I tie beginning to end by connecting my notion of the dressed, dancing body as a material entity connected to its referent – a dream of an impossible body where history (with a small 'h') is not excised from Western knowledge when viewed from an alternatively masculine position.

In the next chapter, I move to an analysis of the larger context of state production as it relates to the enforcement and policies surrounding prison wear.

## CHAPTER 3

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### PRISON WEAR, SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, AND AN UPTURNED COLLAR

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*“Prisoners... should be allowed to wear their own clothing except for items that pose a serious security threat.”*

National Prisoners Project, 1988

*“Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”*

Exodus, 21:23

#### **The Living Dead**

In this chapter, I suggest that prison wear is the garb of the living dead – of beings with material bodies who are not extinguished, but rather, in their long sentences and tenures in solitary confinement, are forced to live in a juridical, architectural, and social context – the prison – that comprises a living tomb. In this tomb, I argue that it is worth considering dress not as the sartorial manifestation of the state’s provision for inmate welfare as mandated by federal law to address inmate’s “basic human needs,” but rather to see prison dress as a death costume that, like the definition of “cruel and unusual punishment” articulates a blurry juridical category located between the living and the dead.

To support my thesis, I look at the uniform dress practices and policies of three prison events and one drag king performance to explicate how prison wear and drag

king performance are both tied to U.S. State formation. First, I address the upturned collar of political prisoner Susan Rosenberg, documented in Nina Rosenblum's "Through the Wire" (1990). I argue that although Rosenberg's upturned collar is a cultural referent that disrupts the normative meanings of gender, class, and nation, it is also an embodied signal of a choreographic practice (dressing) productive of Rosenberg's intimate knowledge about freedom, outside of verbal discourse. Against the practices of Rosenberg I pair the prison uniform as a material discourse mandating uniformity, conformity, and subordination in dressing practices to conceptualize 'prison wear' as something that ought be politicized as not just "institutional dress" but actually a product of a deeply sinister ideological framework where life, death, materiality, and immateriality, the juridical and the social overlap in knots. Next, I move to an event described by journalist Laura Whitehead of a 1992 protest in Lexington, Kentucky by the FMC Women's Camp inmates to establish how prison wear, post-Enlightenment, structures and reduces the visual field to two social possibilities – captive and captivator. I then contextualize this claim in prison literature which situates the historic emergence of punishment and prisons in the U.S. and Europe, drawing out the underwritten presence of the sartorial in these literatures.

Legal scholar Colin Dayan (2001) describes prisoners as *the living dead* in an essay I explore later in this chapter. This category of living death describes a juridical and socially liminal grey area where life, agency, psychic death, and physical death overlap. Life in this category reads like a laundry list of warfare on the human body and spirit: prisoners are deprived of their given names (and become cell numbers); of the comforts of bedding, shelter, natural minerals and resources (sun, air, water, etc.); of

good food; of physical, psychic, civic, and social safety; of a sense of mobility, effectiveness, and agency; of apt medical care for normal and extreme medical issues (including pregnancy, burns, wounds, stabbings, pre-existing psychiatric disability, stress, depression, despair etc.); and of hope, an opportunity to participate in productive labor and healthy social dynamics.

Dayan describes the legal context for these conditions. She writes that prisoners are understood through “the condition of being *civilter mortuus* or dead in law...” (Dayan, 2001, 12). While the Latin phrase does not give way to an easy pronunciation nor understanding, *civilter mortuus* does mark a disabled individual and citizen who exists at the intersection of life and death, both commonly and legally understood and misunderstood. I give a name to the dress of these U.S. prisoners who, likewise, effectively and often die behind prison walls via the state’s “endurance” tests of incarceration and solitary confinement, both contexts designed to do violence to the human spirit, body, and mind. My intervention in the wealth of abolition scholarship that evidences this reality is to provide a framework for recognizing how prison wear – the clothes inmates are required to wear while incarcerated – is assumed to be clothes for living beings who are ‘temporarily’ detained to be rehabilitated, but in reality these could be the last clothes they ever wear. These could be their death clothes. It is likely that many inmates are aware of this possibility the moment they put on their prison uniforms. While for some readers these ideas might reek of existentialism, the intention behind them are not aligned with that philosophy. Rather, following the analysis of Colin Dayan, it becomes clear that the civic deaths of incarcerated people put them in a conceptual category that marks them as (in every other way) just-about-to-be-deceased.

## Uniform Practices

Prison uniformity as an ideology extends itself from the choreography of prisoner movement to their dress choices and styles. A prison “uniform” signals a desired “uniformity” of the state, by creating a uniform and easy-to-distinguish visual topography of prisoners as one massive unit. This intent produces prison uniforms in their limited set of color, size, and shape options for inmates. In this section, I take up the double entendre of the phrase: “uniform practices.” The first meaning of the term refers to the prison uniforms themselves: material entities of polyester or poly-cotton blends tailored into standard institutional shapes, sizes, and colors. The second meaning of the term is the more important of the two to my current analysis, where physical and ideological “practices” of conformity meet a discourse of “uniformity” at the site of the prisoner’s body organized by dress. Pairing prison ‘uniforms’ with ‘a discourse of uniformity’ in the post-Foucauldian environment of punishment characteristic of the contemporary US prison regime gives way not only to the bio-political effects of prison wear as an ideological construct, but also of its ability to make every-day women (before incarceration) into criminals and ‘men’, simultaneously, through its implementations of prison material uniformity.

What cruelty makes carbon copies out of its inmates, through the prison uniform? How does the US prison regime evacuate “woman” and a humane recognition of all other non-white, male gendered identities from its dark halls? While there are many answers to these loaded questions, the answer I pursue here lies in the beliefs about dress inherent to prison wear as a discourse. Namely, the answer articulates

conventional beliefs about “male” and “female” dress options – that to be “man” is to accept limited dress choices; and to be “female” is to have more options but sacrifice a full human identity. Reinforcing binary gender, the state promotes true citizens (outside the prison walls, as Colin Dayan argues) as those with dress choices; and prisoners as those with none. The default category “male” is left in the wake of this evacuation as the only option for recognition within the prison.

Following this logic, my current line of thinking about uniformity re-frames the space of the U.S. prison as a place where hegemonic masculinity and whiteness tied to state-formation is produced in equal relationship to the available oxygen within the prison regime.<sup>43</sup> What this leaves in terms of a remainder of gendered and racialized subject-positions is a factor of zero. Hegemonic masculinity and biological maleness, then, becomes the imposed default category and only viable social location to occupy as an inmate in the U.S prison, according to this logic – an impossibility contained with the fantasy of punishment and the ruse of prisons as places of sanctioned discipline and ‘rehabilitation.’ In terms of dress, then, the options point to masculinity as the stylistic imperative. This leaning comes out as a materialization of a utilitarian conception of dress fathomed to cost the least, control the most, and demarcate ‘the criminals’ from the rest of those who pass through the US prison regime. So, institutionalization in the US prison regime offers up reduced ‘choices’ in terms of style, color, fabric, etc. in prison wear (all these would be considered options of ‘free’ people in capitalist societies); masculinity also relies on a devaluation of the sartorial as a language as part of

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<sup>43</sup> My mention of natural resources is clearly a metaphor here for social economy, circulations of desire that mark privilege and human bodily survival at its most basic level.

masculinity's project to deny the presence of the body (and the feminine); within this framework, hegemonic masculinity fabricates the idea that there are 'essential' dress components (shirt, pants, shoes, socks, undergarments) to which a human body can be reduced.

I pursue this thought within the context of my discussion on 'uniform practices' and an inquiry into the project that transforms inmates from bodies with civic identities to those marked as 'criminal' to address and unbind the language that masks what prison uniforms themselves might be, beyond the product of numbers-crunching and market-place outsourcing, and likewise beyond an inmate's response of conformity and subordination to state/federal dress policies. What else could one call the "essential" components of dress – what name might describe this 'basic' uniform that fulfills the legal duties of the state to provide 'basic human needs' to inmates, besides "prison uniform"?

### **Dress As Punishment**

Colin Dayan explores the genealogy of the term "punishment" through a juridical lens in her essay, "Cruel and Unusual: Parsing the Meaning of Punishment" (2001). Through Dayan, we may develop a way to unmask the haunting resonances of prison wear as clothes not for the living, but for those about to die. This shift in perspective in regards to prison uniforms is, I would argue, extremely important. Colin Dayan (who then published under the name Joan Dayan) describes a world where inmates are destroyed from inside their bodies outward, under the radar of the juridical

definition of 'cruel and unusual punishment' outlined in the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>44</sup> Dayan suggests that this is made possible through "a remnant of obsolete jurisprudence: the state of a person who, though possessing 'natural life' has lost all 'civil rights' " (7). When speaking of the upturned collar of Susan Rosenberg one need ask the question: How does the cultural resistance of an upturned collar (not part of the style of prison uniforms as guided by the state) articulate and reflect these practices of living death? Dayan explicates that old Saxon beliefs and laws (carried through to the present tense) mandate that those incarcerated give up rights of property, blood-line, and "the extinction of civil rights, more or less complete" (2). In this way, the symbolic destruction of a civic identity is coupled with the destruction of a human identity understood (legalized, articulated, choreographed, and represented) by blood-lines.

Dayan's look at what constitutes civic death is, however, only half of the argument the author makes in her genealogy of punishment as a juridical category. Dayan recounts the spectacle of physical torture characteristic of an earlier period of penal punishment, following the 1977 analysis of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. The 18<sup>th</sup> century stories Foucault offers describe a drawn-out ceremony of torture and mania, coveted as "sovereign law." There, the ritual of public death articulated religious rule, where human inability to kill "the criminal spirit" because of the persistence of the body to live on, is met with unrelenting physical violence. The deeper anxiety about death looming within this ritual (about what it

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<sup>44</sup> The Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution reads: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted" (Cited in Dayan, 17).



cannot do) is a factor unarticulated in these ritual performances, but never-the-less entirely a factor in the levels of explicit physical torture characteristic of this period. Yet, Dayan fast-forwards intricately through Foucault to reference this period of penal punishment, avoiding the pitfalls of a fetishistic and eternal pause on bodily torture often brought on by reading Foucault. That is to say, Foucault's images are viscerally memorable: his opening story of Damien the regicide who was burned, torn, melted, and finally drawn and quartered on March 2, 1757 at the main door of the Church of Paris is an image Foucault produces that screams in its physical descriptions. The story cannot help but captivate and may halt a contemporary reader in her tracks to process the implications.

In identifying both the Christian roots and anxiety associated with criminality (but, more specifically, with racial difference<sup>45</sup>) as it linked up physical torture, Dayan then moves her analysis to the present tense to the contexts where brutality writ large are held up against 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment conceptions of "cruel and unusual punishment." Dayan's argument is that, juridically-speaking, the past remains in the present where the language of the law shields the current practices of penal brutality from view because the older definition of punishment as a corporeal, physical act separate from the mind is the primary juridical definition of punishment available. It is this link between mind and body that Dayan carries into the remainder of her analysis to rigorously unwind the circuits of punishment where the loss of a civic identity (by cutting off an

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<sup>45</sup> Dayan's focus is also on how conceptions of the slave during early American history functioned to validate a discourse of miscegenation and fundamental (Christian) anxiety about a 'corruption of blood-lines.' She writes "It can be argued that slavery in the United States resulted in a new understanding of the limits of human endurance, so that new, more refined cruelties could be invented. On the ruins of the rack, the thumbscrew, the wheel and the iron boot, the atrocities of a more enlightened age came into being" (2001, 8-9).

inmate's legal ties to family, inheritance, and all other forms of property, including clothing) remains "not as serious an attack on personal liberties" (9) as the invisibility that comes with the contemporary situation where torture is no longer spectacularized (except in accidental cases that leak into the media, such as with Abu Ghraib). Dayan suggests most importantly, however, that this invisibility is combined with long-sentences 'where inmates are 'imprisoned for life" and become "dead in law" (9) thereby creating a ruse in the penal system's claim of humanitarian alternatives to spectacularized physical brutality. This ruse, as I will discuss later, came in the form of solitary confinement. Dayan describes how this new form of incarceration "mark[ed] the continuum between unnatural (civil or spiritual) death and natural (actual and physical) death" (17). Dayan astutely elaborates on the importance of exposing the poles of death in order to recognize the modern form of genocide hidden by the glare of physical conceptions of punishment, deterioration, and death. Dayan writes:

As we will see, the legal understanding of punishment, once concentrated on the physical, would take advantage of the fact that mental disintegration does not necessarily leave any physical trace. And unlike the ritual execution, there is no public audience inside the prison cell and thus no need to protect witnesses from blood, smoke, gasps, or jerks (14).

Colin Dayan describes the situation where prisoners are secretly hurried to confinement and where "sufferings are unknown or forgotten" (3). Dayan asks, "What, then, is the status of inmates? Are they slaves to the state, wards of the state, or do they occupy some other status, perhaps 'criminal aliens,' in the words of the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act? (104 Congress 1996: sec. 440, 62). The prisoner's status remains the most neglected area of correctional law...." (12). Dayan's expertise in

parsing through legalese along with her commitment to abolition renders her essay a vital document for my dissertation's concern with clothing and prison wear as a fundamental site for analyzing U.S. state formation. Though Dayan looks at the genealogy of the legal language of punishment primarily, the piece provides a way to understand prison wear as clothes not for the living 'criminal' undergoing a process of rehabilitation and a timely release, but instead as dress that fortifies a prison ideology that makes living bodies into living corpses. In this way, falling suit (conforming) to the mandates of prison wear in their entirety puts an inmate at risk of participating in a discourse that sees her only, and always, as worthy of nothing more than death. Conformity and uniformity combine to produce a commitment to an inmate's living death. Dayan writes, "Confinement of prisoners in the United States thus became an alternative to slavery, another kind of receptacle for imperfect creatures whose civil disease justified containment" (12). Dayan continues her essay diving into the "great and awesome symbol of solitary confinement" known as Cherry Hill or the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia (15), documented by many writers including Charles Dickens in his 1829 *American Notes*. It is worth quoting Dickens at length, for his prose gets to the heart of contemporary penal brutality with both poetic beauty and sharp incision. Dickens writes:

Once the black hood covered the face of the criminal condemned to Cherry Hill, the long process of executing the soul began – and in this dark shroud, an emblem of the curtain dropped between him and the living world .... He is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and despair (Dickens, 1842: 99-100; cited in Dayan, 15).

Charles Dickens' prose strikes me as hardly fictive in its rendering of Cherry Hill. The author's description of the black hood as a "dark shroud" that cut the inmate's life off from the "free" world by shielding his vision and bearing down on his body through use (as a reminder of his criminalized status). The close-up of Cherry Hill as emblemized through the black hood foregrounds the discursive and corporeal role of the black hood as a ritualized practice of state control landed in dress mandates. Yet, in addition, the black hood actualizes an early form of "solitary confinement" by isolating an inmate from his environment and from other inmates, by cutting off visual and sensual perception and stripping the prisoner of even more rights to privacy than he had prior to the black hood. Through this lens, sensory-deprivation becomes visible as part of a larger network of physical, conceptual, and psychic processes of a violent nature, the untold stories of human control and destruction formed by racism, incarceration, hooding, and other patriotic investments in U.S. nation-building.

### **The State of Affairs Inside the U.S. Prison Regime (which is everywhere)**

Prison abolition aims its analytic at the prison industrial complex, a regime of militarized state violence that criminalizes and incarcerates 1,612,071 persons in prison alone as of January 1, 2010 in the United States, according to the April 2010 *PEW Center Report*,<sup>46</sup> leading the world in number and percentage behind bars. This statistic represents a crisis, and an atrocity. In addition to the sheer over-incarceration of particular social subjects (meaning, racialized, non-normatively gendered, and

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<sup>46</sup> See report at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Prison\\_Count\\_2010.pdf?n=880](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Prison_Count_2010.pdf?n=880)

impoverished people), the U.S. prison regime also utilizes semiotic and spatial logics to wield a unified notion of a ‘proper’ U.S. citizen within current practices of modernity. Spatially-speaking, prisons are huge architectural mega-complexes that often occupy massive acres of “un-utilized” agricultural land or vacated landscapes of many of America’s economically impoverished towns. These structures in their enormity make a visual impact. They elicit awe and wonder, as any huge architectural structure might to the modern human eye. Prison mega-complexes as material entities foster an atmosphere of dread and isolation in their domination of the visual landscape. Likewise, the building materials of the prison signify violence, sadism, manipulation, corruptness, a lack of safety, torture, violation, injustice. Prison building materials are menacing and sharp: bobbed-wire, walls several feet deep, cement, stone, hard dirt.

The 1.6 million federally captive bodies inside federal prisons, separated from the world by bobbed-wire, cement, stone, and miles upon miles of geographic isolation and subject to high-security, state-of-the art surveillance technologies, witness and experience the effects of U.S. ideological control over citizenship and national identity, through corporeal control. I argue that nowhere else than in the U.S. prison regime is evidence of an investment (ideologically, and economically) in the bio-political control of gendered identities and racialized differences (both inflected by class), control that characterizes life for drag kings both inside and outside the formal prison walls. This chapter looks at the U.S. prison regime, therefore, to make the stakes of sartorial interventions by the drag king performers and female political prisoners in this dissertation, on modernity and European knowledge production, blatantly clear.

William Pinar details the numbers and percentages in a painstakingly long research project dedicated to histories of violence and homophobia against gay men in U.S. history. Pinar writes, “The United States now incarcerates a greater proportion of its population than any other nation, except possibly Russia: one in 167 U.S. residents was incarcerated in local jails and federal state prisons at the end of 1995, up from one in every 453 U.S. residents at the end of 1980” (Pinar, 2001, 987). Pinar suggests that women have been the most hard hit, with a 993% increase in the number of incarcerated women between 1984 and 1993, compared to the 458% growth of male prisoners over a similar but slightly longer period, 1972-1995 (986). While the statistics suggest that these 20 years represent an increase in crime under the force of a stable governmental arm, Pinar and other critical penal system theorists suspect otherwise, citing racism and the criminalization of black and brown bodies in their anti-prison praxis. “Much of this increase in women’s incarceration is due to recent anti-drug legislation which mandates longer prison sentences” Pinar suggests, citing Colvin (987). If the body is always and already implicated in representational and sensorial system of dress formed under the white supremacist state of statecraft and nation-building, then what can be said of the process which marks race, sexuality, and gender through practices of subordination and violent legal and social inscription, criminalizing black, brown, and alternatively-gendered bodies, some of whom live out alternative sexual practices to normative heterosexuality? And how are these layers of discrimination layered into the mandatory prison wear dress policies of the U.S. Federal Prison Regime?

As in hospitals, the abuse in institutions such as prisons are fertile grounds for constant and consistent abuse of hierarchical power. Activist-scholar Dr. Angela Davis

speaks about “completing the wrook that was not finished during emancipation” (Davis, public lecture, Pomona College, 2009). Though I have purposefully left my mis-spelling of Davis’ mention of “work,” the idea of “wrook” rings a true bell. “Wrook” is in its formation a queer labor, something that those who choose to do it are committing to in their lives. Prisoner of War Alejandrina Torres describes in her interview in “Through the Wire” (1993) that rightful ownership of freedom comes at a cost. Torres said in the interview:

There are those within the independence movement that are good for protest. There are those that are good for writing. There are those that are good for reading. And there are those that have to sacrifice their families, sometimes, to achieve that which rightfully belongs to us and that is our freedom (“Through the Wire,” 1990).

Sometimes, when not in community with those who honor our subject-formations as desiring subjects, we rely on objects to form us. Sometimes, there are no people around to offer a mirror – contemplation about how the world works -- and in this absence, is a hole. These two sentences are packed with the visual and theoretical concerns of this chapter. Alejandrina Torres is speaking from a hole in her articulation of what revolutionaries such as she sacrifice to make themselves visible to the world as feminist, female, direct-action resisters. I place clothing as a response to that hole – not as a band aid for a wound, but as an object and a second skin, a network of weave patterns and overlying threads, chains, fabric, full of holes. Linking a failed body (the hole of absence) with an even more queer one (the weave pattern full of holes) begins an anti-Oedipal sex

act<sup>47</sup> which I proposed in Chapter 1 is the figure of the dressed, dancing body. “Through the Wire” takes place inside an underground prison, in a high-security unit that aims to turn human beings into blind spots on the visual register.

### **High-Security Female Confinement – Lexington, Kentucky, 1986**

In a conversation with the National Prisoner’s Project about the Lexington HSU, Susan Rosenberg stated that prisoners “should be allowed to wear their own clothing except for items that pose a serious security threat” (National Prisoner’s Project, *Report*, 1988). The comment raises a question: Why would a person take the time to talk about clothes, in the context of the cruelty and life threatening practices of prisons? What clothes and dressing habits would comprise the threshold of a “serious security” threat? One fathoms that dress must be a site of struggle over power and survival in the U.S. prison regime.

On October 29, 1986 the Lexington HSU opened its doors. Located inside the Lexington’s Federal Correctional Institute, the 16-bed unit was entirely under-ground where no natural air or light ever passed. Prison officials drew up a blueprint for a redesign of the existing basement, in preparation for what has been called the first political prison in the United States. The HSU cost the general public almost \$1 million

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<sup>47</sup> By ‘Oedipal sex act’ I mean to invoke the Freudian idea of the production of normative heterosexuality through affective identification a young boy experiences in seeing his parents have (Missionary) sex for the first time. To be against this scene is to resist its relevance as a mandatory measure of healthy subjectivity, and so national citizenship.



with “an annual per woman maintenance cost of over \$55,000” (O’Melvaney, 1996).<sup>48</sup> This notable cost of the redesign indicated to the women incarcerated in it that they might be the subjects of “an experiment” of the federal government, at the expense of their human rights.<sup>49</sup> A PBS award-winning documentary “Through the Wire” (1990) directed by Nina Rosenblum, focuses on documenting the women’s stories through interviews and images taken on site in Lexington.

The three prisoners who brought attention to the conditions of the Lexington, Kentucky unit described it as “an experiment” to degrade and destroy their material, social, civic, and psychic bodies. Writer Carolyn Burbank describes the unit as a “cruel high-tech form of political persuasion,” in an August 1997 review of a play based on the Lexington HSU by Megan Rogers.<sup>50</sup> Yet, while federal representatives denied their own political motivations behind the re-design of the basement or its aim to destroy those it incarcerated, the judges of high profile court case against the Justice Department determined the unit to be unfit for human habitation in violation of human rights, ordering its closure. The High Security Unit for Women in the Lexington, Kentucky prison was closed on August 19, 1998. But, the story does not end there.

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<sup>48</sup> Attorney Mary K. O’Melvaney represented political Lexington prisoner Susan Rosenblum in the suit filed by the attorney’s from ACLU’s National Prison Project, the Center for Constitutional Rights and herself against the Justice Department for putting Rosenberg and other prisoners in conditions that violated the U.S. Constitution and international human rights law.

<sup>49</sup> Court case: July 19, 1988. SILVIA BARALDINI et al., Plaintiffs v. EDWIN MEESE, Attorney Genral of the United States of America, et al., Defendants.

<sup>50</sup> The play is entitled “Bombs in the Ladies Room.” [http://www.division13.org/press/article\\_bombs.html](http://www.division13.org/press/article_bombs.html) A third art project focused on the Lexington case was “Voces de Acero,” (1990) a performance incorporating dance, theater, spoken word (multi-lingual) and music by the Pregones Theatre Collective in New York City. <http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000549815.html>

### Susan Rosenberg's Upturned Collar

In "Through the Wire," the prison wear of the female political prisoners is given view. In one section of the film, political prisoner Susan Rosenberg wears a tan polyester shirt or jumpsuit. Another prisoner, Allejandrina Torres, wears a brown shirt, khaki pants, belt. Surveillance cameras are at every corner of the unit, with the possible exception of cameras in the showers (this concern is raised by one of the prisoners in the film, and not resolved). With surveillance cameras on 24/7 and ritualistic body cavity searches and other prisoner checks, the unit provides no contact with a natural, living, breathing, public world. On its most basic level, the difference between the primary prison – the main women's prison in Lexington, Kentucky – and the high-security housing units that characterize the isolation of the underground high-security all-female unit for political prisoners is the lack of fresh air, light, or human contact, almost at all. These are coffins shared only by those unofficially sentenced to die. I say 'coffins' truly meaning it; these are four closed walls without air, natural light, exits. They are not imaginary states of mind – they are actual places that people are forced to live in.

Given no outdoor privileges, female prisoner recycle a single quantity of air; and in doing so, are taxed by its increasing ineffectiveness as source of nutrition. But the costumes in this film are what capture my attention. When Susan Rosenberg turns her collar up (at least once, when the jumpsuit or shirt first comes out of the wash), how is she making room in the coffin for a discussion about freedom, and therefore producing emancipatory discourse through movement and costume? To answer this question, I

return to a detailed description of Rosenberg's sartorial appearances in the film, to establish her own stylistic habits as evidenced in the film. It would seem that Rosenberg is building and dwelling with her gesture, making it difficult to breathe as she rises from the coffins and redesigns the architecture.

Against this backdrop are the three women of the women-only high-security unit in Lexington who importantly inform my analysis. The following section reflects my memory and viewing of the film, over several television sets and digital screens during one year of my research, 2009-2010. Written as auto-ethnography, it constructs a discourse for analyzing prison wear through an attention to Susan Rosenberg's upturned collar while incarcerated in the Lexington, Kentucky high-security female unit in 1986-8.

Susan Rosenberg, a former member of the Weather Underground, was joined by Alejandrina Torres, a long-time fighter for Puerto Rican liberation, and Silvia Baraldini, an Italian citizen and known as an active member in the Black Power and Puerto Rico independence movement in the United States during the 1960's and 70's to be some of the first prisoners of the Lexington, Kentucky high-security all-women unit. These three women are interviewed in Rosenblum's "Through the Wire," and highlighted in many of the media and activist projects based on the Lexington HSU. Rosenberg, Torres, and Baraldini were committed to the Lexington, Kentucky HSU with some of the longest sentences in U.S. history for the crimes linked to their incarceration. Rosenberg, arrested in 1984 for possession of false identification papers, explosives and other weapons was given 58 years – "the longest the U.S. has ever given for a weapons charge" (Ely, 1998). Torres was arrested in 1983 and given 35 years for "seditious

conspiracy” and for her attempt, as she describes in “Through the Wire,” to overthrow the U.S. government by force. Torres notes, “I call myself a prisoner of war for the colonial relation between the U.S. government and my country, Puerto Rico.” (in Rosenblum, 1990). Baraldini was arrested in 1982 while walking down the street, and received a 40-year sentence “under the federal RICO ‘anti-racketeering’ law for allegedly belonging to ‘corrupt organizations’ (by which they meant underground radical movements)” (Ely, 1998). Baraldini describes that her arrest was related to the accusation of helping Black revolutionary Assata Shakur escape from prison (in Rosenblum, 1990). Susan Rosenberg, Silvia Baraldini and Alejandrina Torres are not performers on a performance stage in the same sense as the drag kings of this dissertation. But, I would argue that the disciplinary boundaries that need be crossed over to understand their similarities, articulates a common discursive neighborhood, where at times the two directly interact. It goes without saying that there was no love in Lexington. Yet, the documentary sheds light on hope, through its act of solidarity in filming the women for an activist audience. “Through the Wire” communicates an incommunicable situation, at least to some degree by foregrounding and setting afoot the women’s stories.

Like any product of capitalism and U.S. imperial expansion, the public literature on the U.S. penal system prides itself on using state-of-the-art technology. Whether these be wall-mounted analogue cameras or digital tracing systems connected to a global satellite, like any industry, the U.S. prison regime validates itself through a

discourse of capital and progress linked specifically to the visual.<sup>51</sup> But, the use of innovation did not stop with surveillance systems. Argued to be a blue-print for today's super-max high-security units hugely popular in the contemporary U.S. prison regime, the designers of the Kentucky high-security all-women's unit also rounded up all the tools of institutional lodging, and amped them up to the nth degree. Their goal: extreme civic and social isolation; psychic and physical torture; sensory deprivation.

Silvia Baraldini, in close-ups and medium shots, strikes a handsome chord to my eyes. She reminds me of the images of Mafia kings I have seen in narrative film over the years, a reading of the political revolutionary informed by her Italian citizenship as well as by my U.S.-centric mythologizing of Italian kinship structures that I have absorbed from U.S. narrative cinema. This is effected mainly through the physical stance Baraldini takes in her interviews. There is an assuredness to them, a sense of her being solidly in her body with both feet on the ground. Baraldini dons the prison uniforms with grace: an open collar and firmness in her shoulders is visible in the early interviews with her at Lexington. Susan Rosenberg's images on screen come in flash flames, like the sharp edges of her voice soothed over by a cooler tone. The cinematic portraits show a woman with brown, bushy hair and man's overcoat. She shouts "Long live the armed struggle" in response to a question and is tucked into the police vehicle in the footage of her arrest at a storage unit. Rosenberg's collar on the jacket is turned up, in this footage. Alejandrina Torres in the early part of the documentary has copious amounts

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<sup>51</sup> The mention of the visual is hardly insignificant, as countless scholars have discussed. European modernity's reliance on visual knowledge production and the predominance of sight as the key perspective faculty of proper modern self-hood. As a counter to these normative Oedipal reproductions of the European subject, Donna Haraway, for one, argues for the subversive forms of reproduction at play in multi-sensual and/or human/non-human reproductive relationships. See Haraway, 1997.

of energy and a sharp sense of humor; later in the documentary she appears pale in pallor, and far less spunky. The contrast of her opening persona in the film and the one presented later in the film is striking. A similar sartorial tale is told in the film. In the beginning, Torres wears a shirt with medals on it, signifying her status in the Puerto Rican revolutionary struggle. In the end of the film, her uniform has been replaced by prison wear from head to toe.

As I write these descriptions, I find them horrifying. Giving a picture of the women through language, what dwelling place am I invoking for these women, and at whose cost? There is no question I describe in words marked by my ignorance of political revolution, armed struggle, military independence movements. I have not had the fortune to work in those ways. Rather, I use my words to elucidate the ornamentation of struggle – to point out its performative character as excess. Taken into the wrong hands, descriptions of women’s bodies, clothes, and their affect plays into the hegemonic discourses of misogyny, third world oppression, sexual violence, murder, and low-intensity torture characteristic of the U.S. State (military) imaginary, of which I am an inheritor as a scholar born in and living in the United States. These ideologies become psychoanalytic theory in scholarly writing; they become racial fetishization in film theories; they feed the fascination of a televisual audience bred by a hunger for old west heroes (like Susan Rosenberg) and Italian mafia kings (like Baraldini). As I hope my analysis forthcoming makes clear, “Through the Wire” works as a heroic ‘old west’ story for political revolutionaries, painting a picture of the kings of a thriving international revolutionary movement. Perhaps this is why I chose these three kings as

“neighbors” to the drag kings dancing in this dissertation: to witness the wedding of different kings with kings, and these kings to queens.

### **The Striped Prison Uniform**

To get to an analysis of Susan Rosenberg’s tan shirt with the collar upturned, I must first situate prison wear into its historical context as a pattern of criminalization. Moving from the traditional “striped prison uniform” established in European histories to the monochrome, high contrast, and polyester uniforms of contemporary prison scenes, the upturned prison collar will then be contextualized within a political battle to control, organize, and excise “different” bodies from the state. Susan Rosenberg, incarcerated in the late 1980’s, did not enter the formal prison walls to Kentucky dress policies that mandated striped prison wear. The uniforms there are evidenced in “Through the Wire” as monochrome 2-piece uniforms and scrub jumpsuits, likely polyester. I will mention later that the 2-piece uniforms are a continuation of the striped black-and-white prison uniform of U.S. slavery, the Holocaust, and Medieval times (to name only a few); but for now we begin with the representative field of European cognition linked to visual literacy.

Medieval art historian Michel Pastoureau looks at how the stripe in clothing has historically been assigned to all those cast out of society – be they prostitutes, heretics, French revolutionaries, or artists sporting a ‘good stripe’ chic in his book, *The Devil’s Cloth: A History of Stripes* (1991). Pastoureau analyses Medieval striped clothing in

paintings, sculpture, and Christian scripture based on a pattern he noted of striped garb in these mediums. Pastoreau observed:

In the medieval Western world, there are a great number of individuals – real or imaginary – whom society, literature, and iconography endow with striped clothing. In one way or another, they are all out-casts or reprobates, from the Jew and the heretic to the clown and the juggler, and including not only the leper, the hangman, and the prostitute but also the disloyal knight of the Round Table, the madman of the Book of Psalms, and the character of Judas (1991, 2).

Curious to understand “the origin of this sign” and why negative figures seemed always associated with the stripe, Pastoreau observes that stripes in these mediums “... disturb or pervert the established order; [and] ... all have more or less to do with the devil” (2). What Michel Pastoreau offers in this stark look at stripes in art is a look not only at the repeated patterns of semiotic signs in visual representation as a discursive field, but also at visuality itself: the systems of visual apprehension produced by European modernity.

Pastoreau comments that all stripes seem more or less “to do with the devil.” Christian scripture points us in the direction of seeing this link. In the Bible, there is a phrase from Leviticus that oft appears in popular culture. Leviticus reads, “Veste, quae ex duobus texta est, non indueris” which Pastoreau translates as “You will not wear upon yourself a garment that is made of two ...” (2), leaving the final translation to debate. Pastoreau argues that modern Bible translations of Leviticus remain faithful to a Hebrew translation. Christian theologians “interpreted this as a ban on ornamentation and colors when it was only a question of fibers and cloth” (4). What is at issue for Pastoreau is the translation of the phrase in modern theological texts. The phrase



describes a moment in Christian political history, where a new order – the Carmelites – projected their beliefs through scripture and dress, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Leviticus passage references this moment, culling up a memory of this battle between those who worn brown-and-white striped cloaks (the Carmelites) and those who did not. In this fight for power, the sartorial stood in for a host of beliefs that threatened the established order, and thus subjectivity itself. For the Carmelites, a white cloak was designated to express devotion to Mary, with brown stripes referring to the passage of their prophet, Elijah, who passed through flames before being carried off by a chariot of fire. Elijah’s commitment to Mary disrupted the conventional practices (sartorial, but also choreographic – physical practices) of nation-building encased in conventional Christian theology. Observing that Elijah had clout in his birth of a new order, the prophet had to be physically removed, signified by his disappearance in “a chariot of fire,” forever more. This over-reliance on the Hebrew translation of the Latin Leviticus verse enabled and legalized the discrimination of the Carmelites within European modernity, through an emphasis on aesthetics – rather than fiber and cloth – to communicate its authority.

As is well-known, the Renaissance inherited the traditions of visuality present in Medieval painting, architecture, and sculpture. The formal divides between church and state were separated, however, with the use of perspectival vision to cue depth in painting. This depth provided a housing for bodies to emerge more fully in three-dimensions in these paintings, an affront to Medieval conceptions of the body as inseparable from God. While figurations of bodies in the religious iconography of Medieval work is characteristically flat, Renaissance works such as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel (1508-1512) commissioned by Pope Julius II evidence three-

dimensionality in their figurations. This painting practice is achieved by the use of horizon lines and vanishing points: what is described as perspectival vision or, simply, “linear perspective.”<sup>52</sup> These leanings in European subject formation towards perspectival vision to understand figurations that included landscape, bodies, animals, cities, everything down to the first millimeter of woven thread were joined by a burgeoning separation of the military (headed by royalty) from religious clerics. Additionally, it was joined by new economic practices, in short in the development of mercantile capitalism.

Retracing Michel Pastoureau’s history of the stripe as a design motif of clothing makes a link between stripes and outcasts, through a Biblical translation that leans heavily on a Hebrew understanding of the two things not to be mixed, according to Christian theology. I suggested that this imposition of juridical power through theological discourse was linked to the threat posed by Carmelites to disrupt the social order. I also contextualized this viewpoint in the changes taking place in painting that fomented perspectival viewpoints, in order to render three dimensional demarcations of space more easily than in earlier painterly, sculptural, and architectural traditions. I further marked these changes in the context of the growth of mercantile capitalism during this era of perspectival vision.

While perspectival vision does not end in the Renaissance, I thread the discussion back, now, to the stripe to recount Pastoureau’s most important claim in *The*

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<sup>52</sup> An important contribution towards the establishment of perspectival vision in visual representation was Alberti’s 1435 treatise *On Painting*. He “imagined the picture surface as a plane cutting through a pyramid of visual rays” (1992, p. 13). The tools provided by Alberti and others allowed painters to gain a more immediate technique to demarcate space in their painting, and thus were tools readily utilized.

*Devil's Cloth.* Pastoureau finds in the stripes of his inquiry: outcasts, jokers, heretics, and prisoners. This leads the art historian to complex interlacing of social bodies with dress codes, and of ornamentation with the excised social bodies who are thrown to the edges of civility, marked by the sartorial. What could be the crime of the stripe, Pastoureau wonders? What marks its power, its affront?

Pastoureau delivers his thunder. “Indeed, in most societies, the world of fabric is where questions of technique and material mingle most closely with questions of ideology and symbol” (xi) he writes. Returning to Medieval texts means to an art historian to return to other ways of seeing – other practices of visibility. Quite absent from 21<sup>st</sup> century popular practice, the body was read during Medieval times from top to bottom and bottom to top in a linear fashion. In a time when depth (via linear perspective) was not part of visual reading practice, a clothed body in public was understood as a series of color palates that did not affront their cognition (almost at the level of neuro-science). The affront the stripe provided was its breaking apart of the plane of the body into segments that caused cognitive dissonance. It was “odd,” it signaled that something was the matter, was trouble. He writes,

On the one side, there is the plain – and the same word, plain, is used in ancient French and the language of heraldry; on the other, there is everything that is not plain: the spotted, the striped, the divided, all structures that finally express the same values. This equivalence is found again in the domain of colors, where, likewise, the notions of bichromatic and polychromatic hardly differ. As for the prostitute, whose dress is striped red and yellow, and the juggler or the clown –future Harlequin— whose costume is made up of squares or diamonds of three, ten, twenty, a hundred different colors, all three wear upon their clothing the idea of trouble, disorder, noise, and impurity (25).

Pastoureau further argues that Medieval sensibilities were challenged by the stripe for its ability to interrupt their reading practices, but also by the sculpture effect of the stripe as a line that never ended. He suggests, “The pure stripe no longer stops the eye. It is too effervescent to do that. It clarifies and obscures the view, disturbs the mind, confuses the senses” (91). With these two interventions as fodder, one might begin to understand the careful wedding of ideology with fabric construction and design, as a site where “an affront” to European subject formation was enacted.

In a chapter of *The Devil's Cloth*, Michel Pastoureau specifically addresses the historic stripes of the prison uniform: “In English, the term stripe, which refers to striped fabric, must be related to the verb to strip, which has the double meaning of undressing and depriving (or even punishing), and the verb to strike off, which means to cross out, to bar, to exclude from a list” (60). He notes that “...prisoners must be seen from a distance, differentiated from the guards, grouped together, and easily spotted if they flee from prison or the place of their deportation” (57). Welding ideology with practice, then, one witnesses the practices of “exclusion” enacted by the striped prisoner’s costume choreographed by color and design, as a way of enforcing hegemonic reading practices and narratives of the aesthetic in their production of the nation-state. Pastoureau notes that an accurate story of prison uniforms “remains difficult to construct,” suggesting that the stripes may have come from America, linked to “the penal colonies of the New World (Maryland, Pennsylvania)” where the striped costume

first appeared around 1760 (56).<sup>53</sup> But, he persists in his analysis, mega-phoning the broader stakes of his project. Pastoureau writes,

The stripes of convicts and deportees are not only a social mark, the sign of exclusion or of a particular status. Inscribed on cheap cloth, there is something profoundly degrading about them, which seems to take all dignity and all hope of salvation from the one who wears them. Moreover, combined with disturbing, vulgar, and sullied colors, they themselves often seem charged with evil powers. Not only do they identify and exclude, they degrade, mutilate, carry bad luck (57).

Pastoureau links up the cheapness of cloth with the degradation intended by the mark of criminality and incarceration. He cites the example of Nazi concentration camp stripes as stitched into a network of violence that inscribed the bodies of Nazi prisoners in profound violations of human dignity (58). Though not striped, the “cheap cloth” of contemporary prison wear arguably degrades prisoners in the same ways it did in Nazi concentration camps or the penal colonies of Maryland, Pennsylvania. If one were to take Pastoureau’s analysis at a corporeal level, then the “mutilation” described as an effect of prison uniforms describes bodies destroyed by mandatory dress as an ideological and material structure.

What strikes me about Pastoureau’s discussion is his evocation of the senses through his mention of “cheap cloth” and “sullied colors,” together. Bringing the visual in line with the felt, Pastoureau paints a picture of a corporeal body capable of more than just seeing with his eyes. There is a trace of this combination in the 1908 essay by Adolf Loos “Ornament and Crime” discussed in my introductory chapter. As one may

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<sup>53</sup> Pastoureau admits his disappointment as a historian. He writes, “I admit, however, that I haven’t been able to find a concrete link – material or institutional – that would tie the dress of convicts and deportees of the modern era to that of the outcasts of medieval society. ... how did the modern Western world gradually make striped clothes the specific garb of prisoners? That remains to be studied in detail” (57).

recall, Loos posed ornamentation in architectural design as the site of debate about economy, though many of his essays discuss hats, shoes, and clothes. Adolf Loos claims that ornamentation was a pre-modern proclivity necessarily (in the modern era) expressing criminality, whether dormant or practiced. It would seem that Pastoureau's identification of the translation history of the Leviticus phrase taken up in so much European art, sculpture, and scripture (political discourse at the time, and still) echoes Loos' idiotic professing, though in Biblical theology and so in a more scholarly manner. Loos' claim was that the "detail" in architectural design in what he calls 'pre-modern' design was excessive in the modern age; ornamentation was unnecessary to modern subject formation. Loos' argued that ornamentation retarded labor and in effect did not match up in terms of dollars, labor, and cents. I would argue that here, though not explicit in his text, Loos makes room for another meanings of "cents" as "sense," registered through the sonic order.

Cross-stitching a Marxist understanding of "cents" with an embodied overlay, I connect dollars, sound, touch, vision, and visibility into a multi-faceted analytic practice that is "a sensual discourse." It is with this sensual analytic that Pastoureau carves a place for stripes in critical histories of art, politics, and cultures. The book speeds through era after era, almost as fast as a stripe. Pastoureau looks at the "good stripes" of sailors and the "bad stripes" of the French revolution as developments in this history of stripes worn on the body. 60's "stripe chic" where the revolutionary gets a fashion spot, joining the chic and famous in "sporting" resistance through commodity media circuits. If the book were to continue, I could see it addressing the sculpture effects of the stripe more, in relation to issues linked to cultural literacies of the

geometric/sculptural pattern. Pastoreau does comment on the threatening power of the stripe in its representation of unstoppable mobility (its visual speed). From this thought, we can imagine that the two-piece pants-shirt prison uniform replicates the effects of the stripe: where there are only two stripes (a horizontal one at the waist, where pants and shirt meet; a second horizontal one at the shoulders, where shirt and neck meet) that sectionalize the body. Yet, in their emphasis of upper halves of bodies (shirt) and lower halves (pants), contemporary prison uniforms may more directly express its reliance on the two-gender binary to actualize its carceral project.

#### Dress in “Through the Wire”

Michel Pastoreau’s analysis in *The Devil’s Cloth* trace a genealogy of contemporary prison wear routed through the evidence of striped clothing in Medieval paintings, sculpture, and architecture. Noting not only the “cheap cloth” but also the ubiquity of social/civic excision from normative societies with the stripe, Pastoreau’s argument makes a direct link for me from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> in relation to prison uniforms. Pastoreau gives the example of the Carmelite brown-and-white cloak as evidence of this history of state resistance articulated through the sartorial. I suggest that Susan Rosenberg’s upturn prison wear collar in “Through the Wire” articulates a site of state resistance through the sartorial and movement.

The three female political prisoners in the film “Through the Wire” are interviewed in the state-mandated garb of the Lexington HSU. The uniform is off-white in color, broken into two pieces of clothing: shirt and pants. Each shirt and pants

the women wear are identical in tailoring, fabric, weaving pattern, and general aesthetic or 'style.' This style is a result of an industrial design practice aimed to foreground economy and mass reproducibility, and marked by an efficient distribution circuit aimed at nation building. While it is not made evident in the body of the film "Through the Wire" nor detectable through the sensorial distance provided by the film (filming churns three dimensional knowledge into a two-dimensional format, thereby eliding many of the cues necessary to recognize such things as fabric through touch, smell, and other intimate sensorial effects), it is likely that these clothing items are made of polyester and do not breathe well.

In the dance world, dancers know what it means to be asked to wear certain items of clothing for a studio class or for the stage. Dance all-but mandates Danskin jumpsuits or underwear, pointe shoes, hair tied back in a bun, and other forms of tight or loose-fitting clothes in its history, sometimes directly described and other times understood through the cultural values shared by dancers. It is with this knowledge that I ask my readers (who may be dancers and/or dance theorists) to "listen" to the following words of a female political prisoner incarcerated in Lexington, Kentucky and documented in the film "Through the Wire" (1990, dir. Nina Rosenblum). In the documentary, Rosenberg responds to an interview question about the conditions of the high-security unit in which she was held captive. Rosenberg states:

Prisoners were forced to dress and look alike. The unit had uniform stark colorless walls and constant glaring artificial lights 24 hours a day. It was maddening and deliberately so. Never a blade of grass, never a sense of what time of day it was, or season of the year, never a breath of the outside. It was deliberate "sensory deprivation"—designed to create physical depression and a sense of isolation. Contact with the outside world was sharply restricted: Visitations were limited. The definition of



"immediate family" was so narrow that one woman was forbidden to see her grandchildren. Attorneys and families were harassed and humiliated. The location of the prison was so far from the homes of the prisoners that only two were able to have family visit on any regular basis. There were frequent and arbitrary violent cavity searches which would be considered rape by any standards (*italics mine*. Susan Rosenberg, "Through the Wire," 1993).

Rosenberg calls attention to the mandatory dress policies of the unit in Lexington, a mention that is not casual in the context of the other forms of punishment and deprivation that fill her description of Lexington. Why? In the interview linked to the above excerpt, one notices that Rosenberg herself has her collar turned up. What drove that choreography of dress? Was this a stylistic detail for which Rosenberg had to fight, for example? After mentioning the uniform dress at the Lexington HSU, Rosenberg describes the setting of her incarceration. Rosenberg says, "Never a blade of grass, never a sense of what time of day it was, or season of the year, never a breath of the outside...." As a performance artist and mover, I hear Rosenberg's words as with my body. I hear the twinkling of blades of grass in an inner ear that takes the form of an image; I look around for a clock or light to tell the time of day, engaging my neck and shoulders, waist and hips; I look at the food in the fridge to determine the season; I breathe in gratefully as I take a breath of fresh air. If one were to wonder what form the forcing took, it seems Rosenberg provides the clues to a listener who acknowledges an interdependence on plants, lungs full of air, sunlight, bearable colors. As Rosenberg describes how family members and attorneys are hassled and abused, one gets a physical picture of a more hostile environment where bodies clash with bodies, and fighting over air, light, sunshine, water, human touch, and "who's right." In Rosenberg's account of

the Lexington HSU, the prisoner paints a scene of an environment where restoring imbalances is the constant battle of the day. Psychic reconstitution under captivity may be nearly impossible. But Susan Rosenberg's upturned collar offers a moment of hope – a glimpse into the active mind+body united of Rosenberg herself – within the context of violence.

Susan Rosenberg's upturned collar example evidences how the U.S. State has a historical and on-going vested interest in how people dress. Rosenberg identifies the systemization of dressing habits and dress styles to reflect the national agenda, marking inmates as criminal, as sub-human, as beyond the juridical protection given to practices of normative citizenship. In this way, dressing as an act of freedom is brought into direct confrontation with the loom of state violence engaged like an elbow by the prison industrial complex. Set in the context of extreme cruelties, the phrase forced to dress alike and look alike rings out like a beacon to the sartorial historian and theorist. Rosenberg's speaking strategy is a frontloading technique, attentive to the stage of prison abolition she occupies by way of the cameras, microphones, and crew of the documentary. Rosenberg does not describe the cheapness of the fabric of prison wear; she does not remark upon the stripes of light provided by the bars and screened windows of her cell. Rosenberg does not cull up a political history of prison wear, yet her comment demands the work in its implications. This chapter begins that critical analysis, by foreground the tan shirt of Susan Rosenberg, with the collar turned up. Linked to the earlier filmic image of Rosenberg when being arrested at a New York storage unit, one understands the semiotic meaning of this upturned collar as a part of the cultural ethos of revolutionary garb. My analysis has focused instead on the

physical practice that pre-dates the images of upturned collars in revolutionary histories. I suggest that this physical practice points dance and abolition scholars to review images of costume that may pass them by, by default, in their own critical engagements with the state, dance, desire, and corporeality. Rosenberg as a dressed dancing body yields a view of the moving body as one encased in dress, run through with its discourses, histories, archives. Material and so “felt,” dress foregrounds not only the intimate knowledges produced by Rosenberg’s interactions with the state while in the Lexington basement HSU, but also the unknowable facets of her experience, registered through all the senses. Dress, in this light is a conduit and a portal for the body, always and already. The dancing body need then be seen as a body in conversation with its costumes, if one understands my Rosenberg upturned-collar analysis.

### **High-Security Nation Building/s**

Dr. Angela Davis describes her days incarcerated in Dylan Rodriguez’s book *Forced Passages* (2006). A highly watched woman, Dr. Davis paints the picture of an uprising. In this image a roar of chants and networks of desire unite a group of women, they cheer together and pass chants back and forth; their voices seem to break through the cement, brick, metal, and steel built environment around them. The text reads:

On a cold Sunday afternoon a massive demonstration took place down on Greenwich Avenue. It was spearheaded by the bail fund coalition and the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis. So enthusiastic was the crowd that we [the prisoners] felt compelled to organize some kind of reciprocal display of strength. We got together in our corridor, deciding

on the slogans we would shout and how to make them come out in unison—even though we were going to be spread down the corridor in different cells, screaming from different windows. I had never dreamed that such powerful feelings of pride and confidence could develop among the sisters in this jail. (Angela Davis, *Autobiography*, 397-98, cited in Rodriguez, 126)

The evidence of extreme isolation is communicated through the way Davis tells her story, pointing to the astounding effects of uniformity erasing individual subjectivities.

Here, though, they are recuperated into a collective notion of selves:

Chants thundered on the outside .... After a while we decided to try out our chants .... While the [outside] chants of 'Free Angela' filled me with excitement, I was concerned that an overabundance of such chants might set me apart from the rest of my sisters. I shouted one by one the names of all the sisters on the floor participating in the demonstration. 'Free Vernell! Free Helen! Free Amy! Free Joann! Free Laura! Free Minnie!' I was horse for a week (126).

What is striking about this excerpt is the solidarity evidenced through this team-created group cheer from inside the prison walls to the outside, and back again, and on. Within Davis' telling of her memory, she expresses an awareness of bodily control, of the work of throwing voices by restructuring the architectural imaginary, to form a collaborative picture of a freed world where the prison walls have been taken down. Using sound, conceptual space and material space intertwine. Dr. Davis' account leaves in clear view the intuitive sense each set of women have of each other, that verges on the visible but rarely achieves it. Davis breaks down the prison walls and therefore the architecture of the prison blueprint as a model of governing citizens that the women prisoners break out of, and live on in Davis' memory, recounted here.

There is pleasure evidenced in Dr. Davis' recalling of this performative moment. Being "horse for a week," Davis marks a corporeal change effected in her by the experience, something that need not go unmentioned. Dr. Davis describes her brain's process in making her contribution to the project. She does not want to be separated from the group – meaning, she did not want to be isolated by language, by a name. So, Davis yells "Free Vernell! Free Helen! Free Amy! Free Joann! Free Laura! Free Minnie!" (126). It cannot be gleamed from Dr. Davis' recounting in *Forced Passages* the exact light or measure of fresh air, light, food, visitors, or humane treatment experienced by the women who chanted in the corridors that day. But, if we take the Lexington, Kentucky HSU as an example of the everyday practices of federal penitentiaries and routine state violence "on the outside," then a clear picture of that answer is unavoidable.

Taken at face value, what is striking about the two views of prison life provided by Angela Davis is their contrast as moments of resistance to state brutality. One is out-of-doors, where women are chanting in unison, producing a pride astounding to Dr. Davis. In the other, there is a despair fomented by the tease of human contact as a felt symbol for another world: the possibly free world where extreme isolation and sensory deprivation is not brutally enforced. In both is the uniformity of dress, gesture, appearance, pallor. In both resides the denial of citizenship for those other than white male. These ideologies manifest in the prison's built environment, I have suggested. Following Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's critical reflection on panoptic power,

the contemporary prison now adopts “state-of-the-art technologies” to boost its cultural capital and claim to shed no blood in its “reform” of those incarcerated.<sup>54</sup>

Dylan Rodriguez’s discussion of Security Housing Units (SHU’s) in Supermax prisons involves an attention to how architectural designs are fundamental to the ideological manifestation of death machines, sprawling through 275-or more acres of grass, town, and discourse into a thing called “prison.” His project builds on an earlier analysis of prisons forwarded by philosopher Michel Foucault’s writing on disciplinary power (1977). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explores the architectural designs of Jeremy Bentham, who designed in a “panopticon” as the new model of prison built structures. Foucault points out the state ideology manifested in the built environment of the panopticon. The panopticon placed unfinished walls horizontally in line with each other, though not completely on the same linear planes. Behind these walls, prison guards were designed to occasionally appear in the flesh, visibly and energetically seen as keeping a watchful eye. In turn, the walls became a symbol and manifestation of state corporeality, whether actual prison guards were present, or not. These structural elements are meant to cause prisoners to internalize these meanings and develop self-surveillant inner perceptive system organized police prisoners and inculcate state ideology.

Bringing Foucault’s ideas up to date with the 21<sup>st</sup> century manifestation of disciplinarity and the ideological design of the prison, Rodriguez argues for a

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<sup>54</sup> This comment is a resonance of analysis in feminist science studies and military history that challenges the 21<sup>st</sup> century notion of “a bloodless war.” This statement is historicized, instead, as a comparative recall to World War I images that show the grotesque reality of bodies being shot to pieces, limbs cut off, and buildings collapsing with people inside.

redefinition of the supermax prison as an updated blueprint of carceral violence wrought through such histories as panoptic vision, panoptic physical practice, and newer “state-of-the-art” technologies. Rodriguez’s articulation of the destructive power of the visual is set out in terms of violence and embodiment. He writes, “It is precisely the structured solidarity between technologies of coercive visualization – including the ‘virtual’ rendition and projection of imprisoned people’s bodies intentions, and movements through high technologies of surveillance – and a proliferated, militaristic, and normal violence that crafts and reifies the prison regime as a way of life” (157).

In his analysis, Rodriguez deprives the state of its invisible tools, by naming sensory deprivation as a form of torture forced upon incarcerated radical intellectuals, a form of “low-intensity torture” waged on those who speak up against normative prison ideology (186). In common parlance, SHU’s are referred to as “the hole,” isolation units where prisoners see neither light nor others for months and years at a time. In “the hole,” logics of social and civic isolation are combined with a sensory underload to effect “the sense that one’s psychic/bodily experience is somehow outside the realm of communicability” (181). Rodriguez describes this as a moment where the subject of political agency is sharply drawn into focus, where “state terror collides with that slippery and stubborn thing we name as political agency” (181). Rodriguez’s attention to the incommunicability of those experiencing extreme ‘psychic/bodily’ torture is of utmost importance to my argument about architecture.

Writer Cassandra Shaylor retells the brutal story of a 54-year old woman suffering from medical problems left alone in her cell, in her essay “It’s Like Living in

Black in a Black Hole: Women of Color and Solitary Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex” (1998):

Angela Tucker awoke at six a.m. cowering in the corner of her cell, shaking uncontrollably, unable to breathe. A fifty-four year old African-American woman, Tucker suffers from hypertension, diabetes, and asthma. Though she was confined alone in this cold, dark cell for six months, she finally had reached her limit. She repeatedly called for guards to help her, but they refused to respond.” The guards take her to the showers, and in returning to the cell Angela Tucker “begged to be placed in a larger space, to be put in a cell with another prisoner. Tucker testifies “living here is like nothin’ you could ever begin to ... (1).

Angela Tucker offers a difficult page of words for me to read, and produce anxiety. I get out of my chair, move across the room, my breath is shaking too. I am unsettled as this story passes through my body, but for me it is only a temporary unsettling. The image is shocking to the mental capacity and resides at the edges of believability. In Shaylor’s description, the morning shaking of Tucker is given a moment of relief by her own passage into cell showers for water. But her refusal – ne, begging – not to go back into her cell is hardly an image of an emancipated individual protect by international standards of human rights. Shaylor italicizes the tale of Angela Tucker, signifying an excessive performative. Shaylor uses this technique to mark the state of inconceivable cruelty of incarceration, through a stylistic choice that could be characterized as ornamentation. While in “Through the Wire” the color tones of modern TV’s lends the prisoners a heroic status, in the cursive black hues of the written word on traditional textured white page gives the story a harrowing temporality removed from the common order. The testimony written up by Whitehorn gives voice to the power of architecture



to destroy the human spirit – and in turn human and non-human responses to that force of building design and captivity.

Tucker’s testimony serves to challenge the common order of language, by providing a voice from deep in the eerie darkness of the prison industrial regime. Her story evidences the processes of “state terror” colliding with “that slippery and stubborn thing we call political agency” named by Dylan Rodriguez (181). In the supermax prison, this knowledge determines the design of prisons. In prison parlance, Supermax prisons contain “Security Housing Units” or SHUs (186). Living in a black hole suggests no easy process of human survival – or else physicists would not spend their lifetimes (on our dollars) researching what the phenomena of the black hole (time and the material) is. These units (both ideology and a built structure) are a “synergy of the ‘old’ and ‘new,’ ‘low-’ and ‘high-’ intensity torture forms” (187). Designed into existing structures that are themselves inhabitable (like the Lexington, Kentucky basement of “Through the Wire”), Angela Tucker and others inhabit the black hole of state violence by dwelling in prisons. These dwelling sites are black holes, obscured from human visibility. Their corporealities produce anxiety, at their cost, in its removal of the masculinist discourse of the state, removed from its unified body. As dance historian Susan Foster has argued, if one understands that all movement is a form of writing, then what is left is a written language of a different order. I suggest in this dissertation that the material that is the page is clothing. Fabric becomes the mediator and the medium in my formulation, and in this way is a discourse: sartorial, sensual, intimate, felt.

Angela Tucker is not quite described in sartorial terms. One can assume that when she shakes she is wearing clothes of some sort (hardly for sure). In the shower, one assumes she is allowed to remove her clothing and feel the water on her body; then, redress on exit. From a dance perspective, the description leaves out Tucker's body, though it does evoke it. A different description could read: "Angela Tucker shook from her head to toes, her shoulders scrunched against her neck and bent over in a sitting fetal position. The ragged prison pants she was issued were thin, soiled, barely providing the prisoner protection from the cold surface beneath her." What does adding this additional layer of description add to Angela Tucker's story? Utilizing this "feminine" discourse of sartoriality complicates the image of Angela Tucker provided by Laura Whitehorn. It adds a layer of meaning inexistent in the writer's prose without it.

Herb Keane has described clothing as the 'garb' of meaning. As excessive performance of language, clothing in text and on the body ornaments the corpus formed by fleshy body+dress. In so doing, it points a finger back at masculinist discourses that omits the mention of clothes and devalue the sartorial. While a writer and reader "garb" Angela Tucker distantly by tracing the fabric of her clothes with our reading eyes, we also are meant to realize that Tucker was already clothed: that is, was already a dressed, dancing body. In writing critically of garb simultaneously ad-dresses the state on the subject of clothing as one of the 'basic human needs' necessarily provided by state watch as an aspect of basic human rights. In ad-dressing by re-dressing, I upset the way the state wears its clothes. This analysis is meant to show the omissions of the sartorial: the upturned collars, the shirts worn inside out, pants legs twisted during a rush through the courtyard.

One can then begin to imagine the omissions in prisoner reports by federal staff of the sartorial details of inmate conditions, and so the omission of prisoners as dressed, dancing bodies who by definition (as dancers and consumers) are entitled to human rights as citizens and producers in U.S. culture and commerce. I suggested at the end of my introduction in this chapter that “objects form us.” I argued that the discourse of clothes, one of senses and subjectivity, establishes a site of this relation between subjectivity (the self in process) and the “objects” that form us. This site points to an analytic stage on which to advocate for the rights of prisoners in relation to the importance of clothing in claiming the right to freedom, as Puerto Rican prisoner of war Allejandrina Torres proposed in her interview in “Through the Wire.”

What is different about contemporary prison wear in comparison to the era in which philosopher Michel Foucault initiated his look at disciplinary power and the birth of the prison, is the network of corporate investments in the prison industrial complex. Clothing creates a bridge to talking about the models of disciplinarization in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clothing is both a site of industrial capital and a highly-charged location where culture and nature, the material and immaterial, feminine and masculine, agency and fascism reside. It occupies a mid-ground between the live human body, always in the process of being structured within representative modes (language, visual reproduction, the sonic) as it changes. Clothing functions and can be understood as an art object whose chemical properties (like the oil painting as it intersects with light over time) fundamentally propose the body as something that deteriorates over discursive and material time and place. Clothing itself as a found artifact suffers the problems of archival fit on two counts – first that how an

item is worn, rather than strictly what it seems to bespeak, representationally (meaning, visually) is a crucial element in the item's movement within culture(s), and secondly that it is, like an oil painting, in an active process of deterioration as a chemically-processed but none-the-less "organic" material artifact.

Reading the last line of the first page of Cassandra Shaylor's essay,<sup>55</sup> I too cease. With the story of Angela Tucker, I have had enough. I have heard the words; the image they evoke leaves traces in my memory. The documentary film "Through the Wire" ends on a sour note, noting that the closure of the All-women's High Security Unit at Lexington provided only an architectural closure to the basement, but not an end to the violation to human rights imposed on the female political prisoners. Upon closure, they were simply transferred to new units at different prisons. Indeed, as the film provides, the Lexington, Kentucky high security unit functioned as a successful experiment, creating an architectural blue-print for new-technology high-security surveillance prisons, units, and solitary confinement holes.<sup>56</sup>

### **Federal SWAT Wear**

In the words of a prisoner of 1992, in the FMC Women's Camp in Lexington, is evidence of at least a few accoutrements common in prison. Reporter Laura Whitehorn

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<http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/nejccc24&div=18&id=&page>

<sup>56</sup> A review of the film reads: "in the ten years since this documentary was released (1989), it is reported that 16 similar facilities have been built." <http://www.allmovie.com/work/through-the-wire-49813>

describes an uprising in August 1992, where these accoutrements on the scene of the uprising are highlighted. Whitehorn writes:

From Aug 12-14, 1992 the first sustained act of resistance in 20 years by women imprisoned in the U.S. Federal prison system took place at FMC Women's Camp at Lexington, KY. In response to a brutal attack by a (male) guard against a female prisoner, witnessed by over 100 prisoners, an organized disobedience occurred in the "Central Park" area of the outdoor exercise yard. Over 90 female prisoners stayed in the yard refusing to return inside for a head count. Ringed by guards, and a *SWAT team in full regalia*, they sang songs of protest, demanding to speak with the Captain of the Guard, and asking for accountability for the beaten woman and the guard that attacked her. When the Captain announced that the guard responsible for the attack would be back to work on Monday, the crowd of prisoners shouted and booed until he was forced to desist his announcements. The protesting prisoners were *handcuffed* and escorted to segregation, most taken to the old High Security Unit in the Basement that had been "almost entirely" out of use since 1988. The following day 12 of the women involved in the protest, including prison rights activist, and AIDS in prison educator, Laura Whitehorn, were put on a bus and transported to Marianna, FL (the Shawnee Control Unit). (italics mine. Whitehorn, "Resistance at Lexington", *Criminal Injustice*, in Rosenblatt 1996).<sup>57</sup>

I have italicized words in the body of Whitehorn's prose. There in Lexington, Whitehorn describes a group of SWAT team members in "full regalia" who beat a woman and later "handcuffed" prisoners and take them to segregating. Choreographically, the women are surrounded by a ring of guards, and left to fend off the attacks of guards as they break the circle and rush in on the women prisoners. The women are singing in an outdoor exercise yard, in protest to the brutal attack of a male guard against a female prisoner. Whitehorn does not discuss the dress of the women

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<sup>57</sup> <http://books.google.com/books?id=iYINIT46rNcC&pg=RA1-PA122&dq=Lexington+High+Security+UNit&cd=1#v=onepage&q=Lexington%20High%20Security%20UNit&f=false>

prisoners in terms of cloth or dress style, as what is important to get the word out is the evocation of a close-up of the heads of these women singing out in chorus: revealing eyes, mouths, heads, hair, face, air.

Documenting the event at the FMC Women’s Camp, Laura Whitehorn writes of the “full regalia” of the SWAT team and the “handcuffs” on the women prisoners’ wrists. Whitehorn does not describe these accoutrements in terms of color, material, style, or tailoring, yet images and props of described send one in a detailed visual direction. Popular TV is full of (fictionalized) images of police riot gear, SWAT cops, and handcuffs. A google search links one to an image of two SWAT team members. Their backs are to the camera holding line while a peaceful protest walks across the horizontal plane of the photo.<sup>58</sup> The SWAT members are covered from head to toe in a menacing suit of weapons, bullet-proof gear, and guns – all black. They wear padded shirts, vests, and strong helmets. The vests wrap around in a V for tightest efficiency; at their waists are guns and belt. In their arms, rifles. They also wear neck protectors and elbow pads that are layered with a hard plastic surface. Finally, padded SWAT regalia cover their shoulders, to soften the blows of heavy or sharp objects projected at their arms.

One imagines a scene where 12 women are standing in a courtyard of a Lexington Federal Penitentiary. In prison wear, these women likely wear khaki shirts and pants, standard-issue.<sup>59</sup> Or, if there were recreating outside, they may have on t-

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<sup>58</sup> <http://blog.newsweek.com/photos/gagglepix/images/599353/500x288.aspx>

<sup>59</sup> I gain this information from a conversation on a public blog about prison uniforms. See <http://www.prisonstudies.com/forums/showthread.php?t=380252>

shirts and sweats. Alternately, it is possible they wear jumpsuits (green, or brown, depending on the level of security; orange if segregated). Against this muted backdrop of packed-down brown dirt and bland earth colors,<sup>60</sup> SWAT team members in full regalia appear like big black dots across the scene, connected to each other. They form a circle around the women. They start in towards the women, making a tighter circle. It is a performance they have rehearsed, now played out in front of the women, other federal penitentiary guards, and under the panoptic gaze of the state. At not only the level of weapons, it would seem, but also color, these women are dominated in the visual field produced by European knowledge and linear perspective. The black dots (which are the SWAT team members) block out visual access to escape routes, they narrow the women's fields of vision. Yet, the women find a way out – they sing – to articulate the city (a space) of their imaginations. How do clothes function in this performative moment? To answer this question, I ask it in relation to the corporeal transformation encouraged by the performance. This section will address how dress functions in the FMC Women's Camp in Lexington, set in the context of the greater rubrics of race, gender expression and U.S. citizenship.

While feminist and abolitionist discourse has and does turn up positive images of female prisoners in the independent circuit, the mainstream media largely fetishizes female prisoners in order to curtail the threat of legitimate female power and feminine agency, and of feminism. Women prisoners are given uniformity their primary option. Tied to a belief that lumping people together into one visual field is the best way to

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<sup>60</sup> One on-line commentator suggested that an outfit similar to the brown jumpsuit looked like excrement. "It looks just like a giant turd, doesn't it?" <http://www.bopuniforms.com/>

control and coerce them, women's prisoners are forced to dress alike, and dress 'down' in only shirt, pants, and underwear – stripped down to the basic essentials of garb determined by the state. This devaluation of more layered sartorial practices where there are more than three or four items of dress worn is masculinist in its origins. It would seem its basis in European cultures is tied to castration anxiety and the vicious belief that clothes make one female. This devaluation of dress expressed by the mandatory prison uniformity via dress (and other things) forms an image of proper citizenship as male, unadorned, stripped down, coded sans dress.

In an early interview with Lexington HSU political prisoner Susan Rosenberg in "Through the Wire," Rosenberg wears a tan shirt, cut crisp at the collar. She has turned her collar up, a stylistic accent that viewers have seen in the television footage of Rosenberg's arrest, where her man's coat has collar turned up. As the film establishes the voices of the three women political prisoners, it also establishes some of their stylistic patterns – how they dress, sit, hints to the bodies that reside within the prison wear – inside the clothes. Within these two sites of Rosenberg as a public figure, the upturned collar gains a set of meanings – ones gendered, raced, revolutionary and aligned with feminist and lesbian discourse. It seems that here may be a clue to what the revolutionary meant in advocating for prisoner's rights to wear clothing of their own choosing, "unless it poses a serious threat." Of course, this question of threat is what is at play in Rosenberg's upturned collar, as what can be imagined is not only the fact of a 'gesture of freedom' held within the archive of Rosenblum's film, but also the discourse of dressing suggested by the trace: the upturned collar understood cinematically as a geometric pattern and play of light. In dressing herself, Rosenberg



turns her collar up. This act of dressing engaged by hands, arms, shoulders and core muscles inscribes an embodied practice of Rosenberg's – and Tucker's, were the sartorial details provided – revolutionary thought, does it not?

### **Prison Wear and U.S. Citizenship**

Richard Dyer discusses in *White* (1977) that normative identity in the U.S. is based on racial whiteness, a category usually unmarked by white people but nonetheless formative in white access to such basic needs as a “human” identity, good housing and employment, healthcare. Dyer write, “White people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see they thus construct the world in their image” (9). Dyer warns against white “me-too-ism[s]” where white people describe race in terms of multiculturalism, flattening racial differentials through a claim of empathy (10-11). These methods do not deconstruct white hegemony. Dyer continues his analysis of whiteness by discussing the association of the white, built body as an emblem of European superiority signified by the white, muscular body in his chapter, “The White Man's Muscles.” He historicizes this perception of white in Christian mythology as the struggle (of Jesus Christ) between body and spirit. White bodies become “the supreme expression of both spiritual and physical striving” (17) Dyer notes, the site where physicality is linked with a racialized project of nation-building. Dyer describes a typical Greek body, those valorized in European art beginning specifically in early European sculpture. This body shows its physical strength in muscles: in the ripples of a strong stomach and the thickness of pectoral and shoulder muscles. These signifiers of physical

strength along with leg, heart, and arm strength stand-in for the spiritual (and thus moral and mental) clarity and strength of the Greek male, an always already symbol of military victory and readiness for battle. Dyer mounts a cumulative strength into his analysis by a look at the white, male bodybuilder as a symbol of European imperial expansion and national identity. Dyer writes that “The built white body is not the body that white men are born with,” but are instead “made possible by their natural mental superiority...a product of the application of thought and planning” (164). “...the built body and the imperial enterprise are analogous” (165). In this chapter, Dyer establishes the history of European and Roman classicism, comic book fantasy, crucifixion anxiety, and the cultural values of California natural health and mobility with the white man’s trained body shot through and through with Darwinian evolution. As one reviewer of the book writes, in Dyer, “as in Christianity, racial discourse, and imperialism, the white man’s trained body displays the victory of spirit over flesh” (note #9, Todd M. Kuchta, “Review of Richard Dyer. *White*,” 1988).

Richard Dyer provides the context of European imperialism as the ideology that white masculinity tied to nation has produced. Dyer’s analysis speaks directly of the survival of the European subject through whiteness, one generally unmarked but inherent to the process of European imperial expansion. This points to a question: how can one be woman or otherwise ‘un-male’ and still be acknowledged as a citizen of the state? Richard Dyer addresses this question, remarking that white women’s gendered identities revolved around the passive figure of Mary in Christian mythology. Yet, if one cannot or will not conform to these mandates, is one either ‘woman,’ or ‘man’ at all?

Investigative reports such as those provided by Amnesty International or the New York Prison Project, media and oral histories of the U.S. prison regime are caked with evidence that to survive in prison, one must adopt codes of normative masculinity to be heard, seen, respected, or at least feared. This fact is inculcated from the start, where women prisoners are given uniforms that replicate normative white masculinity such as a presumed lack of ornamentation, low economic cost, an inattention to fabric choice, and a devaluation of clothing as a discourse and site of self-knowledge. Prison uniforms de-emphasize the sexuality of the body by de-emphasizing fit and foregrounding a uni-body, replete of sexual desire or corporeal agency. With V-neck scrubs and industrial work pants as the model for contemporary uniforms, for example, women prisoners are provided a limited playing field for expressing their gendered identities at the level of sartorial representation, replicating traditional femininity through adornment, or other femininities. For butches, studs, or aggressives, these 'male' or 'genderless' clothes can provide an important opportunity for their alternative masculinities to shine. Prisons are marked by hegemonic masculinity as the site where European superiority is demanded through acts of physical brutality, psychological torture, social and civic isolation, and sensory deprivation – acts aimed at the death of those bodies whom (upon their entrance) are marked as sub-human and unworthy of survival.

Yet even beyond ascribing to codes of masculinity, those incarcerated conform to standards that put them in a liminal category of the “living dead,” where, as Michel Pastoureau suggests, inmates are “striped” (Pastoureau, 1991, 60) by prison wear:

redressed, literally, in a category of identity and corporeality (“criminal”) that fundamentally relies on costume to support it.

### **Forced Dress and Kings’ Captive Queer Bodies**

The words ‘forced dress’ have within them a grammar of violence. Whether these forced items be the pink boxers enforced by an Arizona sheriff; the historical stripes of those marked as criminal and defying conventional Medieval reading practices discussed in the work of art historian Michel Pastoureau; or the drab, homogenized outfits of “Through the Wire,” these instances of forced dress signal the state’s investment in sartorial policies and enforcement as part of nation-building. The Lexington, Kentucky HSU struggle is significant to my dissertation for how the HSU and the case surrounding it, depicted in the film “Through the Wire,” evidences state violence enacted through prescriptive gender and sartorial discourse, held up in the ideologies driving the building design of the Lexington cell-block. Aimed at sensory deprivation in the context of U.S. State formation through incarceration, the violence enacted by the state is recalled through a report by the National Prisoner’s Project, as well as through testimony one of the political prisoners incarcerated there. I have argued that the discussion I wage about drag kings need be situated in the context of the U.S. prison regime. In that way, there is abolition through an attention to the sensory and the sartorial in this analysis, making for a “sensory discourse” of abolition. Sensory-deprivation provides a framework for recognizing where and how state ideology is made manifest in sartorial codes of prison uniformity.

In this chapter, I pushed the analysis of drag kings further to represent kings as captive queer bodies living under the laws of the state. King bodies are linked to style; they ornament heteronormativity and normative masculinity with a feminine discourse – dress – and in so doing, threaten the state. What drives kings is the pursuit of a queer speech act, enabled through a drag king lip-synched performance and a critical inquiry of the fundamental relationship between dress and biological essentialism. King performances draw attention to the detachability of the biological from gender presentation, foregrounding affect, gender presentation, gesture, choreography. Kings create what I would call a ‘transfer zone’ that is almost still – almost freeze-frame representations – of the transformation process many people go through in dressing for a day of work. While these transformations in everyday life are rarely seen by more than one other person or a chosen household of roommates, they nonetheless, I would argue, exist as a nearly ubiquitous ‘human’ experience of time and corporeality.

\* \* \*

It would seem that now that the story lives on, the abuse of the prisoners at Lexington was a material “cautionary tale” about fallen women manifested in architectural design and the systemization of low-intensity torture through sensory deprivation. The efforts of O’ Melvaney and others on behalf of Rosenberg, Torres, and Baraldini proved successful, when on January 20, 2000 (and January 2001).<sup>61</sup> Then

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1806>

U.S. president Bill Clinton granted Rosenberg, Baraldini and Torres clemency and their release from prison. These grants of clemency occurred non-simultaneously.<sup>62</sup> Regardless, a blue-print for the Supermax prison had been borne, off the bodies of Lexington, Kentucky women political prisoners Susan Rosenberg, Sylviana Baraldini, and Alejandrina Torres, amongst others. I have argued for a practice of critically reading clothing that works to make visible and legible the daily embodiments and choreographies of state violence out of view from the documentary filmmakers, and out of view from the world. By focusing on architectural design and the sartorial policies of the Lexington, Kentucky high-security female security unit brought to national attention in 1986 – 1990, I forwarded a way of understanding political prisoner Susan Rosenberg’s upturned collar within the archive of the documentary film, “Through the Wire.” This archive points to the felt archive of revolutionary practice articulated through the traces of the sensual discourse of dressing as a practice of freedom.

### **Denim Archive**

In February of 2007 I found what may have been the softest pair of jeans I had ever felt at a thrift store Southern California. Donating a box of family goods to a Los Angeles Goodwill donation center, I ventured inside the Goodwill to take a moment to reflect on passing on my family’s items. Scanning the men’s section, an image of a beautiful young man’s face drawn in black and transparent fades across the left leg of a pair of denim jeans caught my eye. I stopped to investigate, pulling the jeans out by

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<sup>62</sup> According to one source, Rosenberg now works on social and economic justice issues for a New York City-based human rights organization. [http://www.peggybrowningfund.org/pdf/Bio\\_OMelveny.pdf](http://www.peggybrowningfund.org/pdf/Bio_OMelveny.pdf)

their hanger and catching the back of the pant-legs in my hand. They felt good to the touch, lightweight. The man's face came out of an airbrushed shadow, lit from the right. The light was gentle, evenly casting blue-denim-to-black fades over the figure's eyebrows, nose, lips, chin, neck, and across his jaw line. He was a handsome man, with deep, black centers in each eye which focalized the portrait. From these eyes, across the bridge of his nose and mouth came a vocal element to the piece – a solid, silent express of something nearly impossible to dismiss. Who was this man, I wondered? I thought of the interview with Fred Moten, about an object stopping one in one's tracks. The image grabbed my whole being.

On the right front leg of the jeans I noticed writing, as if from a Sharpie of a love-struck teenager or punk rocker scrawling out favorite band names or lyrics on their jeans. I read the title quickly. In small caps, it read: "IN THE EVENT OF MY DEMISE / DEDICATED 2 THOSE CURIOUS." The morbidity hit me instantly. This was testimony of the author's own death. It felt almost as if it were a will, sent anonymously to a general public whom the author hoped he would reach. The words were aligned vertically in short sentences, like a poem. They length of the jeans leg read:

"In the event of my demise / when my heart can beat no more / I hope I die for a principle / or a belief that I had lived / I will die before my time / Because I feel the shadows D/ So much I wanted 2 accom / Before I reached my deat / I have come 2 grips with / and wiped the last tear fr/ I loved all who were positi / In the event of my Dem...."<sup>63</sup>

Words cut off in partial spelling where the denim hems met up at the inseams. I could not tell who the man was, but it was clear he felt an intimacy with death, with its

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<sup>63</sup> The poem "In the Event of My Demise" was first published in a book of poems called *The Rose That Grew from the Concrete* (1999), by Tupac Shakur.

immanence. The effect of the cut-off letters echoed the sentiment of death in the poem, their incompleteness worked to rearticulate the incomplete life the poet was mourning. I wondered, was he an inmate in prison? Was the script a poem? A farewell letter, found post-mortem? A stanza from a song? Or was the whole design simply the footprint of commercialism? There was a loneliness and resolute essence to the written words which gripped my heart, beyond the heroic flavor of the author's wishes.

Within every artifact is a story – or many – and a wish, even in its abandonment, for the possibility of being able to tell that story. As I shifted each part of the jeans into the center of my vision, I processed the words as literature while also engaging the materiality of the jeans as a sculptural object. Each visual, tactile, kinesthetic encounter with them allowed me both to process my own experiences with death, and to gain an embodied literacy of the isolated position from which the poem's author was speaking. Once again I held up the jeans to wonder, "who was this man?" Everything about these jeans – from their touch, to their design – dumbstruck me, like absolute poetry. Before I knew this was an image of Tupac Amura Shakur, and likely because I did not know this was an image of a internationally-acclaimed, commercial rap star, I grasped the jeans as a collector intellectually and sensually grasps an undiscovered or dismissed work of the sublime.



## CHAPTER 4

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### SOUND IN DRAG KING PERFORMANCE

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*Sound can arouse human emotion to a more intense level than can sight alone. 'Screaming' headlines in the morning newspaper catch our attention but have no grip on our heart. Pictures of disaster may elicit more of a response. But we will be thoroughly engaged by the sound of an ambulance siren or by cries of pain, rage, or despair.*

Yi Fu Tuan (1995)

*Went to school and I was very nervous / No one knew me, no one knew me.*

Drag King Slim Jim, performing to the song *Mad World* (2009)

#### **Sound as Prosthetic**

This chapter of the dissertation provides analytic stepping-stones for dance scholars to grasp dance costumes and the drag king lip-synch as a sonic form. Drag king performance has received a good deal of attention in the last thirty years for its tendencies as a performance genre to disrupt the misogynistic economic and social hierarchies which privilege white heterosexuality, a binary organization of gender and sexuality, and bio-essentialist foundations for gender.<sup>64</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, such

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<sup>64</sup> This identification of “the last 30 years of scholarly attention” (1980-2010) refers to an estimated window of time in which drag kinging as a category congealed into a massive wave of king performance ascribed to artists and musicians from a number of discursive, geographic, and affective locations. The blurry borders of this time period are discussed in Chapter 2.

texts as Jack Halberstam's 1998 *Female Masculinity* posited this kingly disruption as a detachment of masculinity from bio-male bodies tied to nation, and a very specific boon of the genre.<sup>65</sup> Yet, as I mentioned in chapter 2, there is a noticeable gap in mainstream historical records and in scholarly analysis about kinging related to the musical basis of the form. Having now spent three chapters on drag kings in full or part, I attend in this chapter to a very basic contradiction that exists within drag king performance related to the form's removal of vocal production from the biological body. I do so to draw attention to kinging as a performance form that produces, appropriates, and imagines vocality as a phallus. In this way, I identify a sonic prosthetic in the drag king performance rooted specifically in music as an extension of the body.<sup>66</sup> With this focus on the sonic in tow, I complete this dissertation's provision for a more thorough critical approach to king performances and costumes in dance.

The lip synch as a performance form has typically been described in feminist and queer live performance and music histories as a mark of feigned political and social power. Dislodged from the actual spoken ability and vocal agency of the singer, lip synchronicity seems to suggest skills in mimicry and a robotic re-enactment of the hard-won labor, compromises, and true dedication to life as a musician and public

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<sup>65</sup> "Bio-male" refers to male-identified men born with a penis, in counter-distinction to female-to-male or other transgender men who may have chest or phalloplasty surgery, as an effort to create bodies in alignment with their gender identities.

<sup>66</sup> One reader of this section has suggested that the lack of attention to drag kings as musical beings castrate kings of the fundamental desires which lead to kinging. While I agree with this response at a common-sense level, it would take a thinker adept at psychoanalytic theory to take a reader along the path of king lack and castration. I leave for that queer Lacanian an interpretation of the vocal dynamics and articulations of phallic desire and power that the drag king lip-synch sets up.

entertainer. Drag kings and queens, in short, are slighted the bravery with which they not only adorn themselves in clothes scripted as inappropriate for the genders into which they were born at birth, but also denied empowered discursive spaces in which to recognize their adoptions of cross-vocal modalities through lip-synchronicity. In this chapter, I explore the oversights and under-evaluations of these efforts as a way of making space for the sonic knowledge drag kings and queens possess and enact in their drag performances.

To begin, I take up a notion proposed by ethnographer Regina Bendix (2000) of “intended solitudes” made possible in 21<sup>st</sup> century public spheres by music listeners’ strategic uses of communication technologies. Bendix reviews media scholar Michael Bull’s analysis of users of the portable audio music player The Walkman, who make measured control of their sensual experiences of the public sphere by listening to their Walkmans (Bull 1995). Bendix describes the project:

Seemingly turning away from collectivities such as are gathered at a rave, Bull is interested in how individuals manage their own space perception and experience through their personal Walkman. Bull conducts not what Augé wistfully called ‘an ethnography of solitude’ (1995: 12) but an ethnography of what one might term ‘intended solitudes’ (38).

Bull’s focus on the Walkman, Bendix suggests, is part of a shift in anthropological fieldwork of ethnographers “com[ing] to their senses” (Sklar 1994, in Bendix 2000, 34) quite literally. Bull’s look at Walkman users analyzes “the historical nature of the senses in relation to the use of new forms of communication technologies” (Bendix 2000, 7). While this reference to media theory and 21<sup>st</sup> century Walkman

users' articulations of privacy (notably unmarked by race, gender, sexuality) may seem far afoot from drag king performance, I would like to argue specifically<sup>67</sup> that the drag king lip-synch as an aesthetic form may be best understood, musically, as a communication technology that allows its users to similarly articulate "intended solitudes" as a strategy of inhabiting king identities within the "collective" spaces of drag king performance. In point of fact, the wave of ethnographic writing and self-reflexivity about sensual perception that Bendix summarizes in her article deals largely with the sonic and specifically with cross-cultural listening patterns that the author suggests are best understood by multi-sensual ethnographic perceptions. Bendix writes,

If we are to probe the contours of sensory perception and reception and seek to understand the transitions between the individual, cultural, and transcultural dimensions, as I am urging here, then research methods will be needed that are capable of grasping 'the most profound type of knowledge which is not spoken of at all' and thus is inaccessible to ethnographic observation or interview (41).

I propose that the drag king lip-synch allows kings to articulate the gaps in normative conceptualizations of sonic agency tied to the biological body and to audible speech. While a lip-synch performance does not didactically emphasize the lip-synch (in the sense that there are no semiotic arrows pointing at a king's mouth while lip-synching), I would suggest that this elision of this "non" vocality covers up an interesting theoretical dynamic where "silence" is maintained (and therefore a kind of privacy, or intimacy with self) while at the same time a gendered "vocality" is shared collectively across the

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<sup>67</sup> By this I mean a very purposeful specification of both drag *kings* (as opposed to queens) as well as drag king *lip-synching* (as opposed to king live singing)

temporalities of biological and technological presences/absences invoked by performing the king lip-synch.

What is important in my suggestion is that the muted layer of performance in the drag king lip-synch need not be seen as an enactment of a loss of agency, but rather, an intentional moment where kings are engaging the apparatus of the drag king lip-synch for the purposes of sensual control and a shifted perceptual opportunity to interact with the world. Bull suggests that Walkman users can shape their moods by their strategic navigations of post-modern temporalities and sound (Bendix 2000, 37). Likewise, kings reroute sonic agency and vocal projection from the biological body of a singer to a lip-syncher who does not produce the sonic register of a performance by his own vocal chords, creating environments of intentional privacy within the space of the stage. I suggest that in king lip-synch performances, the king creates a scenario where collective engagement (and therefore notions of collectivity or collective governing) is conceived as a sonic exchange<sup>68</sup> rather than specifically or primarily as project of visual representation (via identity politics) and resource management via capital. I suggest that this collective economy is made possible through the king's understanding of not only how gender is produced at the level of visual representation (accounted for by the king's inhabitation of masculine clothes and choreography), but also by the king's uses of the tools of song (vocalization and listening) to enable his desired masculine significations. A model quite different from a normative democratization of sonic space where "equal" time for listening and speaking is shared and exchanged "equally" by

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<sup>68</sup> By "sonic exchange" I mean a combination of the "intended solitude" of the king, his tools and practices of listening, and the assemblage of music/sound that makes up his vocal projection.

participants in an economy, I suggest that the practices of the drag king lip-synch performer are specifically tied to vocal sacrifices kings make as minoritized subjects framed by a hegemonic sonic register organized by biological essentialism and a binary gender coding. In short, in order to efface the “failures” of the king’s biologically-produced vocal projections (coded as female) and override the misrecognitions kings might otherwise experience by voice as a primary gender characteristic.

### **Drag Kings as Gendered Musical Subjects**

Thus far, I have made an argument for the successful creation of a “quiet space” on the drag king stage where performers articulate the limitations of a biologically-based sonic hetero and gender normativity, by not participating directly in speech as an economy. Equally true is that many kings cannot sing – have been neither trained nor are naturally skilled; nor do some want to sing, but rather prefer to appropriate the voices of talented male vocalists to gain audience approval and tell their queer tales. For me, these two realities of an intended solitude on stage and of a lack or disinterest in vocal talent reside in two entirely different locations, politically and affectively. However, what the two disciplinary spaces share in common is the body of the drag king who is subject to the binary codes of gender when he lets his voice loose into the microphone. In this section, I move away from the interventions kings make in extending their own vocal agency through the apparatus of the drag king lip-synch (and so, their expansions of human and non-human interdependency), and focus on a king performance that satirizes the organization of gender identity into a binary by

demystifying the bio-essentialist mythology of vocal production and projection.

Berlin-based drag king, Ocean LeRoy and I were in an email conversation about our experiences on stage, performing. I suggested that in performance, my Cartesian orientations of space, time, and the hierarchy of vision over the other senses are for the most part obliterated, giving way to the transformations of corporeality encouraged by rehearsals and the context of a particular performance. LeRoy proposed a kind of “turning to over-human...in the sense of being over sensitive to some things (feel a huge audience for example, feel your body differently) and shutting other feelings down.”<sup>69</sup> The conversation generated some resolutions for me about the habituation of the body on and off stage, but left still open the question that had driven me to reach out to LeRoy this particular time, in regards to his experiences (and expectations) of voice on stage. LeRoy, notably, is a king who not only lip-synchs on stage, but also performs spoken word, post-modern choreography, and live song. In a signature piece first performed in at the *Drag Festival Berlin 2008*,<sup>70</sup> LeRoy sings a parodic rendition of “Femme Like You,” a French R&B song by the artist K-Maró<sup>71</sup> that positions a male singer (K-Maró) who sings his praise and desire for the ultimate woman. In the

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<sup>69</sup> April 14, 2010, Ocean LeRoy in conversation with the author.

<sup>70</sup> A truncated video of this performance filmed by Italian drag king/filmmaker Julius Kaiser is viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS4QAdnkd9I>

<sup>71</sup> The chorus to this song goes: [French] “Donne moi ton Coeur baby, ton corps baby hey / Donne moi ton bon view funk / Ton rock baby, ta soul baby hey / Chante avec moi, je veux un femme like you / Pour m’emmener au bout du monde / Une femme like you, Hey hey ...” (K-Maró). [English] “Give me your heart baby, your body baby hey / Give me your good old funk me / Your rock baby, your soul baby hey / Sing with me, I want a woman like you / Take me at the end of the world / A woman like you, Hey hey...” Video viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qtg39ddNYE>

number, LeRoy is dressed in half feminine garb (a black dress with spaghetti straps) and half male garb (a black business suit coat and slacks); performing the number with either his male profile or his female profile to the audience, LeRoy matches his visual representations with female/feminine and male/masculine vocal registers, respectively. What interested me about the performance was LeRoy's use of live singing to fully articulate the fantasy of "un femme like you" (translated: a woman like you) raised in the K-Maró song. In asking LeRoy about his proclivity for playing with vocal coding, the king responded: "...Most of the time we are seen, or better 'read' rather than heard, before we even talk and, mostly, 'betrayed' or if you prefer 'revealed' as 'drags' by our voices." <sup>72</sup>

LeRoy's statement struck me for the simplicity with which he relayed the complex networks of desire, biological destiny, identity, and identifications present in 'drags' as performative subjects on and off the formal dance stage. The tensions of language in LeRoy's translations of his thoughts to me (he, a French-born and French-speaking drag king residing in Berlin, writing to me in English) are brought forth most evidently in LeRoy's expanded definition of what a king may experience when his voice enters the public sphere. LeRoy describes first a "betrayal" of gender identity, suggesting that his feminine voice (a.k.a. higher vocal registers, a quickened tempo) provides a point of rupture and failure for the drag king. Following, however, LeRoy offers a liberal, neutralized response to this point of rupture between biology, intention, and representation by stating that a king's biological voice (coded as feminine) may

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<sup>72</sup> April 14, 2010, Ocean LeRoy in conversation with the author.



“reveal” the transitive crossing of female-to-male performers who may pass sartorially, but are exposed vocally. Without placing a judgment on this exposure, LeRoy offers that voice is an indicator and site of drag king subject-formation as ‘drag.’

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, in a vocal economy, vocal agency is linked to a conception of vocal production tied to the biologically singing body. Under this lens, LeRoy’s interest in denaturalizing gendered vocal coding by drawing attention to the performativity of vocal tenor and rhythm functions to upset the circuit of desire that connects vocal production to a bio-essentialist gender identity and social location. What LeRoy’s statement suggests is an opportunity to elaborate Louis Althusser’s ideas about nation-building and the “hailing” of bodies into citizens through vocal projection (Althusser 1970). As one may recall, Althusser makes the argument that when a policeman calls out “hey you” across rubrics of power to a subject in the street, a process of subjectification ensues that shapes and integrates the subject-as-citizen into the project of the nation. In this view, the “hey miss” or “hey you in boxer shorts” hailings of drag kings enact the violent use of language in nation-building into motion by delimiting the nuanced understandings of gender identity understood by the rest of us. These mis-categorizations of social and civic identity are leveled on the drag king in the form of mis-perceptions about gender identity and performance. At its most general moment, these mis-perceptions reveal the difficulty normative culture may encounter in learning the array of terms gender- and sexual-queerying communities produce in describing ourselves to each other. For example, while “transgender” in some ways has become a liberal humanist identity that the state has now beholden to recognize on a civic level (through the policies and laws which protect transgender and

transsexual individuals), such terms as “hir,” “ze,” “she,” and “he” call on far more inquisitive listeners to understand, recognize, and utilize in public and private conversation appropriately. Through these vocal interventions of the hegemonic hailing of the state, kings and queers defy heteronormative patriarchy to survive as gender deviants and pursue radical desires.<sup>73</sup>

Yet these inventions of new words within the linguistic economy of the nation do not account for the impact of vocal tenor, rhythm, inflection, and so on in the production of nation. In short, while Althusser’s theorizations point to the role of the sonic in producing circuits of desire and power within the context of nation, scholarly analysis has focused on the narrative event of the “hey you” rather than on the gendered coding of the hail as a sonic project. LeRoy’s mention of the failure of king voices as voices that “betray” the king performative even while a king’s dress may indicate masculinity points to the primary importance of the sonic in state formation and king subject-formation.

### **The Sonic Rub**

Having established some clear sonic layers of drag king performance, I move now to the murky waters of the inaudible to make a final analysis on how the sonic functions in drag king performance. I do so to stitch the sartorial back into the world of

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<sup>73</sup> Survivors of sexual abuse, adult children of alcoholics, trauma survivors all evidence habits of filtering the immediate present to weave in routes of security: such as an escape route through a crowd or a linguistic escape from a domineering heterosexual with violently normative habits.

king performances and to sound. While performing, producing, and analyzing drag king performances, it has become clear to me that in drag performance clothes are not only a matter of the “cross-dressed” performance form, but in some ways *the* matter at play. Said differently, while drag kings can be paired with drag queens as residents of a common performance aesthetic, I would argue that an analysis of drag costume, in general, shares a common basic analytic lynchpin with all critical analysis of costuming in dance and live performance when wielded with primary attention to the effects of costume on choreography and corporeality. What may be useful about the critical lenses I take in this dissertation is that they can be applied to costume’s role in, for example, lesbian pioneer Loie Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance* (1908) as equally as they can be applied to an Andalusian female Flamenco dance in the contemporary setting on any given day. The common terrain is an attention to how costume not only signifies culturally-specific norms and temporalities, but also that it has a direct effect on choreography as part of the corpus which I have called the *dressed, dancing body*, rather than something secondary that bears no influence on the sensational and representation life of a performance. Yet, drag queen and drag king performances occupy a marginal location in the worlds of dance and live performance despite their resilience as an artistic medium. As a genre, they articulate and embody the histories and affects of highly-marginalized historical agents (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, queers, transgender and transsexuals, drag queens, drag kings, gender-queers, intersexuals, and so on) whose stories rarely make it to the formal modern dance stage.

Yet, there is a crucial difference between drag kings and drag queens, besides the visual absence or presence of the Adams Apple and general stereotypical tallness of

queens and shortness of kings. As queer theorist Jean Bobby Noble (2006) has described, kings and queens share distinctly different corporeal, sexual, and political genealogies as marginalized people and performers. Hardly universal amongst kings in the sense that in-as-much-as all bodies are marked by race, class, ability, sexuality, and gender identities, drag kings have established ourselves as a community with identifiable parameters only since the development of a public “male impersonating” performance circuit in late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century burlesque, cabaret, and club scenes. I propose that what unifies these performances is a “sonic rub” in king performance, namely the erotic specificity of the transitive spaces kings occupy in their performed “impersonations” of bio-men and hegemonic masculinity. I will attend to this *sonic rub* as a way to discuss the stakes of f-t-m cross-dressed performance as it exists in its contexts of heteronormativity and patriarchal misogyny.

I make this “sonic rub” visible by drawing upon the work of anthropologist Stephania Pandolofu who proposes a “different listening” practice in her work on marginalized subjectivities and Moroccan modernity. It is with this call for “different listening” as a critical methodology for engaging drag kings in their specificities that I end the chapter, and the dissertation. Dance historian Jane Desmond describes in her edited anthology *Dancing Desires* (2001), that it has not been the presence of gay and lesbian dancers that has escaped canonical dance history, but rather the markings of LGBTIQ sexuality. Desmond writes, “While canonical dance history has omitted the contributions of other marginalized groups, such as African American choreographers and performers, it did not write out the presence of gay and lesbian dancers. Rather, it wrote out – made invisible or at least unspeakable – their gayness, through what Susan

Foster terms ... 'one of the most remarkably open closets of any profession' (Desmond, 2001, 15).<sup>74</sup> It is to Desmond's call that this notion of the "sonic rub" responds, as a way of marking the "gayness" of drag kings in their specific affective registers.

### Listening Differently

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that drag king performance calls for a specific kind of listening practice to interpret king performance. I call this practice "listening differently" as a way to signal the embodied work the listener must do in order to "hear" the sounds I suggest are present and meaningful in drag kinging as a performative. The implication that there is a labor involved in "listening differently" is intended to drag attention to the normalized presumption that listening, generally, involves no work at all but instead is achieved as a natural result of the biological body: of having ears that are functional. "Listening differently" then opens up the door for not only a choreographed set of "listening" practices (leaning in to king performances differently; turning the head to better capture the stereographed sounds; attending more carefully to the logic and needs of the outer and inner ear to hear, translate, filter, and decode sound waves, etc.) that evolve out of an engagement with drag king

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<sup>74</sup> Jane Desmond thus argues for the intersection of dance and sexuality studies together, rather than the restorative gesture of the "inclusion" of GLBTQ's in dance studies histories, or of dancers in sexuality studies and history. Desmond writes, "This claim for the necessary intersection of sexuality studies and dance studies is based on two assertions: first, that issues of sexuality and especially of non-normative sexuality, are not merely relevant but play a constitutive and under-recognized role in dance history; and, second, that dance provides a privileged arena for the bodily enactment of sexuality's semiotics and should thus be positioned at the center, not the periphery, of sexuality studies" (3).

performances, but also calls out in no uncertain terms that listening is a primary perceptual activity of interpreting drag king performances, rather than seeing/sight.

My reason for choosing “listening” as a conceptual response to drag kinging is not an act of barging ahead to produce a (new) formula of the sonic, nor is it to reach a conclusive, graspable sound. Rather the intervention of aligning “listening” to drag king performance carries with it the intention of attaching an analytic lens to a performance form – kinging – that is based on sound and the sonic, even in the “silence” of lip-synchronicity.

Some performances twist up the senses, opening up new spaces for perception and knowledge. There is a counter-intuitive turn in my chain of significations to suggest that something that does not use vocal chords tied to the singing body (the lip-synch) produces song. To suggest this would be to break apart the ties we have to singing: that it comes from our own bodies, and is uniquely ours. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s discussions of the rhizome aptly address what I mean by this claim. In

*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2004) the philosophers write:

Write to the *nth* power, write with slogans: Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots! Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities! Run lines, never plot a point! Speed turns the point into a line! Be quick, even when standing still! Line of chance, line of hips, line of flight. Don't bring out the General in you! Don't have just ideas, just have an idea (Godard). Have short-term ideas. Make maps not photos or drawings. Be the Pink Panther and your loves will be like the wasp and the orchid, the cat and the baboon. As they say about old man river:

*He don't plant 'tatos*  
*Don't plant Cotton*  
*Them that plants them is soon forgotten*  
*But old man river he just keeps rollin' along*

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between

things, interbeing, intermezzo (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 24-25).

Imagine the duets one likes to hear: songs between two people, or between a person and a musical instrument, or between instrument and dancer. What happens to song here, to one's unique song? It becomes heightened by the participation of other economies, other knowledges, other lines of flight in the same way as a rhizome, with no "beginning or end....always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo." This vision is necessary to make the leap from singing-as-attached to the body, to singing as a collective experience in which performers share "voice" and so "song" in an upheaval of the temporal registers of a performance space. In this way, the drag king performance becomes an experiment with becoming pink, as the Pink Panther does, thereby disappearing into the sea of significations that are now not only his environment, but also an extension of himself. I suggest that the drag king lip-synch is a vocal form, not a muted mimicry of some essential 'truth' contained in the 'original' incarnation of the song by an iconic musical group. I suggest that a "different listening" practice is needed to "hear" this claim, and "hear" it in the lip-synching performances of contemporary drag kings.

Lip-synching the Adam Lambert song "What Do You Want From Me" for example, renders in me a feeling that I am singing and *am* Adam Lambert, the pop music icon. This "feeling" is either a psychological ruse, a lie I tell myself, an embarrassing fact of my theoretical naiveté, or it bears the seeds to a different kind of knowledge, based in listening to sound. To believe the later, that what one hears articulates the real, defies the importance of the visual in the making of history. It seems that if a drag king produces a fantasy of "being" as an articulation of the

performance, this process has no effect on an audience by the fact that fantasies cannot be seen.

To historicize my argument, I set “listening differently” as a concept against hegemonic conceptions of listening in European psychoanalytic history. I do so to critique these Euro-centric practices of violent medical listening where sound production and listening is removed (detached; split off; foreclosed) from the performing body and granted to avatars of Western knowledge in the form of privileges of citizenship, social and economic power, and individualized authority. This critique is significant for its practice of listening differently as a critical engagement that resides “nearby”<sup>75</sup> the subject, and is an explicit critique of the hegemonic structures which pathologize marginalized subjects as bodies unable to “hear” their own sound(s). This site marks, for me, a site of radical potential where clothing addresses state power as a constructed utterance (never natural) that falls under the theoretical circuitry of normative queer and radical scholarship, though not entirely. The stakes of this claim are grounded in the physical and psychic experiences of drag king performers.

My proposal is that in performance, the intimate touch of costume and skin creates sounds that reverberate through the body, and bespeak a particular kind of sensation and source of agency that is particular to drag kings. I have suggested that drag kings create a place of “intentional solitudes” in order to mark their particularity as gendered beings between vocal registers coded as female and those coded as male. But, would this mean that a “drag king’s voice” could be mathematically produced at the

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<sup>75</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha forwards a critical practice of “speaking nearby” in her project on knowledge production and cinema, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991). I refer to Trinh’s practice here.



middle point between culturally-recognized “male” and “female” vocal registers? Without of falling prey to this kind of deducting, I suggest an imaginative leap that disassembles voice as an audible, material, textured, linguistically-legible collection of sound waves; instead, I propose conceiving “voice” as a process produced outside of a bio-essential model and not necessarily organized around the mouth as an organ. Instead, sonic articulation of a drag king “voice,” I propose, is spread production over the surface of the body by making a *sonic rub* at the interface where clothes touch skin. This deferral to the whole body as a tool for sound production presents a new way to look at drag king performances, through theories of the sonic and sartorial.

To make this point, let me provide an example. When a king tears off the duct tape that binds his chest when performing, squeals of pain accompany this act. Yet, the audible sounds are only part of this experience of binding and unbinding. Present, too are the associations of pleasure and pain linked to the psychic relief of binding and unbinding in the first place. For this reason, the concept of the “sonic rub” need be registered as both audible and inaudible sounds heard and not heard not only by the human ear, but also by the body’s internal systems of listening – the inner ear, bones, muscles, nerves; residing in imagination, kinesthetic memory, and fantasies of desire materialized in the sonic. I propose that this sonic rub sartorial provoke a series of events that include physical processes (e.g. an increase or decrease in the body’s temperature), physical action, and psychic processes that are part of the drag king’s subject-formation. All in all, the basis for my claim that these sounds exist remains beyond the parameters of my current research project. They are an educated guess – heuristic. So, I am going to press on, inviting willing readers to join me in believing that

they do.

In *Dioptrics* (1637), René Descartes wrote that the senses ruled human encounters. He foregrounded “the sense of [as] sight being the most universal and most noble...” (1). In order to understand how the other senses connect to sight, Descartes fathoms up the figure of a blind man who navigates the world without sight. He describes the typical stick-tapping activity of the blind, where objects that form and orient his path are understood in their sculptural composition by the full-body experience of stick-tap vibrations coming down the stick. Descartes exclaims with some vigor that the blind can practically “see with their hands” (2) and also suggests that most with seeing-ability often draw on this “sixth sense” (3) when walking in the dark at night, and using a similar prosthetic to “see” with their hands. This story is worth quoting at length. Descartes writes:

It has no doubt sometimes happened to you, while walking during the night without a light through difficult paths, you have had need of a stick to help direct yourself, and from this you have been able to remark that you feel, through the medium of the stick, the various objects which you encounter around yourself, and that you could distinguish if there were trees, or rocks, or...similar things (2).

While Descartes foregrounded sight in his explorations of the senses, it is clear that his vision was selective; his look at sight shadowed over of other perceptual cues in his blind man story, such as the sound of the stick hitting the trees and rocks as he walked. I follow Descartes’ example of emphasizing one sense over the others. The physical touch of the body to another surface (telling the brain if something is hot, cold, rough, coarse, etc.) is replaced by a different set of connections. Touch of the body to costume – of skin and costume as two mediums interacting with each other – produces a friction

that I understand as sound. I call this friction and electricity “the sonic rub.”

My argument in this section is that drag king performances call forth an embodied listening process that restructures conventional notions of ‘the sonic.’ I suggest that this process reroutes audience listening tools organized through the ears and proprioception, into listening tools linked to textiles, that is, to the touch and sound of textiles as they meet the interface of a performer’s skin, deferring expression from the mouth to the whole body as a receptive and sonic tool. I contend that drag king subject-formation at its most fundamental level sounds itself into material existence by the rubbing of two mediums together: costume, and skin. Drag king performance, under this formulation serves the particular and unique function of performing the sonic quality of clothing as it presses against the skin by de-materializing ‘the auditory’ within a hierarchy of perception informed by European modernity, into a multi-nodal sensual system that combines sight, touch, and the auditory as intertwined. But how are these sounds heard?

### **An Autre Écoute – Feminist Contestations to Listening Authority**

In “The Thin Line of Modernity: Some Moroccan Debates on Subjectivity” (2000) Stefania Pandolfo writes about a “language whose speech is waiting to be delivered” (Pandolfo 2000, 118) in her work on Moroccan modernity and the impact of modern science on traditional ways of healing. Pandolfo describes a woman who “makes a journey” to a Quranic teacher to receive healing in the form of “an autre écoute,” a different listening (116). In this section, I apply Pandolfo’s notion of “an autre

écoute” to my look at drag kings in order to explicate the particularity of the lip-synch as an aesthetic form with sonic agency, based in dress.

Pandolfo understands this woman, Su’ad, to be enacting an intervention to a hegemonic discourse that prioritizes Western medicine as the solution to psychiatric disabilities.<sup>76</sup> Su’ad crosses this interface – this thin line – on a long walk from her home in a middle-class neighborhood in Morocco to a fqih – a Quaranic teacher and healer – who resides in a small community in southern Morocco, a place she had never been. “The space of our journey was a detour of waiting, a postponed verdict, the hiatus of a dream,” Pandolfo writes (116). The two walk together, literally, and arrive to the silence of the fqih as he sits and perceives Su’ad – by listening – as she sits before him. Finally, he offers his prescriptions. The three meet again; Su’ad and Pandolfo leave and journey back to the urban neighborhood where Su’ad lives. In this exchange is a resonance of what Pandolfo describes as “the long history of exchanges and transformations ... of those entities that are today called the Arab world and the West, and the fluctuation in what now appear to be fixed identities” (123). Pandolfo describes that Su’ad is not “cured” of her disability in this exchange. Rather, she suggests that what occurs in this walking journey and encounter with the fqih is an opportunity for the complicated textures of voice held between and within the temporalities of Moroccan modernity to be heard. Pandolfo writes, Su’ad did not find “a cure, a resolution, a deliverance, but,

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<sup>76</sup> A term in itself that it both pains me to write, and marks the impoverishment of language brought on by Western medicine in relation to the many forms of embodiment practiced – by choice and by default – by the world’s inhabitants. “Psychiatric disabilities” stands in as a place mark for a vast array of mind-body connections and practices that make up human and non-human corporealities, that are usually relegated to a lesser, substandard, and “unproductive” status in normative European ideology, discourse, and history. These ‘unproductive’ bodies have, historically and still in many locals, been LGBTQs, communities in which drag kings often reside.

perhaps, for a moment, what in the language of psycho-analysis is called an *écoute* – an active listening, and a recognition.” (125).

Without taking Pandolfo’s notions too far out of their context of Arab-specificities, the anthropologist provides some useful ways for unraveling the weave of temporality, the material body, movement, listening, and uttering present in the problematic of recognizing and giving voice to “difference” within the context of power and foreclosure created by Western medicine and knowledge. Stephania Pandolfo describes that she makes a walking journey with Su’ad. She describes that she sits with her and the Moroccan *fqih*. While walking is a physical practice more uncommon in many U.S. Western contexts than not, these details of the journey are more important – or as important – , from a dance scholarly position, to the practice of an *autre écoute* as the prescriptions that the healing practitioner offers. While many readers and writers may find themselves sitting or lying in recline when reading analysis or when confronted with the subjects of their studies, what is also true is that there is also a journey to these positions, as for the subjects of our studies. This part of the journey often gets left out of the formula of the final analysis, though never entirely. Pandolfo does not describe the intricate physicalities of listening while she sits with Su’ad and the Moroccan *fqih* during her fieldwork. Her task is not a comparison of how a Western doctor may have listened to Su’ad physically, versus the Moroccan *fqih* (as two figures and poles of authority in the industries of healing). Rather, Pandolfo describes the significance of the embodied fact of her long walk with Su’ad, and the embodied fact of sitting while the *fqih* listens. Pandolfo is sure to mark that Su’ad is not cured by the Moroccan healer, yet suggests something about the importance of the interaction.

Pandolfo suggests only one thing about the Moroccan fqih, and that is that he experiences an impasse in his healing practice in his recognition that, in his encounter with Su'ad, he needed to listen "differently" to her. Pandolfo writes, "And he had found himself in a place that was novel for him, a place where the assumptions of his ritual acts were suspended" (116).

These details of the écoute suggest something to me as a thinker attentive to drag king performance that movement and movement are connected, as two projects of performing a kind of critical listening practice that does is attendant to difference. While these details are not evidenced in the prose provided by Pandolfo, I raise them into the discussion to fully answer what it might mean to *listen differently* to drag kings. Pandolfo discusses a second woman with a psychiatrist friend. Pandolfo makes a walking journey with this second woman, from her village in the South to Casablanca, to a Western psychiatric hospital. In that journey and at the final destination, her speech "circulates again" after sitting in the hospital and visiting with a nurse. "I wondered whether the fear of institutionalization fueled in her a desire to belong, to join a community of speech..." Pandolfo wonders to her friend. The psychiatrist makes his evaluation. He says, "she needed to travel far, far from her village, and from the ties in which she was entangled; she needed an autre écoute, another listening" (117).

### On Listening

How does one listen to a performance in which mouthing words of a song sung by someone else, into a mic that is neither plugged in, nor much more than a character

prop, is its lynchpin? Is this ventriloquism? Mimickery? Play-acting? Could drag king lip-synchronicity be no more than an amateur aesthetic practice of limited influence on political agency? Does drag king lip sync amount to a “baby brother” to “mature, adult” live singing, where non-vocally-talented youth pantomime the moves and replicate the looks of their favorite pop icons, striving to draw themselves into the field of capital, and this uncritically and (many times) to racially offensive result? A way to broach these questions into one discussion is to pose one question: What happens when we listen, at all?

Scientifically, physics suggests that sound vibrations are sucked in by the physical ear through a channel that guides sound in particles through the drum of the ear in what is called a sound wave. Through the drum, sound waves hit the middle ear and its bones, and are translated into a fluid, and then become electrical impulses in the inner ear. From here, sound travels through nerve impulses to the brain and other parts of the body. Sound against a thigh or other non-ear part of the body also transforms as it hits the body’s mediums – skin, muscles, bones, blood, etc. Listening engages the ears and other parts of the body. A listener might turn her head towards a noise to make the path sound waves travel more direct. Sounds that may be softer call for a leaning-in to the sound, using the neck, head, shoulder muscles, torso and core. Listeners may thrust their heads back in response to a noise or to a thought that is triggered while listening. Shoulders may hunch, knees may buckle, and so on.

These scientific and physical processes of listening do not, however, describe the physical act of listening and hearing. Listening is impaired when material objects obstruct the pathway of the ear, such as a set of construction earmuffs designed to

reduce the impact of sound vibrations on the ear. MP3 players worn in public do the same, as well as providing the ear (and the listener) with sound vibrations of her choosing to translate into electrical currents in the inner ear. Pain, suffering, dis/comfort, elation, and desire also enhance and disable a body's listening ability. In everyday use, this filtering provides a way for human beings to focus on the sounds that they interpret are most relevant to their subjectivities, to their selves-in-formation. At worst, this filtering is called "selective listening," a term that often comes across as an accusation. In biological terms, this filtering is called the Cocktail Effect: a listening practice that entails filtering out sounds that are not relevant to a conversation held in a busy, noisy environment, such as at a cocktail party. Ocean LeRoy discussed a similar process filtering out the sounds and narratives of hetero- and gender- normativity as a gender-queer, as a strategy of producing a positive self-image. I have previously discussed Althusser's intricate argument about how the state calls its subjects into existence through hailing, through the 'hey you.' I wish to speak about the process of resisting this intimate state control by an active act of "not listening."

Yet, as such scholars and Elaine Showalter (1993) and others critical of the European psychiatric and psychological industry have offered, obstructions to listening also occur by interpretive lenses that rely upon patriarchal ideological constructions and knowledge-bases, ones that divide mind and body, prioritize Western knowledge, give power and authority to Western notions of the body and the self, and disavow listening agency from the performing subject.

Feminist theorist Elaine Showalter writes about the feminist romance with the figure of the hysteric (1993, 286). In her essay, Showalter suggests that this romance is



based on imagining hysterical women as figures of “universal female oppression” (286), thus situating these figures as ripe for feminist intervention. Showalter suggests that a “herstory” of hysteria emerged in the last few decades written by feminist social historians who “concentrate on the misogyny of male physicians and the persecution of female deviants in witch-hunts” (287). I pick up these feminist discussions not to reclaim the figure of the hysteric, but rather to reclaim listening from the hands of medical and psychiatric medicine, for drag king performance.

In the essay, Showalter notes that not only women, but others exhibiting certain kind of gestural and/or verbal behaviors are pathologized as “hysterical.” In this hegemonic naming, notions of normativity are stabilized at the cost of others losing their agency and becoming subjects of and to Western medicine. This moment of loss describes the conditions and epoch in which listening is stripped away from the articulator within a binary structure of power. In this project, listening authority – which is to say who is given the authority and power to listen, to interpret, and to speak about the utterances of another person – is stripped from racially white women and from the feminine under the ruse of developments in Western medicine. This shift of listening authority then, reformed the meaning of “listening” to be a process of Western expansion where the listener became author, authority, scientific and marked as masculine, white, European.<sup>77</sup> In turn, the articulator’s self-listening authority was foreclosed, marking her physical and psychic organization as feminine and in an

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<sup>77</sup> This moment deserves much more attention than I can give it here. For more on the racialized components of the expansion of Western medicine, see Wulf Sachs *Black Hamlet* (1937).

epistemological disjunction with the U.S. nation.<sup>78</sup> I take these ideas forwarded by Showalter and many others to the stage of drag kings to suggest my own interest in and use of listening authority as an important concept. Against the hegemonic Western listening authority, one can see how listening became an extension of liberal, humanist ideals linked to seeming “benign” interventions of Western medicine to “cure” some bodies of their supposed afflictions. *Listening authority* in this view becomes visible as a loaded political activity that arguably stretches outside of the formal walls of the psychiatrist’s and doctor’s offices of European modernity, onto all the formal and informal stages where there may exist a contestation about embodied corporeality, gesture, and the production and/or meanings of sound.<sup>79</sup>

Ethno-musicologist Christopher Small writes about the phenomena of music in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (1998). Small has pointed out there is no such thing as music, but rather that music is an event. He writes:

Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing ‘music’ is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely (Small, 1998, 2).

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<sup>78</sup> The case of the invention of the stethoscope during the outburst of tuberculosis could be another example of how Western medicine imposed its beliefs about the superiority of doctors “trained” to diagnose and given tools to foreground their listening authority to the point of intervening in the corporeality – in the stethoscope’s pressure against a patient’s body – of a person fathomed to be without their own listening agency.

<sup>79</sup> These concepts were heavily explored and debated by the first and follow-up essays on Indian subalterns provided by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, though with Spivak the focus was on the speech act itself, rather than listening per se. See “Can the Subaltern Speak” (C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillian Education: Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313) and “Scattered Speculations on the subaltern and the popular” in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 475-486, 2005.

If one thinks closely about this phrase, or, rather, *listens closely*, it is possible to recognize what the performer experiences as an interpretation in performance. Without the king, there would after all be no performance; and without his fantasies, the king would not exist.

In the next section, I assert instead an alternate corporeality and organization of the senses where meaningful listening is returned to the self and selves, through my appropriation of Pandolfo's concept of "an autre écoute," a *different listening practice* that is both physical (in its engagement of the body) and psychic (in its role in subject-formation and subjectivity).<sup>80</sup>

### **Drag, Sound, and Subject Formation**

In performance, the intimate touch of costume and skin let out sounds that reverberate through the body. Dress makes sounds as it scoots across one's body when writing, dressing, or dancing – something only intimately heard. How can these events be made legible? How can they be heard? My representation of the Heywood Wakefeld performance brings to the surface one possible rendition of the sonic in drag kinging.

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<sup>80</sup> Much has been written in cultural studies analysis about the geographic and cultural context in which the sonic is produced: a vinyl record played in a club in Brooklyn need be understood necessarily as differently significant than the same song played on an boom box or iPod in a dining room in the backwoods of Kentucky, for example. Their acoustic compositions are, in large part, determined by the architecture, physical spaces, and interactions with other sounds, lights, and sensual properties in their spaces of amplification. While the stereophonic technologies for playing are clearly different, not only the political contexts but also the choreographies and corporealities of the bodies listening are different. I propose that one holds these notational particularities at bay, which also means holding out the need for the final musical score of the sartorial-skin concerto at bay. Instead, I turn my attention to the performative demand I ask of a reader to *listen differently* as an analytic practice.

Yet, my story only airs the question of how sound functions and is produced in kinking, rather than provides an answer. The site I provide in this chapter is where costume touches skin, producing a sound that may not be audible to the human ear. This site marks, for me, a site of radical potential where clothing address state power as a constructed utterance (never natural), a potential that falls under the theoretical circuitry of normative queer and radical scholarship, though not entirely.

There is a discussion in Continental philosophy about a tree, falling in the woods. “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” the question goes. The question concerns sense perception and object hood on one level, and began with the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher George Berkeley who posed the question in his 1710 writing, *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Part I*. But on a more fundamental level for Berkeley was a concern with spirit and metaphysics on the one hand, and with questions of embodied perception on the other. The slice of these debates that concerns my work in this chapter is the question of sound: of hearing sound, of ontology, of what I will call “listening.” I offer up a scenario similar to the tree/sound/forest scenario not to replicate an ad nauseum debate, but rather to let a different set of philosophies loose on each other, towards the productive end of attending to the sonic rub in drag king performance. I propose that in drag king performance, the intimate touch of costume against skin produces sounds that reverberate throughout the body. Heard not only by the human ear, but also by the body’s internal systems of listening – the inner ear, bones, muscles, nerves; residing in imagination, kinesthetic memory, fantasies of desire materialized in the sonic –, sartorial sounds provoke a series of events. These events include an increase or decrease in the

body's temperature, to mental activity, to physical action, which, I have argued, intervene in subject-formation.

In representing the sounds of drag king costumes (some of which may not be audible), I am consciously drawing my analysis to an intimate activity of focused, precise, close listening that follows the organic contours and materials of costume and the body. This listening necessarily navigates intimate spaces, intimate sites, and intimate knowledge. By itself, the subject of costuming references both a cultural activity that is on the one hand abstract, superficial, and tooled apart from emotions, feelings, or sensations – that is, the activity of dressing and/or costuming. On the other hand, costuming as a subject references “clothing,” a topic often relegated to ‘the personal,’ ‘the intimate’ and ‘feminine.’ And so, linking up this intimate, feminine, superficial, sensory site of knowledge production with the body – already over-determined as a threat to Western reason – a patriarchal, heteronormative reading would suggest that what is produced is a doubly-loaded feminine abstraction with negative zero agency that – like two ‘female’ usb plugs for the computer – cannot conjoin or produce (like lesbian sex) a historical mark without the aid of a ‘male’ adaptor or an ‘outie.’ Again, following this line of reasoning, listening to drag king costuming could be aligned with ‘looking at clothing on women’ with one’s eyes slightly averted,<sup>81</sup> and that in both cases this gaze is a product of a homo-erotic desire for women’s bodies, framed by a fetish for clothes – all ‘unproductive’ labor. I place this in the conversation

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<sup>81</sup> Jacques Lacan (1981) writes about the difference between “the gaze” and “the look” as a differential of power. For Lacan, “the gaze” produces the subject at the moment it cuts, creating both as excess (what is lost in entering language) and as mirror (a representation of the self). Jean-Paul Sarte discusses (1959) “the look” in the context of “being seen” and shamed into subject hood. As I will discuss shortly, I suggest that listening as a practice also participates in these cuts and reflections, but differently.

to mark the summersaults of gender, class, race and national citizenship involved in conceptualizing what it means to “listen to drag king costumes.” There is no doubt that I am a queer who enjoys wo/men’s clothing and costume choices, but the stakes of this analysis hardly rest in the sexual, or a-political.

But there is more to the paradigm of intimacy than physical closeness relevant to my argument. Intimate listening (which may arguably be what listening is at its most fundamental level: intimate) as a site for knowledge production hosts strong contrasts in meaning about vocal articulation. These meanings are rooted, I suggest, in the networks and circulations of temporality in listening as an analytic practice.

### The Sounds of Costume

In 2005, Boston-based drag king Heywood Wakefeld performed a duet with an audience volunteer at the sixth annual *International Drag King Extravaganza* (IDKE). Wakefeld, as established performer and MC in the drag king scene, chose the Neil Sedaka song “Love Will Keep Us Together” written by Sedaka and Howard Greenfield in 1973. Heywood performed the 3:15 min song as a duet. As I describe the performance, pay attention to the sound cues. Heywood is clad in a costume reminiscent of Las Vegas-style entertainers from the 1970’s or 80s. He wears a white tuxedo jacket over a black pair of slacks, with black belt, black shiny shoes, and light pink, ruffled tuxedo shirt and black bow-tie rounding out the costume. Wakefeld’s moustache is thick, dark brown and shaped like a pair of motorcycle handle-bars that outline the contours of his mouth, loosely. The drag king’s natural hair matches the moustache; his

thick black eye-glasses (prescription) also match the outfit and frame his eyes. Wakefeld mentions out loud on the microphone that he has picked this volunteer “because your red bra matches my pink shirt,” to express camaraderie and set the comedic flair which often characterizes Wakefeld’s drag king performances. Wakefeld says that the performance “is only a demonstration, because you are taken, right?” into the microphone. His question posed to the volunteer shifts the terms of touch from romantic intimacy to a performative for the sake of entertainment. Putting the mic aside and taking his place to her stage right, facing both her and the audience, Wakefeld lip-synchs “Love, love will keep us together” in synchronicity with the pop song that booms out on overhead speakers. The performance ensues.

Wakefeld reaches both arms to the dancer to his right as he says “love.” Knees bent and polished black dress shoes reflect the light from above; the king hits his next mark with precision, rising to straight legs and putting his right hand on the volunteer’s shoulder. As he does so, his oversize tuxedo jacket edges graze over thighs. With an ear close to the coarse fabric, one might hear steady coarse scratches of polyester grazing polyester as the king moves behind his volunteer and his jacket follows along behind him. Wakefeld bounces lightly on his toes as he walks, leaving echoey tap-tap-taps as he moves stage-right to stage-left towards the volunteer’s other side, following the 4/4 beat of the song. Wakefeld continues his lip-synching facing the audience and his dance partner -- “You, you belong to me now / Ain’t gonna set you free now / When those girls start hanging around, talking me down ...” -- the volunteer begins to interact with Wakefeld, too. She touches Wakefeld’s legs, grazes his genitals (which she mouths is/are “so big” as she pantomimes with her hand); with

these points of contact between her hands and his costume, the condensed noise of gripped fabric fills the stage, quick tones that stop suddenly when she moves her hands off the performer's body and back to her own. She looks to the audience and to him, indications that she's quickly putting performance gestures together, improvisationally.

Wakefeld scuttles from one side of her to the other, leaving long wakes of shuffling sounds as he prances about. He mouths "Young and beautiful / someday your looks will be gone," then nods his head 'no' to the audience as he puts both hands on the shoulders of his volunteer. "When the others turn you off, who will be turning you on? I will, I will..." As Wakefeld lip-synchs, the stretch of his lips pulls at the spirit-gum-pasted moustache on his face, tearing the tiny hair follicles slightly as the 'stache loosens to enable his speech. More sounds come: a crack in his jawbone, the smacking of lips; a staccato chafing noise as his neck rubs against the fray of his tuxedo shirt. Simultaneous to these imagined tiny incidents, the volunteer smiles, laughs, grabs Wakefeld some more, and clutches her breasts to accent the moment. Going down on his knees with a lyric, Wakefeld's black pants stretch taught through his inner thighs as he leans forward towards his partner, and then away, as he demonstratively belts out (in lip-synch) "Just stop, 'cuz I really love you. Stop, I'll be thinking of you." And so on.

I transition now from the actuality of Heywood Wakefeld to the figure of a drag king performing a lip-synched song. Many kings wear boxers, briefs, or any number of undergarments that will hold a phallic object (such as a softie; a sock). Some kings bind their chests with sticky duct tape, pulling their breasts either back away from the center of their chests, or squishing them into their ribs. The effect is a flat chest; the feeling is a tight, often painful constriction of the chest cavity, making breathing a bit cumbersome



and stretching into a grand dance move laborious. Yet, kings rarely sacrifice their performances in relation to these elements of the labor. Costumes purchased from thrift stores or as hand-me-overs (in exchange with other performers or friends), may be over-size and loosely fitting due to disparity in size of “men’s” clothes placed on the average “woman’s” body in the U.S. All these details affect choreography, and thus the intimate and inaudible sounds that are center-stage to this chapter. I suggest that this rubbing of two ubiquitous and extremely flexible discourses together (the sartorial and the corporeal), produces a historical agency, whether heard or not. In combination with the articulate sounds of costume hitting skin, scraping against the floor and colliding with other fabric; or of a jacket’s tail twirling in the air as a performer spins on his toes letting out a swooshing sound, one can imagine a host of other gendered sounds produced at the very intimate site of a drag king’s subject-formation.<sup>82</sup>

### Historical King Sounds

To draw out this discussion of temporality, I return to the historical sounds of lesbian icon 90-year-old Stormé DeLarverie that began this dissertation. DeLarverie is often referred to as the “granddaddy” of drag kinking in the U.S. because of long-term active involvement and employment as a male impersonator and ballad singer. DeLarverie’s deep voice established the genre of male impersonation as separate from

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<sup>82</sup> Here, I offered a series of intimate sounds – arguably inaudible – as somehow essential to the properties of costume fabric and “body” of the drag king performing: as if all bodies produced the same essential sound when interfacing with a polyester jacket, tuxedo shirt, loosely-fitting slacks, and so on. Yet, such a claim is not only based in a materially-essentialist fantasy, but far from the truth of sonic production.

female impersonation and drag queening, as did her costuming and demeanor in the Jewel Box Revue Shows. DeLarverie's history is, for the sonically-oriented thinker, a rich archive of sounds: "originary" drag king vocal tones and pitches, song choices, emotional registers, costumes, technical concerns, et al. There is a feature of DeLarverie's tale of hitting the policeman back in the historic moment of police brutality for LGBTIQ social history that supports my proposal that the subject-formation of drag kings and female masculine people utilizes sound. In the case of DeLarverie's tale, however, the "sound" that interests me is the one that was barely audible or even silent – a sound having nothing to do with real-time "live speech," "live sound," or "live song." To hear this sound and its tempo(rality), I move through the analysis Jean-Paul Sartre provides in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1959) about subject-formation and sound.

In a chapter called "The Look," Jean-Paul Sartre makes two notations about sound. First, Sartre provides that a man who, "moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice" (Sartre, 1959: 259) is looking through the key hole of a door, absorbed in monocular vision. Suddenly, he hears footsteps in the hall and is shocked out of his self-absorbed state. Impersonating this man, Sartre exclaims, "Someone is looking at me!"(260). This moment of self-knowledge is produced by the fixity of sight in combination with the surprise of sound. Lacan later explores Sartre's incident in his work on the gaze; he identifies this moment of subject-formation as tied to shame brought on by sound – by "the look of the Other" contained in the sound of footsteps. Indeed Sartre and Lacan both suggest, in different fashions, that sound overrides vision in invoking human subject-formation (Lacan, 1981: 65).

In these critical stitches and knots about human ontology and consciousness, sound and vision are both separated from each other – highly demarcated – in their sensual apprehensions of the world. In recalling Lacan’s reading of Sartre’s shameful subject-formation when he finds himself looking in one direction (through a monocular keyhole) and hearing the sound of footsteps from another direction while reading Stormé’s response, what is striking is how Stormé does not hear the onset of the policeman at the moment of her historical subject-formation, and is also restricted in sight. Instead, the cacophony of sounds drones out the individual sound of the cowardly policeman, and Stormé is looking in the other direction. In this absence of a distinguishable sound or visual connection to the Other, touch functions as the gaze. In response, rather than with shame, Stormé responds with pride and gazes – through touch – back. In both of the critical responses to Sartre’s story of the man responding to the footsteps (Sartre’s response; Lacan’s response), there is no mention of the significance of bodily awareness or movement (choreography) to subject-formation. Yet, the man in Sartre’s story is leaning on his knee(s) or sitting, looking through a peep-hole. When he hears the sounds of footsteps, does he turn his head to look – or remain frozen in his panic? While the man is caught in reverie – “someone is looking at me!” –, Stormé skips over the reflective moment (“someone has hit me”) and turns around to hit whomever has hit her while she was not “looking.”

I have introduced the idea that lingering on the interface where costume meets the body in drag king performances makes legible the intricate sonic pathways of subject-formation attentive to a perspective that riddles Euro-centric knowledge production. While not debunking the work that Jacques Lacan produces about subject-

formation and shame, I propose that drag king performance in its particular pole-vaulting of hegemonic masculinity, models a way of unraveling the sounds present in the complex material temporalities of king masculinities, such as the wap of Stormé DeLarverie as she bashed back during a moment of racism and police brutality. In so doing, drag king lip-synch performance might be understood to do more than represent and narrate disruptions of normative masculinity and heteronormativity through cultural referents, but also offers a way of finding the sounds of drag king histories and corporealities droned out by the cacophony of real-time sounds that swirl around kings like knats to a light.

The *different listening* for which I argue encourages an attention to the physical process of listening, one that might take the form of a walking journey, a sitting silently, a moment of circulated speech, or none at all. Instead of focusing on the production of legible speech, I have offered some sounds produced through the rubbing of the sartorial against the body, a body always in movement and always engaged in the properties of dance: using force, gravity, gesture, an understanding of time at times outside of Cartesian frameworks, illegible terms to normative knowledge production. Whether they are audible or not, to listen for these sounds is to listen differently; it is to engage in a physical project of listening that may suspend our habituated ritual acts of usual listening, from no matter where one sits, stands, or reclines. To lean into a performer on stage to listen to her clothes rubbing against skin, when what usually is called-for is looking at her, is to utilize one of the many senses that performance fully draws upon to impact meaning and transformation in both participants and audience members, I suggest. In that act of listening differently, the body itself is created and

produced as a different body – and in the case of listening to drag kings, is perhaps a queer body if only for “an interim of a moment” (Pandolfo 2000, 116). In these moments of altered physicality and ideological disruption, the shift of one sense can then enact the shifting of others. The visual may become background noise for the auditory; sight becomes only a focusing device for a more pronounced listening practice; touch may be heightened or turn into colors; time may become warped; smell may begin to feel. These reorganizations of the senses, I suggest, on behalf of the drag king, stand the chance of disturbing the normative hierarchy of the senses when taking in performance, interpreting kings, and hearing more than what is customarily understood as voice, sound, and the sonic.

## CHAPTER 5

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### CONCLUSION: Drag King Studies and belonging

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*It's not just about putting on a suit anymore; it's about becoming a part of the whole outfit. When I'm in drag I'm expressing a whole side of me that needs to be expressed . . . .*

(Amber, Chicago Drag King, cited in Hanson, 2007)

I began this dissertation with an analysis of a 2000 *Sex and the City* episode that highlighted drag kings.<sup>83</sup> I called attention to the historic importance of this episode in its bold stance on the beauty of drag kings and transgender men, but critiqued the episode for its trans and homophobic treatments of king identities and histories in order to maintain the centrality and visibility of patriarchy, binary gender, whiteness, and normative heterosexuality in global media. To pull the threads of the dissertation together and wrap it up requires an attendance to a final king performance: one also performed to a global television audience in Season 1, Episode 12 of the lesbian sit-com *The L-Word*.<sup>84</sup> In this episode of the historic lesbian situation comedy series, vintage

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<sup>83</sup> *Sex and the City* was an American cable TV series created by Darren Star, based on writer Candace Bushnell's book of the same name. The show focused on the lives and sexual forays of four adult women in New York City, starring Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, and Cynthia Nixon as the lead protagonists. The series aired on HBO from 1994 – 2008.

<sup>84</sup> *The L-Word* was an American cable TV series created by Ilene Chaiken depicting the everyday lives of a group of lesbian and bisexual women friends in Hollywood, California. The series aired on the Showtime channel from 2004 – 2009. The show starred Jennifer Beals, Laurel Hollman, Leisha Hailey, Mia Kirshner, Kathering Moennig, Pam Grier, and Daniela Sea as its main protagonists.

car restorer/drag king, Ivan Aycock (portrayed by Kelly Lynch) gives a private performance of Leonard Cohen's "I'm Your Man" to Kit (portrayed by Pamela Grier) in an underground parking garage. Through an analysis of Aycock's performance, I revisit the concern posed in my introduction about what a field of "drag king studies" might yield as it brings together the interventions of dance studies, performance studies, queer theory, music theory, and how these deal with feminist theories about power, gender inequity, and sexual desire.

To contextualize Ivan Aycock's performance, I provide a summary of some of the major plots and characters of *The L-Word*. Episode 12, entitled "Locked Up," expands previous lesbian sexual dramas, and highlights a discussion of censorship in the arts. One of the show's key characters, Bette, is a power lesbian and art curator who works for a prestigious art gallery. In Episode 12, Bette finds herself attracted to Candace, the lesbian carpenter she has hired to install her upcoming show, "Provocations." When a right wing protest of "Provocations" turns into a riot, the whole *L-Word* group end up in the L.A. County jail. Bette and Candace share the small quarters and intimacy of a jail cell, which leads to a steaming sex scene via a problematic (yet significantly tweaked by race, gender, and homosexuality) revitalization of upper class fantasies about incarceration, inmate eroticism, and working-class women of color.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The two characters never actually physically touch each other, a detail of the 2004 episode that complicates the issues of power and agency which resides in the traditional racist upper-class fantasy. The entire seduction is actualized through the verbal discourse occurring between two lesbians who's key source of tension is their class difference, and Bette's struggle to remain faithful to her relationship and her lover, Tina. Race is glossed over in the scene in order to propel the fantasy along.

Meanwhile, outside the jail, bisexual Jenny contemplates divorce with her husband Tim; café-co-owner Marina (who has had a love affair with Jenny in earlier episodes) flirts with Robin (who has asked Jenny out), by way of dysfunctionally coping with her jealousy and, Kit (Bette's straight sister, a singer and recovering alcoholic) meets Ivan, an auto mechanic and drag king. It is this last twist of sexual attraction and sensual exchange that interests me most as a way of accounting for what I have done, what I have not done, what I hoped to do, and what remains to be done in this dissertation.

### I'm Your Man

*L-Word* drag king character Ivan Aycock performs a private lip-synch of Leonard Cohen's "I'm Your Man" to Kit (played by Pam Grier) in a parking garage after a public club performance in Episode 12, Season 1.<sup>86</sup> The scene opens with a long-shot of the two taken through the back window of a vintage car; Ivan confirms to Kit how much enjoyment she can find in life without drugs or alcohol. His voice is noticeably low, coding the drag king as masculine through a sonic register, before he can be read as male visually. The camera establishes an audience POV in the next shot through a

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<sup>86</sup> Ivan's parking garage performance is viewable on youtube here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyYZqu2U\\_UY&feature=fvw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyYZqu2U_UY&feature=fvw). By way of contextualizing Ivan's drag king genre and gestural vocabulary and offering up an example of the pleasure lesbians, bisexual women, gender-queers, other kings, trans men, and straight women share in taking in drag king performance, see Ivan's public club performance here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1a6tbaixrn8&feature=related>.



close-up of Kit's face as she describes how grateful she is for Ivan's help. She speaks in a higher vocal register (coding her as female and feminine) to Ivan, who is standing right in front of her. The scene is intimate as if a heart-felt moment between two friends. Rather than responding with spoken words in real-time, Ivan responds by walking to the car and turning on the radio. As the music seeps through the scene, the camera draws back into a long-shot. Ivan pulls a Fedora from the front seat and saunters back to Kit and into the lip-synch, which he performs in front of his car. The camera moves in closer behind Ivan's back as Kit realizes that Ivan is performing; she smiles to him as she sits down on the hood of the car. Ivan mouths the lyrics to the song which go:

If you want a lover / I'll do anything you ask me to /  
And if you want another kind of love / I'll wear a mask for you /  
If you want a partner / Take my hand  
Or if you want to strike me down in anger / here I stand  
I'm your man.

Ivan's attire during this *L-Word* performance situates the king as a cross between a cleaned-up rocker with street-wise taste in jewelry,<sup>87</sup> and a coiffed butch lesbian with a flair for rockabilly vintage style. His black pompadour and duck-tail is matched by a set of long side-burns that frame his face. The king's eyebrows are plucked evenly; he dons a small soul patch and thin black moustache in the tradition of a Three Musketeers swash-buckler. The king's eyes are designed to give the memory of Rudolph Valentino a run for its money, outlined in a dark liner and adding (in the racist traditional of neo-liberal American capital) a layer of racial exoticism and sexual animality to his image.

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<sup>87</sup> Ivan wears a single gold cross earring on his right earlobe; his fingers are laced in bulky silver rings of all sorts.

Given that my reading above of this performance reflect my own frames of references and analytic ways to “grasp” (as Akira Lippit suggests, 2005) the king, I would argue that there are two elements of this fantasy about minor masculinity which counter-act this Hollywood neutralization of drag kings as disruptive social agents. The first element that I would argue confronts Hollywood viewing audiences with the real force of drag king discourse lies within the criticism journalist Malinda Lo takes against this scene in *The L-Word*. Lo writes in “It’s all about Hair: Butch Identity and Drag on *The L-Word*” (*AfterEllen*, April 2004) that the Ivan-Kit seduction plays out a “cringe-worthy” violation of boundaries that denies the importance of consent in erotic encounters. Building to the argument, Lo reminds her readers that Kit has told Ivan that “if” he was a man, he “would be the perfect man” for her (Lo, 2). Following this, Lo suggest that Ivan creates a scene whereby he can show Kit that he may just be that perfect man, if Kit were interested. Lo critiques the show’s storyline for blurring the boundaries between playacting (what drag seems to be to Lo) and “actual relationships” (a.k.a ‘real life’) in the seduction scene between Ivan and Kit. Lo writes,

It appears that Ivan has decided to show Kit that s/he can be a man for her – but being a man requires that s/he be someone s/he is not. There is certainly room for playful drag in the context of an actual relationship, but using drag to seduce someone—especially someone like Kit, who has been straight all her life—is a bit cringe-worthy (2).

There is much to unpack in Lo’s criticism that point to the cognitive and ideological roadblocks drag kings present to the real. In alignment with an understanding of drag kings as occupying performative places between maleness/masculinity and femalenes/femininity and integrating the two poles of gender

identity, Lo chooses to describe Ivan's identity with the pronoun "s/he." This choice gives credibility to the gender-queering labor of drag kings and drag king discourse head-on, in public media. Yet, the problematic knot left unexamined in the claim Lo is making in this scene is her devaluation of the performative as an ethical social location where kings can pursue, express, and actualize their lives – their attractions, feelings, intellectual stances about the world, etc. Lo suggests that Ivan is being "someone s/he is not"<sup>88</sup> and "use[s] drag" to seduce a "woman who has been straight all her life" (2). On all counts, the simplifications and limitations Lo places on sexuality and drag performance along with her insistence on Ivan's "real" identity muddle the potency of drag kinging as a stable site of cultural power and embodied self-knowledge. Lo takes a stab at the complex circuit of desire running through the performance in her next paragraph. She writes:

It is not that a situation like this is unlikely in real life. Real life is full of complications and it is possible that a fifty-year-old straight woman would fall for a drag king with a pompadour-mullet. But I do wish that the producers of *The L Word* had thought through the messy implications of this storyline a bit more" (2).

Lo suggests that Ivan is wearing a mask as a king, thereby delegitimizing the fact of erotic and sensual exchange in "staged performances." In this suggestion is a presumption of Ivan's "essential" gender and sexual project as biologically-based and homo-normative (lesbian="women-loving-women"), framed by the notion that social beings are determined by their economic roles. These ideas applied to Ivan and Kit would yield Ivan to be "a woman (straight or lesbian) dressing as a man (heterosexual)

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<sup>88</sup> What Lo means by this is not yet clear in her analysis.

for the purposes of audience entertainment” and Kit to be “an audience member/woman (straight or lesbian) attracted to a man/male character on stage (sexuality unknown and unimportant), or a person she believes is a man.” In either case, what is fundamentally important to Lo, here, is a reductionist view of what Ivan might be as a drag king other than “a woman pretending to be a man.” Said differently, Lo leaves out the possibility that kinging might be a gender identity of its own; and secondly, Lo glosses over the intricate negotiations of agency, power, and consent that reside in performance as an expression of daily life, ethical exchange, and participation in relationships.

In her essay, “Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment,” Julie Hanson (2007) explores drag kinging as a project of bodily becoming (Hoogland, in Hanson, 61) that occurs because of the specific time and spaces of drag king performances. Hanson’s interest in the essay is in understanding and giving “due credence to the powerful bodily effects drag kinging can and does have on the women who engage in its practice” (62). Hanson’s viewpoint functions in sharp contrast to the perspective on kings that Malinda Lo provides. Hanson recognizes kinging as a project of transformation where “alternative knowledge of the embodied self” (63) are actualized in king embodiments. Taking up this perspective gives validity and presence to “Ivan Ayacock” as a particular and specific masculine being who cannot be split up by the whiplash of rationality and impositions of linear time that exist in Lo’s formulations, I would argue.

These linguistic twists and turns point to a foundational point of analysis left out of this dissertation: about what a drag king is in relation to the social order. In this way, the debates forwarded by J. L. Austin (1970) and carried forward by Judith Butler

first in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and many others are not addressed in this dissertation. As an attempt to encourage a different battle with Western knowledge production than the one fought for by Butler and others in their queer disruptions of binary gender, normative sexuality, Cartesian frameworks of the body, time, materiality and the immaterial, I have focused on the significance of embodied knowledge contained in and produced by drag kinging as a project of a “drag king studies” perspective that is based in music, and costume. In the process, this shift has allowed me to discover the tempo of king songs: those qualities of live and lip-synched performances where music conveys meaning to a listener through resonance, timbre, density of sound, vibration. Thus, I have focused on the cross-firing in sensual registers (where vision, touch, and sound overlap, in specific) as a way to stretch the critical discussion of drag kinging further afoot from visuality and concerns solely with cultural representations as a way of talking about power. My goal has been to press for corporeal understandings of drag where visible registers and the critical discussions linked to visuality fall short, fail, or remain over-determined.

There is another level of oversight in Lo’s critique of Ivan’s potency as a king. Choreographically, there is evidence in the Leonard Cohen performance itself that suggest Ivan’s willingness to offer “another kind of love” than the one he presents on stage, yet his performance does not confirm that this masking would involve him being “something s/he is not” as Lo suggests. Ivan mouths Cohen’s verse “If you want another kind of love / I’ll wear a mask for you.” At this point of the song, the camera is in close up of Ivan’s head and shoulders, shot from Kit’s POV. As he mouths the words, Ivan takes the hat off his head and draws it down his face, as if putting on and then

removing a mask. Ivan's facial expression hardly changes from the opening of this phrase to the end, creating an ambiguity in the meaning of the "mask" he might wear, and also clouding the firm boundary between pleasure and sacrifice as an expression of his willingness to adorn himself (in mask) for his lover. Ivan does smile ever-so-slightly at this point, in fact, but the quick transformation of emotions from sly dog (willing to wear a mask for 'another kind of love' – a statement that could arguably point to his interest in kink) back to normative-Ivan (good friend/elegant romancer/Musketeer) is both smooth and barely perceptible at the level of the visible. Instead, Ivan's use of time, intention, and an exchange of energy with Kit as an interlocutor (along with the camera shot choices, editing, diegetic sounds, i.e. the cinematic apparatus) prove to be more critical elements of the performance's potency as erotic communication and queer disruption. The gesture and synchronicity of Ivan's transformations are leveled in negotiation with the temporality of Cohen's morose and alluring masculinity, effecting what I would suggest is a moment of touch, a drag king caress that comes out of the body of the performance and reaches Kit. To follow and take up this line of reasoning, however, involves investing in the penetrative potential of drag king as a material discourse – one that functions through the corporeal register to reach (and in this way touch) its audiences as it bridges, connects, unifies, integrates, and reorganizes the rationalist split between the mind (of ideas) and the body (as a hermetic mass of flesh and bones).

My focus on the concept of a "sonic rub" in the fourth chapter of this dissertation has been my analytic way of describing this penetrative potential and its possible materiality as "a sound not heard but certainly experienced" by drag king performers

and their audiences. I have chosen sound and physical touch as the sensual registers that articulate the sites of contact and production of an integrated mind-body in kinging both to give king discourse a new critical skin (one removed from the mandates of the visual), and to point to the flip side of the audible that lies at the center of drag kinging as a genre: the lip-synch.

Finally, within the response Lo provides to the Ivan Ayacock parking garage performance, lies one final element of kinging that I have not addressed in this dissertation. Lo levels this response on the basis of Ivan's hair. Lo writes,

It would have been so much simpler – and less cringe-worthy – if Ivan had simply looked more butch off-stage. That's right, if s/he had a butch haircut as opposed to the pompadour-mullet... Instead, we have this long, blonde-haired woman pretending to be a man so that a life-long straight woman will fall for her. This not only falls into the stereotype that lesbians recruit straight women, it also diminishes the issues of transgenderism...(Lo, 2).

Lo's reasoning is fascinating in this final moment of her analysis. The thinking raises her critique of *The L-Word* storyline out of the tar pit of rationality and disciplinary logic, and into a more complicated arena of transgender gender identities and their relationships to, or away from, butch lesbian social histories and identities. While Lo's humor regarding the significance and difference between a "butch haircut" and a "pompadour-mullet" provides striking relief to the complicated web of wo/men's gendered, raced, and classed identities existing within these haircuts as signifiers of historical moments and queer corporealities, what is most useful to the argument I pose in this dissertation is the absolutely key role hair specifically plays for Lo as a truth serum of sexual and gender identity.

I have suggested in this dissertation that a critical perspective on costume in analyzing choreography fundamentally challenges the notion that gesture and indeed inspiration originates only from the mind of a choreographer thinking about gesture, dance vocabulary, or the “essential” possibilities of the naked human body. Instead, in this dissertation I have proposed that “the body” need necessarily be perceived as always and already a dressed, dancing body where clothing – such as Loie Fuller’s long silk gown – fundamentally influences the production of choreography, like a dance partner.

Gayle Rubin wrote over twenty years ago in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” that “the time has come to think about sex” (Rubin, 1984, 143). Rubin argued then that sexuality acquired an “immense symbolic weight” (143) that could be aligned with the religious wars of earlier centuries. As Medieval art historian Michel Pastoureau evidenced in *The Devils Cloth: A History of Stripes* (2001), indeed these religious wars were framed at times around the issue of clothing – of a brown cloak instead of the accepted black ones, for example. It would be too convenient to transpose Rubin’s 1984 call that it is “about time” to address the sartorial element of history and class strife over production of the nation, and also erroneous, for the can of worms has been opened long before 1984. However, what Rubin’s text points out is the lack of a meticulously detailed political manifesto about clothing and costume as an important component of feminist theory – not as a subject to be looked *at* visually, but as a subject of “immense” density, weight, complexity, that touches all the senses in human histories and corporealizations.

In opening, I made the suggestion that it is nigh time school dance classroom opened their doors, officially, not only to the LGBTIQ’s et al who *identify* themselves as



such, but also to their affective registers, aesthetic proclivities, dancerly genealogies. In closing, I offer up the hope that by attending to a more focused, sonically-oriented, synaesthetic attention to clothing and costume in performance and dance studies, drag kinging and drag kings may finally occupy a central position in the dance classroom where kings are not outstaged by queens or the “real” dancers, nor made to disrobe or divest from the foundational relationships with clothing and costume that cultivates our performance work. My dream is queer, quite simply. In this dream world, musical numbers are not separated from the daily chores of living; performativity (as Susan Foster has suggested in her critiques of Judith Butler’s disciplinary omissions of actual gestures in “the performances” of “performativity”) is not debated, but rather honed by the inclusion of “drags (as Ocean LeRoy says in his multi-lingual translations from French to English through Berlin, email, etc.), transsexuals, transgender folks, LGBTIQ’s and former political and non-politicized prisoners in dance classrooms. To the kings who came before the dance floor was opened, this is for you.<sup>89</sup> Merci.

\* \* \*

*A dancer enters a small lesbian club on the corner of Lexington Street and 21<sup>st</sup>, in the Mission district of San Francisco, California. He is a butch and punk icon, a musician of international repute who co-owns a small café in San Francisco’s Mission District. Several women have prepared strip-tease performances to entertain the packed audience of San Francisco dykes and their friends.*

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<sup>89</sup> The phrase “for you” comes from live artist Julie Tolentino Wood’s durational performance, “For You” (2005). See <http://www.rob-roth.com/works/tolentino.htm>

*It is the early nineties; KD Lang has already sung at opening ceremonies in the Vancouver Olympics, dressed in a black frock and her signature cut-off cowboy boots. KD Lang's hair is short-cropped as she sings Roy Orbison's "Crying" to a global audience, to much acclaim. In other words, this is the year that butches make it to the world stage, dressed in finery. Silas Flipper is not a self-identified dancer, yet I call him one. At the time of this performance, he has explored work with Tribe 8 as the lead guitarist, his spoken word performances, his dedication to physical practice all signal a commitment to embodied practices.*

*Clad in blue jeans, plaid short-sleeved shirt, and glasses, Flipper's number begins with him standing atop a bar table, looking down at his shoes with some shyness. Eyes of the crowd are on him, though many fumble with their beers, flirt with those standing near, adjust at the hips to find a solid place to stand. The Lexington Club, one of San Francisco's 24/7 queer bars for women and trans folks hosts characteristically noisy but respectful queer clientele, shorn in every kind of hairstyle and queer/dyke costume imaginable. There is no cover, little snobbery, and generally tons of women cramped into the small bar space. On the East side of the Bay, women call the Lexington "the white girls club." In San Francisco, for punk/dyke-oriented women and transmen, the Lexington is a local hangout owned by local hero's and an improvement to the scene at Wild Side West, a Western-themed bar about a mile up Mission Street in the Bernal Heights neighborhood. The comment on race in San Francisco queer demographics will take more time to unfold. Tonight, the member of a well-known punk band is performing as a pencil-neck geek stripper, a gift of comedic undress for his fans and friends. The rock song continues as the details and timing of her performance develop. Legs guitar-distance apart, a wide butch stance in spite of the tensed shoulders carrying his downward-facing eyes. He pulls a pencil from the right breast pocket of his shirt and breaks it over her knee. It is a geeky gesture of bravado,*

*referencing the heteronormative show of strength some men offer in squishing empty aluminum beer cans on their thighs. With his phallus firmly established, the geeky exhibitionism begins.*

*There are laughs and hoots from the crowd. The dancer twists his fingers around each button of the plaid shirt, unbuttoning and quickly removing the outerwear of his costume to reveal the next layer of clothing beneath. Here he remains on stage, in ribbed, white tank top. He pulls it off, continuing the comedic strip tease. The crowd cheers and laughs. Underneath this tank is another. The crowd again laughs and cheers, getting the joke. He pulls off this tank, gripping the front with one hand, and lower edges with the other.*

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