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Understanding Dandyism in Three Acts: a Comparison of the Revolutionary  
Performances of Beau Brummell, George Walker, and Zoot Suit Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

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2011



The Dissertation of Elle Reynolds Weatherup is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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2011

## Table of Contents

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Vita.....	v
Abstract of the Dissertation.....	vi
Introduction. Dandyism through Performance.....	1
Chapter One. The Model of Dandyism in Barbey’s <i>Dandyism</i> .....	29
Chapter Two. The New Beau Brummell: George Walker and the Emergence of Black Dandyism.....	72
Chapter Three. Zoot Suit Dandyism: from Cab Calloway to Pachuco/a Culture and the Zoot Suit Riots.....	113
Conclusion. In Search of the New Dandy.....	153
Works Cited.....	164

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding Dandyism in Three Acts: a Comparison of the Revolutionary Performances of Beau Brummell, George Walker, and Zoot Suit Culture

by

Elle Reynolds Weatherup

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Winifred Woodhull, Co-chair

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My objective in this research was to find a usable definition for dandyism and to understand why the performance has been culturally important and adopted in different eras. I looked to performance theory and to real-life performances of dandyism by Beau Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters, as well as to

the literary productions and historical research of dandyism by such writers as Ellen Moers, Ian Kelly, and Barbara Webb.

I was able to locate, within the life performances of these three historical subjects, three aspects of the dandy's performance that are the most salient and translatable: the dandy shocks his community with a performance of superiority, delimiting his otherwise marginal status in that community; he alienates that society by putting himself on a pedestal of self; and he entertains, maintaining a seamless mask of truth and fiction that pleases his alienated society while he, always the stoic, appears not to notice.

Performance takes place and is passed on in the liminal space, or the topsy-turvy space in the margins of society, which often results from social and political ruptures. The dandyism that is born here is always revolutionary, pushing back against oppression and creating a new space of performance that opens doors to the possibility of future dandies. This holds true for the performance of the three dandyisms explored in the dissertation: Beau Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters' cultural moments suffered epistemic ruptures from which the dandy performance was spawned: late eighteenth-century England was shifting as the aristocracy fell, late nineteenth-century America shifted with the rise of a newly freed black population, and the mid-twentieth century saw great changes in the United States with the Second World War and the influx of migrant workers to the cities. I found that all of my subjects were indeed performing against erasure



in their societies, whether the oppression was set upon their class, race, or, in the case of the zoot suiters, age, family hierarchy, and ethnicity.

## Introduction

### Dandyism through Performance

#### THE LITERATURE OF DANDYISM

This dissertation seeks a new answer to the question, “what is dandyism?” and “why is it important?” Most studies of dandyism have echoed Barbey’s assertion that it “is almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define” (*Dandyism* 31), and yet the dandy is a powerful literal and literary figure who has appeared across the channel from upper-class England to Bohemian France and back, as well as across the Atlantic to the stages of New York, the streets of California, the seminal literary texts of Mexico, and beyond. For this reason, I approach the subject as one whose historical reoccurrence and often revolutionary effect should be given more serious attention and studied no longer as merely a flashy fop, but rather as a potent social and historical presence. I employ the tool of performance theory to unmask the elusive dandy, and it is through the lens of this discipline that I will argue that three circum-Atlantic acts of dandyism, those of Beau Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters, can be defined clearly as revolutionary performances that comprise three main components: first, to shock their respective societies in an act of refusal to be limited by that society; second, to dissociate from that society by taking on behaviors of superiority they have adopted from the upper classes;

and third, to entertain that society by acting, dressing, and presenting themselves in exaggerated costumes and temperaments.

Furthermore, when these three players (Beau Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters) are put in comparison to each other, it becomes clear that not only is dandyism a readable and graspable enactment, it also accomplishes a revolutionary or subversive substitution for the gaps in government, family, and other social hierarchies, including class, gender, and race, caused by historical shifts. Here I am building on Joseph Roach's argument in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), in which he addresses the "three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution" (2). He argues that in each cultural shift in "the life of a community" that community seeks to repair the "social fabric" by allowing a stand-in or a surrogate for that loss. In each case, though, the surrogate doesn't replace exactly what is missing, and so the cycle continues endlessly with new "alternates," who either fall short in their role of succession or far exceed it in exaggerated, grotesque ways. Therefore, the surrogates often come from the margins, where it is safer to test out the process of succession without risking the stability of the whole community (3). The three performances of dandyism interrogated here offer apt examples of Roach's theory. For example, Beau Brummell offered 19th-century England the dandy in place of lost faith in the monarchy; George Walker disrupted culturally (mis)understood "blackness" in Jim Crow America with the black dandy; and the zoot suiters surrogated for a lost and broken sense of family in World War II middle-class America. In each instance, the subjects enacting these disruptions are the least expected cultural participants, or the most unsettling surrogates,

who refused to be limited by their class, race, gender, or age: by enacting a revolutionary delimitation of the oppressive system of their time, they consistently created revolutionary upheavals.

I use as the central text on dandyism Douglas Ainslie's translation of Barbey D'Aurevilly's 1845 textual illumination of the "first" dandy, George Bryan Beau Brummell, in *Dandyism* (1988). Barbey's description of Brummell and of his spectacular self-production serves as the touchstone to a discussion of similar circum-Atlantic self-productions which I have aligned here to compare as exemplars of dandyism. Brummell's life was seldom documented, but his reputation as unarguably the first dandy ripples still. I make Barbey's text central for several reasons: first, because it highlights the performative aspects of Brummell's deportment and makes the performance almost mythical in its grandeur and scope, and secondly, because Barbey interprets Brummell's act as spiritual, suggesting that his was a spirit divinely (rather than performatively) made noble. I will argue that, contrary to how Barbey interprets Brummell's dandyism, the performance actually served to disrupt class boundaries and question the imperative of an aristocracy, instead demonstrating a very powerful secular refusal to be oppressed by a religiously ordained class system (headed by a divinely chosen monarch). Finally, I have made Barbey's text central because it made dandyism popular in France and renewed Brummell's popularity, even though it was published several years after Brummell's death and without its author ever having met Beau Brummell in person. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, like most texts about Beau Brummell, it relies on ephemera: gossip, anecdotes, and second- or third-party stories passed on during and after Brummell's life.

In short, it accepts without verification the various stories told by those who knew him (or who knew someone who knew him).

Ellen Moers' text, on the other hand, entitled *The Dandy: from Brummell to Beerbohm*, couches the study of Brummell in both a historical context and a literary context, and draws both interesting and informative connections between Beau Brummell's creation of the dandy and the creation of the dandy in literature. Moers' is the most well-researched breviary of dandyism, and for that reason, I draw on it for both a historical and a literary context. I will also draw on Ian Kelly's biography, *Beau Brummell: the Ultimate Dandy*, in which the author clearly illuminates Brummell's dandyism as strictly a performance.

In this introduction I will first delineate the term "performance" and how I use it throughout the dissertation, as well as the performance terms that I use to describe Brummell's self-realization; secondly, I will explain my understanding of Brummell's "dandyism"; thirdly, I will summarize the three chapters that follow, on the democratization of fashion and the blurring of class boundaries manifested by Beau Brummell's dandyism; on the revolutionary repercussions of George Walker's "black" dandyism in turn-of-the-century America; and on the emergence of youth culture and the nationwide dismantling of civil and social authority that took place with the advent of zoot suit dandyism in mid-twentieth-century America. These three examples will serve to demonstrate the power of dandyism as a performance that both took the place of social loss and at the same time changed and disrupted the marginalizing powers that most marked the loss. The result of this argument will be not only to redefine dandyism

through performance, but also to engage literature as a history of performance that has and continues to contribute to the creation of our contemporary subjectivities.

#### WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?

Performance Theory is a fairly new discipline in the humanities. Its early development is largely credited to the theatre scholar Richard Schechner and the anthropologist Victor Turner. In the groundbreaking text *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, Victor Turner describes his work in what he calls “comparative symbology,” which, he explains, is not quite “anthropological symbology” because it moves beyond the scope of studying symbols only in terms of their communicative or expressive possibilities, separate from a historical mooring, and places them in comparison to the events and markers of a culture's or cultures' historical momentum. In other words, comparative symbology is a branch of semiotics, Turner explains, because it studies signs and symbols but grounds them in a particular historical and social frame, asking more of the comparison than to reveal just the nature of its signs, but rather the nature of the signs' *uses* in a given society. Furthermore, because the symbols are given their meaning within a social context, they are also given to change as they are adapted to and inherited by other cultures and other time periods. Therefore, comparative symbology can shed light on a culture's social processes (21) and even promote a “transcultural understanding” (18) by illuminating what the symbols express during a cultural event and how each expression points to or encompasses those rituals, rites, and meanings that make use of the symbols. As Turner explains, “[f]rom this standpoint the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an

activity field [. . . ] I formulate symbols as social and cultural dynamic systems, shedding and gathering meaning over time and altering in form. I cannot regard them merely as 'terms' in atemporal logical or protological cognitive systems" (22), he says, because they change and grow with each use and in each cultural and historical context.

When these symbols are used, they are employed consciously by the performer to a given end, in what Richard Schechner calls "restored behavior," which is the collaboration of the living performer with these systems to manifest and to reenact their social meanings. In other words, restored behavior entails a subject's memory of others' behaviors, or of those found in texts, plays, and films, and the reenacting of them, much as an actor would play out the actions of a character. While the act is not always a conscious one, there nevertheless exists "a certain distance between 'self' and behavior, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage," as Marvin Carlson says. "Even if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered 'performed' and off stage merely 'done'" (*Performance: a Critical Introduction* 4). But Performance Studies scholars have since found that restored behaviors (offstage) are also performances, because they recall earlier behaviors and reenact them. Indeed, as Schechner tells it, restored behavior is "something that is acted not for the first time, it is rehearsed or prepared, also called twice-behaved behavior" (*Performance Studies, an Introduction* 22). But there's a catch: as Alan Kaprow has stated in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993), "there is no such thing as once-behaved behavior" (*Performance Studies, an Introduction* 23) since all behaviors are learned and repeated socially, such that there is no blank, inherent

performance of self possible that is not informed in societies already charged with texts, rituals, and rites of passage. In response, Schechner states in *The End of Humanism* that he has “even come to doubt that there is a core or single self that a person can ‘be.’ Everything in human behavior indicates that we perform our existence, especially our social existence” (14). Restored behavior, then, has been the pivotal concept around which Performance Studies has evolved.

But the theatrical endeavors have fortified their place in Performance Studies as well, as Jon McKenzie explains in his recent contribution to the field, entitled *Perform or Else: from Discipline to Performance* (2001), in which he succinctly breaks down the modern theories of performance, the discipline of Performance Studies itself, and the fields within which it has been fostered. In essence, he explains that we can qualify “the activities that once animated the vaudeville stage—music and dance, comedy and melodrama, daring feats of skill” as cultural performances passed on through cultural traditions. Today these performances are found mostly in film and theatre.

On the other hand, we also have cultural performances that do not take place on the stage but in society, and we have learned to apply the analysis of theatrical performance to everyday cultural performances, such that, for example, we can analyze the giving of gifts in certain societies as a reenacted performance. McKenzie adds, “Anthropologists and folklorists have studied the rituals of both indigenous and diasporic groups as performance, sociologists and communications researchers have analyzed the performance of social interactions and nonverbal communication, while cultural theorists have researched the everyday working of race, gender, and sexual politics in terms of



performance” (8). And throughout the branches of performance studies, Schechner’s “concept of ‘restored behavior’—as the living reactualization of socially symbolic systems—has been one of the most widely cited concepts of cultural performance” (8). Indeed, the discipline of Performance Studies, scholars agree, has sprung from the dialogues between Richard Schechner’s texts in Theatre Studies and Victor Turner’s anthropological works, as shown in the above case where Schechner’s theorization of Turner’s “comparative symbology” has given us the performance concept of “restored behavior.” It is this concept that moors my study of dandyism, beginning with Beau Brummell, who imitated the upper classes and thereby shocked his hierarchical London society. As such, dandyism, when considered as a circum-Atlantic performance, becomes a social, historical, and even linguistic medium for the understanding and reinterpretation of social, political, and class systems.

#### A PERFORMATIVE CONTEXT OF DANDYISM

Dandyism, as a style of elegant dress, mannerisms, poise, and affect, was an identity performance born of faltering class demarcations and political upheavals in late-eighteenth-century Britain. It is a moment interesting and pertinent to a history of performance and the possibilities of performance for the influence it had on the reconfigurations of class in Regency England, and for the reason that its leverage was gained by nothing more than a pose and a restored behavior taken from the upper classes, creating a new class that existed simply by the insistence that it existed. That the dandy was maintained and remolded to enact new social concepts throughout the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries demonstrates the power of performance to effect change on the social and political environment.

My first chapter on the first dandy, Beau Brummell, is, in Joseph Roach's terms, a "geneolog[y] of [the] performance" of dandyism that "approach[es] literature as a repository of the restored behaviors of the past" (48) because all we really have are literary (as opposed to verifiably historical) accounts of Brummell's performances. Therefore, the literature of dandyism, and especially Barbey's text, is treated here as a historical document that helps to trace and reconstruct the culturally restored behaviors that came after it. In other words, rather than working from the top down and grouping together all those who have been called "dandies," my method is to work from the bottom up: I begin with the conditions and characteristics of Beau Brummell's self-production described in the text and then seek them out in later performances, elucidating a certain kind of self-production or performance to which I apply the term "dandyism." I have chosen three central components of this production that are salient in the performances of all three of my subjects, Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters: first, that their performance initially shocked society because it came from a marginalized performer (Beau Brummell was not from the upper class, George Walker was a black minstrel performer, and the zoot suiters were mostly black and Latino/a youths dispossessed by mainstream America); two, that the performance required dissociation from society because it alienated the performers by their refusal to be limited by a marginal status; and, thirdly, that the performance entertained: in each case, though in different ways, Brummell, Walker, and the zoot suiters entertained the society that they shocked and

dissociated from, so that the shocked and alienated also became an observing, applauding, or, in the zoot suiters' case, panicking, audience.

#### BEAU BRUMMELL'S DANDYISM

By all accounts, Beau Brummell was the first dandy: he came from essentially “nowhere,” without class distinction, and became a high-society “exclusive.” His company was, in his heyday, more difficult to attain than England's Prince regent. It is important to distinguish here that by “dandy” I am not speaking of a simple matter of costume, nor, as Ellen Moers explains in her study, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, “[s]imple foppery (or affectation in male costume),” which is, she says, “as old as time: some wags have traced it to the Old Testament” (12). Rather, Brummell's dandyism marks a particular moment when one's speech, pose, and choice of costume became a social statement:

[D]andyism as a social, even political phenomenon, with repercussions in the world of ideas, was the invention of the Regency, when aristocracy and monarchy were more widely despised (hence more nastily exclusive) than ever before or since in English history. What the utilitarian middle class most hated in the nobility was what the court most worshipped in the dandy—a creature perfect in externals and careless of anything below the surface, a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste. (12-13)

While “simple foppery” may have previously been the playing field of the rich and noble classes, in Beau's time it was an appropriation whereby he denied his class status and began to dress in the manner of the rich, suggesting a nobility of spirit rather than of name or heritage.

As it happened, the dandy emerged in the 1790s, a moment in Western history when the aristocracy was losing its divine place in the hearts of men: the rising bourgeois was deposing the small shopkeeper, and the working-class cry for bread was growing stronger. The three classes that had been maintained for so long were steadily being destabilized and shifted, both materially and in the cultural conscience. Balzac, who was writing fashionable novels during Brummell's life, created a new fictional class in his novels, based on the character's social prominence rather than on his material wealth or ancestry: the "zéro social," or the "social nothing," belonged to the worker, because he lacked creativity, style, and taste, spending his time only working; his company was hence undesirable. On the opposite end, Balzac gave us the highest class, which he called "l'oisif," meaning "idler." L'oisif didn't have to work because his presence was so pleasurable and desired that he was ostensibly given everything *gratis*, much like the aristocracy. Rather than focusing on the accumulation or maintenance of material wealth, Balzac's dandy characters concerned themselves with the cultivation of elegance. Therefore, l'oisif and le zéro social were the only two classes one need know: the middle class, now coming to power, was too uninteresting to remain a category of note because it was not endeavoring towards refinement, and the aristocracy was a thing of the past. Balzac believed that the new aristocracy would be the artists, and that wealth could be replaced with grace:

The need for this new division of society has arisen from the revolutionary breakdown of traditional class barriers. Rank and privilege are disappearing; a new aristocracy of wealth threatens the old aristocracy of birth; "les nobles de 1804 ou de l'an MCXX," Balzac writes, "ne représentent plus rien." The old aristocracy cannot justify a reassertion of traditional privilege on the argument of birth; the aristocracy of the future

—intellectuals and artists—will require something besides talent to win social supremacy. The new, necessary element is elegance, as expressed in the arts of dandyism. (Moers 130)

Only a person who admired himself enough to dress like royalty and live his life as a work of art could perform this new “ritual of taste,” and that person was the dandy. While the costume of the dandy remained on the surface and the dandy insisted that he cared nothing for what lay underneath it, the implication was that what was “below the surface” was an inner greatness to which outer perfection came naturally.

Indeed, the idea was that if a man could dress and carry himself so naturally in the costume of the aristocracy, then there must be some inner aristocratic spirit that was untouchable by the material trappings of society, as Moers explains: “As an attitude, it justified social superiority without reference to wealth and power. As a pose, for those who sincerely deplored the abandonment of aristocratic ideals before the bourgeois slogan ‘enrichesiez-vous,’ it was a defense against vulgarity” (122). At the same time, the dandy stood to further unmoor the rigid class lines by placing himself above his ancestral heritage without the need for—ostensibly, at least—approval by his society or hard proof, so to speak, of his nobility.

Therefore, Beau Brummell’s dandy came to be accepted as a living delineation of new class barriers. Even if what he represented was merely a momentary pose or style of jacket, he flaunted it in all areas of society from the top down: his act was preserved and perpetuated only as long as it was always under the public gaze, and so he made sure not only to keep the company of the wealthy upper-classes but to also make appearances “purposefully among the romantics, pedants, athletes, bailiffs and other bores of this

world to remind them of his superiority” (Moers 19). And his insistence on superiority was enough now that “such solid values as wealth and birth [were] upset”; in their place, “ephemera such as style and pose [were] called upon to justify the stratification of society” (12). Furthermore, it was the age of the masquerade, and so the dandy easily crossed the threshold between costume and clothing: “Masquerade suited the temper of the times. Ever since the Revolution the French had been accustomed to express political opinions and literary tastes by means of costume and pose” (122). Indeed, these pastimes made the dandy a daily object of entertainment for the people: they were fun to look at and offered a topic of conversation that didn’t revolve around the regal boredom that otherwise dominated the common consciousness. As Moers explains, “To those in a position to watch them, [(in other words, everyone, as the audience-in-contrast was an inherent part of the performance),] the Regency dandies provided almost unlimited material for fiction or reflection. In a time obsessed with fears of boredom, they were the ones who created liveliness out of fashionable nonchalance. They were individuals; they cultivated a neat, amusing, tame eccentricity that could never be called vulgar or jar against the basic laws of exclusive society” (58). Indeed, the Beau Brummell model of dandyism provided plenty of entertainment: it was more than just clothing, it was also situational wit and made for weeks, if not years, of interesting gossip throughout the echelons of London’s populace.

Although very little of what Beau Brummell actually said has been preserved, some of the rumors of his encounters with high society and the Prince Regent have been passed down as ingeniously witty jibes of mythological proportions. We can see in these

examples how one phrase could serve to shock, alienate, and entertain. For example, he is said to have once insulted the Prince Regent, George IV, by looking past him at a party and exclaiming to the Prince's companion, "Who's your fat friend?" Certainly, insulting the Prince Regent was shocking; secondly, it set Brummell apart for the audacity of the act; thirdly, it was actually quite funny and has lived on as a source of entertainment for nearly two centuries. At another time, when meeting a couple of London "exclusives" on the street, one of the gentlemen inquired as to whether Beau liked his coat, upon which the Beau exclaimed, "You call that *thing* a coat?" Again, as an insult, the statement was shocking. In the same vein as that which he said to the Prince Regent, it was alienating and put the exclusive in his place, yet at the same time it was entertaining, especially if we analyze it for its timing and cleverness. As Moers explains, the thrill of the performance was not just in the words or phrases expressed by Brummell, but in the timing and poise of his witticisms, and that they had "reference always to a *situation*: [they] triumph over an actual risk" (19). Even then, the words, for Brummell, were merely an instrument, not an end in themselves. In other words, Brummell's poetry flourished more for his manner of articulation rather than for the words articulated, like an improvisational actor whose words matter less than his timing and assessment of a particular social interaction: "meaning lay in the tone of voice, the manner, the glance and the situation to be mastered" (20). Indeed, the entertainment lay in the execution of his startling wit. At times he didn't even need to speak: the jibe was contained in a silent performative gesture, such that he could "dominate a difficult situation without uttering a word" (19).

While contemporary journalists (particularly those who wrote for a magazine called *Fraser's*) who despised the dandies often claimed that society had fallen to anyone who could afford an expensive coat, this was nowhere near the truth. Moers asserts that the exclusive circles were much more scrutinizing in their summing up of newcomers: “Wealth was no guarantee of admission . . . Birth was no guarantee . . . Beauty, talent, achievement, distinction—none of these meant anything unless qualified by that elusive term: *ton*” (45). This was the word of the day, cited hundreds of times in the fashionable periodicals and novels, and is somewhat hard to define: in French it means, simply, “tone,”<sup>i</sup> which without a qualifier highlights the difficulty not only in defining *ton* but especially in performing it. Indeed, it was obvious to Brummell’s community that his *puissance* lay in much more than simply the dress; rather, “his power over others derived from subtleties of manner so fine they cannot be reproduced: ‘Il la produisit par l’intonation, le regard, le geste, l’intention transparente, le silence même’” (“his power was produced through the intonation, the look, the gesture, the transparent intention, and even silence” 262), all of which comprised a dandy’s *ton* and gained him admittance to the exclusive clubs and high-society rumor mills.

Thanks to the novelists, today we are left with a pretty clear picture of the legacy of exclusivism: anyone who has read a Balzac novel knows too well that a young man from the country could buy the right costume but not be noticed in the streets of Paris or welcomed into exclusive social circles; the requirements were much more nuanced and

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<sup>i</sup> It is also used in idiomatic expressions: “donner le ton” means “to set the tone,” “il est dans le ton” means “he fits in well,” or “une plaisanterie de bon ton” is “a joke in good taste,” to name just a few. I will include my own rough translations (in footnotes, when not re-stated in the body) to clarify the quotations in French.



multi-layered than simply the cut and cloth of a man's coat—it was all in the performance. Of course, Brummell would not have bothered with such a performance (as those named above) with *anyone* on the street, but chose the moments when both the person to whom he spoke was of some social importance and, especially, when this person had with him someone else of import to relay the scene that took place. It is this discriminating factor of the dandy's performance that suggests that his performance was a restored behavior, in Schechner's terms, or a played "part" for a consciously chosen audience.

Together, what the dandy performed was accomplished in seconds: the "intonation, look, gestures, transparent intention, and even silence" were played out in an extended liminal space, subject to and molded by an element of shock. Indeed, extending the moment of play, or the liminal space, and bewildering the interlocutor was the first essential goal of the dandy performances I analyze throughout this dissertation, and Brummell was a master, known for surprising his audience: "il aimait encore mieux étonner que plaire" (Mrs. Gore in Moers, 263)<sup>ii</sup>. Looking at the quotation above, "Do you call that *thing* a coat?," we can see that two things are happening: one, the "thingness" of the coat is called into question, which is a totally unexpected response resulting in, two, the Beau stunning his audience and extending the moment of play. Rather than answering the question, he stayed on it, making a seemingly small object, the coat, into the greater inquiry. According to Moers, William Hazlitt observed in this moment "a distinction . . . as nice as it is startling. It seems all at once a vulgar prejudice

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<sup>ii</sup> "He loved shocking more than pleasing."

to suppose that a coat is a coat, the commonest of all common things,--it is here lifted into an ineffable essence, so that a coat is no longer a thing . . . What a cut upon the Duke! The beau becomes an emperor among such insects!” (20). In essence, the surprising topsy-turvy reversal of issues great and small was central to the dandy’s wit: “All his *bons-mots* turn upon a single circumstance, the exaggerating of the merest trifles into matters of importance, or treating everything else with the utmost *nonchalance* and indifference, as if whatever pretended to pass beyond those limits was a *bore*, and disturbed the serene air of high life” (Hazlitt in Moers, 20). This type of “play” is a perfect example of what Victor Turner describes as a crucial element of performance, liminality, the “in-between” where where “people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements” (*From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* 27). Indeed, the novelty at once shocks and, in so doing, entertains. It is in this vein that some of the great dandy maxims were born, and it is this talent especially that people such as Oscar Wilde would practice one-hundred years later, thereby gaining renown (as Wilde did) or failing miserably in trying. “Novelty” was a cornerstone of the dandy credo.

The key word for my purposes here is “practice.” Just as Allen Kaprow stated that “[t]here is no such thing as once-behaved behavior” (*Performance Studies, an Introduction* 24), Brummell’s dandyism was very much a conscious routine put on to affect an audience. And because, as Schechner says, performance “resists that which produces it” (24), it was the perfect vehicle for assuming a greater social status: if the performance could supplant in visibility the person who performed it, a good enough

performer could accomplish a great deal. As Moers explains, “[D]andyism is a pose: not a ‘mere’ pose, but an immensely difficult, conscious and effective pose. It is a training for power. Pelham’s dandy maxim runs: ‘Manage yourself well, and you may manage all the world’” (76). While this is a fantasy of omnipotence, Brummell managed himself well enough to leave a legacy of performance and to manage, at least for a decade, the world of London society.

Certainly, Brummell was nothing less than a great performer: “Brummell is indeed the archetype of all artists, for his art was one with his life. His achievements in costume and manner were living masterpieces: ‘Il plaisait avec sa personne, comme d’autres plaisent avec leurs oeuvres’” (Moers 263)<sup>iii</sup>. For the audience who at that time had leisure enough to pay attention to Brummell and his accomplishments more than to just witness him passing regally through the streets, it was imperative that he maintain the performance as the only thing to stand in for his “life,” or his class status. If their gaze turned from Brummell’s performance to his wealth, class, or even physical appearance outside of cleanliness and clothing, the mask would fall. What better way, especially for the working people, to move up in rank than to perform against the physical and material aspects of the self that would have proved fatal in pre-Revolutionary Europe? As I will discuss in chapter one, that such a performance was created (and prospered) against centuries of rigid class delineations and social constraints is very exciting for the study of performance and the possibilities that this model of performance created for future marginalized groups of people.

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<sup>iii</sup> “He pleased with his own person as others please with their works/masterpieces.”

Once Brummell had won widespread notoriety without having been a nobleman or a great writer or having had any real or tangible merits other than dandyism, others began to follow suit. It became clear that even if someone was not of high birth or nobility (Beau was, according to a Mrs. Gore, “a nobody, who had made himself somebody, and gave the law to everybody” (Moers 25)), a more immediate, surface performance of wit and poise could accomplish just as much and more. All it required was a great performance, a mask, to eviscerate a greater underlying fiction, which was—in Beau’s case, and by his own insistence—that his opinion mattered, that he was someone important. His consummate life performance gave him access and mastery in the new upper-class tiers—a world that “considered itself the only human aggregate worth knowing or being; and this world deferred to Brummell, simply at his insistence on his own superiority” (26). The model set forth by Brummell (and dandies to follow) let the performance speak for the essential qualities of the performer, “resisting,” as Schechner says, the performer himself and the limitations of his class, race, or marginalized position.

In this way, the performer is freed from preconceived notions of classed, raced, gendered, and aged subjectivity and allowed to create whatever identity he chooses in the moment of performance. The driving force of this performance was to deny an initial, instinctual behavior, which was described by the dandies as “animalistic”: “To the dandy the self is not an animal, but a gentleman. Instinctual reactions, passions and enthusiasms are animal, and thus abominable” (Moers 18). Especially since he didn’t want people to see anything “real” or unperformed, the Beau’s dandy necessitated the practice of

recreating his daily behavior, responses, and reactions to completely displace those behaviors that might otherwise betray his origins and break the spell (assuming that his instinctual responses would in some way refer to an “essential” self and reveal a less refined man of lower birth). While this model, it could be argued, still relied on the dandy’s physical appearance (since the only thing that could be considered “a gentleman” was, one could imagine, a white male), the difference is that what the dandy created was absolutely new and therefore responded to preconceived expectations, again, shocking and entertaining, and yet nevertheless dissociating from preconceived ideas of what a gentleman was.

Probably one of the most shocking new distinctions, and the one for which the dandies were attacked the most, was the outward effeminacy of the dandy. Above all, the dandy was “refined,” and in the physical realm this meant a careful attention to and hours of tedious making-perfect of their physical appearance; it also meant “hyper-sensitivity” and “delicacy,” qualities which the dandy loved to parade and to declare to whomever would listen (20-21). Though today’s perception of the dandy holds that he dressed showily and like a fop, it was not the case, especially not for Beau Brummell and the Regency dandy. While he was refined and sensitive and espoused certain feminine qualities, his dress was refined because of its simple elegance and attention to detail. In addition, there was a fastidious attention to cleanliness. One of Beau Brummell’s greatest historical contributions was that he bathed often, which started a trend of personal cleanliness and good hygiene. To some, this near-obsession with personal cleanliness appeared feminine and opposed to the gruff, dirty manliness that was perpetuated by

British men, but Brummell's costume was of a simple "style suitable for any man, king or commoner, who aspired after the distinction of gentleman. Without sacrificing elegance or grace, he invented a costume that was indubitably masculine" (36-7). Still, it was a new kind of masculine, which relied largely on the *insistence* that it was masculine.

This insistence was in fact quite entertaining. For example, Brummell's ability to create an elegant fashion that was actually a fashion that could be worn by the lower classes was, as Barbey once noted, "amusing." What amused Barbey was the fact that "Brummell's affectations yielded utilitarian fruit" (36) even though it was an aristocratic performance. Again, the topsy-turvy reality of that contradiction was always entertaining, even to Barbey, whose goal was to show how Brummell's performance supported a return to monarchy for its inherent nobility of spirit, which he believed was the case for monarchs. Another famous dandy and author of *Dandies and Dandies* (1896), Max Beerbohm, "awarded him the title of 'Father of Modern Costume.'" The irony is that something so simple yet "ordered so exquisitely" and beautifully could be fit for the masses (were they to spend all their time finding the right tailor and acclimating themselves to living their lives as a work of art), and especially that the exclusive set, who despised the masses, would have helped in the democratizing process. Moers goes on to say that "Brummell's costume was suitable for all classes and occupations. Hardly altered in essentials, it would clothe democracy"(33). As you can see, the dandy was a consummate original formed by the weaving of long-standing cultural practices and behaviors—an aristocratic spirit dressed in everyman's suit—with the occasional new

idea such as frequent bathing thrown in the mix to create the balancing and sometimes jelling factor of shock and entertainment.

It is in this way that the dandy created himself, by always making reference to a social “norm” and the ways in which that norm could not possibly hold true for him; for example, “Pelham [(the first, great dandy figure in literature)] draws a fine distinction between what is proper to the dandy and what is suitable for ordinary men” (78-79), which usually meant that any difficult, tiring, work-related, or remotely unclean activity could be allowed for “ordinary men” but not for the dandy. While the simple inversion of male characteristics would be interesting in itself if that were what the dandy insisted upon, this was not the case: instead, the dandy carved an entirely new, “betwixt and between” (Turner) gender performance, which found that women, too, were too gruff and “thick skinned” (Stendhal in Moers, 139) for their habits to be performed or imitated:

“Riding is too severe an exercise for men,” [Pelham] complains on another occasion, “it is only fit for the robuster nerves of women. Will any gentleman present lend me his essence bottle?” The same anathema applies, in theory at least, to violent exertion of any sort, to bad smells, to coarse foods, to heavy drinking and to the rowdy debauchery of “that old fashioned roué set.”...[H]is favourite occupations are the arts of the salon: conversing, gossiping, flirting, and dancing so lightly and so gracefully that “I might tread on a butterfly’s wings without brushing off a tint.” (Moers 79)

Even though Pelham, in this passage, makes reference to “men,” he was not speaking for the undandified men of the time. Certainly the men of England did not consider women to have the “robuster nerves,” as evidenced by the harsh attacks set forth by *Fraser’s*, a popular conservative magazine, whose primary target for these attacks was none other than the author of the infamous *Pelham*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

Indeed, *Fraser's* attacks, which went on for the duration of Bulwer's fame, hinged on Bulwer's lack of masculinity while also asserting what masculinity was: it was, of course, "the king": "His Majesty is a *Man*—this was Fraser's way of saying he was a gentleman: a rough, unassuming, old-fashioned, sturdy, manly Englishman, stupid perhaps (it was a charm rather than a defect) but untainted by foreign affectations or native effeminacies. The opposite of a Man was a dandy, the non-man; throughout its attack on Lytton Bulwerism' Fraser's emphasized (by innuendo only) the vices of effeminacy and penalties of emasculation" (176). Indeed, *Fraser's* was obsessed with the question of who should be considered a "true gentleman," insisting that the old order of masculinity should continue to stand in as the masculine ideal, but their polemic was often frustrated by the lack of clear rules for the "elegance" and "gentlemanliness" espoused in dandyism. Although the dandy was highly sensitive and even frail, he was the new model of a gentleman: "To the question—*What is a gentleman?*—which was to obsess poets and philosophers, novelists and divines, radicals and conservatives, the dandy made the most frivolous answer conceivable. He *was* a gentleman—it was a visible fact—by virtue of a 'certain something,' a 'je-ne-sais-quoi' which could not be defined—or denied" (17). The dandy's answer was a novelty, it was entirely original, as the dandy himself must be: it was neither here nor there, although it used the old systems of interpretation to produce its space in-between.

By bracketing these moments of inversion and confusion, which together formed an unlimited arena of dandy-play, I am arguing that the dandy created a space for a life-performance that Turner would call "liminality par excellence," because it not only took



place in the space of leisure (the “betwixt and between” where meaning is produced), where the dandy resides, but it used culturally symbolic systems of, for example, masculinity, to formulate a new answer to the question, “what is a gentleman?” The dandy thus produced a new cultural concept of gender that at once embraced and eschewed traditional ideas of the masculine and the feminine. In the same way that liminal recombination works to subvert systems outside of it, the dandy’s answer to “what is a gentleman?” reshaped a century of subjectivity-performances of the masculine, the feminine, the upper- and lower-class dimensions of selfhood, and even the otherwise very circumscribed notion of the “self” as a unified structure, linking the internal (the spirit) and the external body (that which was divined by God to be rewarded either beauty or homeliness, wealth or abjection, based on the condition of the spirit, which only God knew).

Turner’s insistence that the “essence of liminality” is found in the random and haphazard composites of cultural elements speaks to the new formations of selfhood conjured and created, artistically, by the dandies. To further demonstrate the point, we can take examples of other dandies and show that their performance was not a simple inversion of cultural norms, but affected the grotesque, or the “weirdness” of recombination. The performance was a sort of confusion and inner-conflict that later came to be known, thanks to Stendhal, as “beylism” (Stendhal’s middle name), and which seemed to many to be a conglomeration of contradictions and oppositions to normative standards. Take, for example, the beylism of D’Orsay, the last Regency dandy of England, who was “laughed at for his dress, which is composed of sky-blue pantaloons of

silk and other strange mixtures. He wears his shirt without a neckcloth, fastened with diamonds and coloured [sic] stones—in short a costume that men disapprove as effeminate and nondescript” (Moers 154). Were they laughing because they thought he was effeminate, because the inability to define him made them nervous, or because they were entertained? Arguably, all three. We know that the dandy’s costume since Brummell was considered masculine, but the strangeness and confusion represented by D’Orsay again provoked questions about the dandy’s sexuality and interest in women. Although *Fraser’s* opposed the dandies as lacking a hardy masculinity, seeking, as they did, clear delineations of masculinity, Brummell’s contemporaries knew that the dandy’s refinement spoke to his originality more than to his sexuality: “Contemporary opinion, so far as it was recorded, did not accuse Brummell of effeminacy. . . . Opinion pronounced him cold, freezingly cold, and so self-committed as to avoid personal entanglements of any kind. The fictional dandy figures drawn after Brummell were portrayed as *indifferent* to the female sex” (36). This indifference, which I will discuss in chapter one, opened the margins of gentlemanliness to include the non-normative sexualities embodied by those such as Oscar Wilde, whose homosexuality was outed once he was sent to prison, or by Huysmans’ main character of the “little yellow book” that was responsible for sending Wilde to prison, *A Rebours* (1898), whose homosexuality was explained as an exercise in artifice or, in short, a performance.

But the dandy’s indifference also lent itself well to his independent spirit and to his originality. It is this dissociation of which I speak throughout these chapters, and it is the spirit in which Baudelaire was to find a beacon of hope and independence against a

decadent age. Even “Albert Camus [was] able to find in the dandy an archetype of the human being in revolt against society” (Moers 17). The performance offered an empty metaphor that was full of power because of its ability to become whatever it believed and outwardly declared it was: “His arrogant superiority was an affirmation of the aristocratic principle, his way of life an exaltation of aristocratic society; but his terrible independence proclaimed a subversive disregard for the essentials of aristocracy. The dandy, as Brummell made him, stands on an isolated pedestal of self” (Moers 17). Indeed, while Brummell’s performances were dependent on an audience, he had to remain aloof and apart from them since, as a performer, his “isolated pedestal” was the stage where he and his audience met.

In this light, the alienated, dissociated stance of dandyism became the natural enemy of the democratizing processes of capitalism, which hated originality and insisted on mass uniformity, as was especially the case for zoot suit dandyism, which caused nation-wide panic. The dandy’s life in the liminal space of leisure, especially in the era of the zoot suiters, was equally reproachful for its inability to be complicit with the productive forces of the market. The dandy became a “figure for rebellion: for scornful, silent, unsuccessful rebellion against the mediocre materialism of a democratic era” (Moers 283): “Barbey points out that the dandy’s distinction, almost his responsibility, is his abhorrence of uniformity, mediocrity and vulgarity . . . Dandyism is relevant to the artist and intellectual, therefore, because it is essentially an anti-bourgeois attitude. The dandy is independent of the values and pressures of a society in pursuit of money. He does not work; he exists. And his existence is itself a lesson in elegance to the

vulgar mind” (264). To Baudelaire, this dandyism was “the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages. . . a setting sun” (“The Painter of Modern Life” 421). All the rational doctrines of humanism, the philosophies on class and imperialism, the wars and revolutions that had only brought Western Europe thus far to a point of sale, could be shown to be at the mercy of the dandy-artist’s irreverent power of transformation.

The dandy was indeed Barbey’s “androgynous of history” (*Dandyism* 78) and at the same time he was Baudelaire’s angel of history, looking back at the past with sadness as he plummets forward, pushed by sweeping historical change. All that was left was the perfectly controlled and contrived costume, “a pose for the intellectual in revolt” (Moers) and the mask which now not only covered up the dandy’s emotions and sadness at the new age, but (as the clothes had adopted and perpetuated emotions earlier) signified them on its own: “The mask for its own sake became an article of faith for those who despised ‘ce stupide dix-neuvième siècle’” (Moers 122-4). In essence, the performance of dandyism proved to be such a powerful one in its movement through the nineteenth century that artists saw in it the real and possibly only weapon against the forces of progress. Inherent in its depiction was the knowledge and despair that progress would succeed, and that the “last representative of human pride drowning in a rising sea of democracy would find ironic confirmation in the last chapter of the dandy’s history. For the dandy was to go down to defeat at the hands not of decadence but of vulgarity. The *fin de siècle* made him over for a mass audience” (283). Nevertheless, dandyism left a legacy of the power of performance to affect the socio-political world, to transcend borders and

class barriers, and to resist not only the performer but the power of conformity, in an ephemeral moment of theatricality.

In the following chapter, chapter one, entitled “Performing Dandyism in Barbey’s *Dandyism*,” I will argue that Beau Brummell’s creation of dandyism as a thing to be admired for its aristocratic spirit worked against the class stratifications of those who admired it, and unmoored the standing of those who supported it most: the aristocrats. Chapter two, entitled “The New Beau Brummell: George Walker and the Emergence of Black Dandyism,” will argue that the performance of dandyism in turn-of-the-century America troubled not only class systems, but the performance of masculinity, answering the question “What is a gentleman?” with the answer that a gentleman was now not only a dandy, but a black dandy, thereby expanding the interpretation to incorporate the performance of race and to dismantle racist expectations of black masculinity. The third chapter, entitled “Zoot Suit Dandyism: from Cab Calloway to Pachuca/o Culture and the Zoot Suit Riots,” will demonstrate how, in the mid-twentieth century, zoot suit dandyism served to unbraid the dominion of wartime authority which marginalized, through family, military, government and police, the youth. In short, the chapters that follow will explore how in each recombination of this alienating performance of idle elegance--that is, dandyism--manifested revolutionary cultural upheavals, despite the fact that each performance of dandyism was “made,” as Schechner says, to entertain.

## Chapter One

### The Model of Dandyism in Barbey's *Dandyism*

In this chapter, Jules-Amédée Barbey D'Aurevilly's *Dandyism* is the primary text upon which I intend to model my definition of dandyism. I will show how the dandyism conceived by George Bryan "Beau" Brummell and described in Barbey's text was developed as one that shocked, dissociated from, and entertained society. These terms, while fluid and never necessarily holding equal weight in a dandy performance, ground the performance in its cultural work. At times, the power of one gesture may trump another, such as when the marginalized dandy's refusal to be limited is astounding to the extent that it ruptures the system trying to limit him, while the entertainment he expresses in that rupture may have less of a social impact than the original shock of refusal. In Brummell's case, he took up the rupture with a caustic wit, or with a terror, as Barbey says, that was both alienating and entertaining. These aspects of Brummell's dandyism can be detected in later performances of dandyism, such as George Walker's and the zoot suiters', and compared for their similarities and dissimilarities, and for the ways in which in each gesture gives way to another, to offer a clearer understanding of the meaning of dandyism. For George Walker, the refusal to be limited was embroidered with entertainment and served his business sense, while for the zoot suiters, dissociation was the most important aspect of the performance, taken up as an aggressive stance.

Barbey's 1845 publication of *Dandyism* is central to this argument because it is the most comprehensive mapping of Beau Brummell's performative acts, which both

surprisingly breached class boundaries yet always appeared aloof, and the effect they had on society. I will also discuss Ellen Moers' widely cited text, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, which details the exclusive and monarchical system within which dandyism flourished but which it gradually corrupted and reformed. I am heavily indebted to Moers for her exhaustive research on dandyism and the clarity with which she delineates the people who historically have been considered dandies. One chapter, which is dedicated entirely to Beau Brummell, establishes his status as the "first" dandy, called simply "the Beau," another word for "dandy." I depart from Moers in my analysis of dandyism as a performance. I will also draw on Ian Kelly's biography, *Beau Brummell: the Ultimate Dandy*, in which the author clearly illuminates Brummell's dandyism as strictly a performance and even a "happening." Kelly's text is one of the first to theorize dandyism as a performance, which is to say he scrutinizes the recognizably restored behaviors enacted consciously by the dandy as happenings, a methodology that I am working in tandem with as I explore the restored behaviors of the dandy. I am also working in contrast to Kelly, as I look at the different types of restored behaviors performed and analyze how they lend themselves in revolutionary ways to dandy maxims. In addition, Kelly's text offers a contrast to Barbey's more metaphysical description of Brummell's dandyism as something that was naturally, divinely, and even cosmologically ordained. While Barbey's text is responsible for reawakening dandyism nearly a half a century after Brummell's time and for bringing dandyism to France from England, I often take issue with the abstract and religious way Brummell's dandyism is characterized. Barbey presents Brummell's dandyism as an apology for royalism, whereas I find the Beau's

performances more seditious than sympathetic to the monarchy. Using these and other theorists of dandyism, I will highlight the specific acts in Brummell's performance of dandyism that I will then be able to define as dandy performances, demonstrating that the term "dandy" does not designate a static identity but rather a series of performative acts that comprise what can be called dandyism.

#### BARBEY'S INSCRIPTION OF BRUMMELL AND DANDYISM

*Dandyism* is a text in which two defining moments of dandyism meet. The first of these marks the appearance of the first dandy, George Bryan "Beau" Brummell (1778-1840), whose heyday covered nearly twenty-two years, from the end of the eighteenth century to his self-imposed exile to the continent in 1816. The second moment is marked by the life of his biographer, Jules Amédée Barbey D'Aurevilly, one of the great French literary and philosophical dandies of the nineteenth century, whose life spanned 81 years, from 1808 to 1889. That two seminal figures of dandyism should meet in the pages of a text that Barbey himself called a mere "statuette" (13) and yet still leave readers perplexed on the meaning of dandyism is telling: it has no specific use, but is instead simply a work of art, one that creates an impression--an "effect" as Beau Brummell would say--and one that can only be understood and reanimated through performance.

Before Brummell the word "dandy" was not applied to men of fashion; in 17th-century England there existed aristocratic men who dressed very effeminately and were pejoratively called "fops" (sometimes also called "Beaux") for their exaggerated dress, but they weren't like the dandy. The latter was self-made rather than hailing from the



upper classes, and his costume emphasized simplicity and grace rather than ostentatious adornment. Later, there were the “Macaroni’s,” who also dressed like fops and prided themselves on aristocratic spoils procured in the course of their extravagant travels. One of these spoils was an affinity for pasta, then called “macaroni,” which was considered a rare delicacy by the masses because it could only be had in Italy; therefore, the Macaroni’s formed a Macaroni Club to show how exclusively well-traveled they were and how extravagant their tastes had become. Just before the Revolutionary War, the story goes<sup>iv</sup>, an unknown British army general wrote a song entitled “Yankee Doodle” to mock wealthy Americans who were traveling in London and adopted, or tried to adopt, the fussy styles of the fops and “Macaronis.” But the fops and Macaronis were English aristocrats who refused to accept into their circles anyone who came from a lower rank or a different nationality. Therefore, when the British general saw Americans putting on airs to gain entrance into the fashionable groups in England, he penned these words: “Yankee Doodle came to town riding on a pony / Put a feather in his cap and called it Macaroni.” The word “doodle,” it should be noted, was a term for a fool or an idiot (as was “fop”). It was only later that this song was appropriated by Americans, who tacked on the word “dandy,” now in common usage after Beau Brummell, and re-calibrated the song into one of the most nationalistic and patriotic emblems of American men. “Yankee Doodle Dandy” is still the state anthem of Connecticut.

By the time Barbey published *Dandyism* in 1844, Brummell had been in exile for over twenty years and had since died. Brummell and Barbey never met, and Barbey

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<sup>iv</sup> There are several stories for the origin of this song, and no one knows for sure which is true. Most agree, though, that it was written by a general to mock Americans.

himself declares in the opening letter to Mr. César Daly, his publisher, that this biography was in fact “a curiosity of manners and of history,” requiring its reader to “feel grace as a woman or an artist feels it, and as a thinker admits its empire” (13-14). This may be true, as we soon learn, because the portrait Barbey paints is indeed a graceful one that glosses over the details of the Beau’s early history and much of the abjection of his later years. Furthermore, the text itself maintains a definite aesthetic grace insofar as the style and execution of this biography are concerned: the chapters, much like Brummell’s public appearances, could be termed vignettes, as many of them are no more than two pages long and read like extended epigrams. The first chapter of the short text is largely devoted to defending Brummell, who was of course British, against centuries of French “moralism” that had condemned vanity “as the lowest of all” sentiments. This is a tactic on Barbey’s part that cues the reader into a two-fold purpose in the text: he will defend royalism by setting up a literary effigy to dandyism, and he will contribute to the French literary and philosophical canon.

Barbey begins the text, after the opening letter to the publisher, with an argument for the use of “vanity” in society and a direct attack on the “moralists,” who are said to create concepts of “self-love” only to condemn the practices associated with them. The moralists were so named by Germaine de Staël in *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (1800). The moralists included, according to Georges Van Den Abbeele’s “1668: The Moralists,” virtually “every classical French author” who “prescribed the conjoining of the useful with the pleasant” (327). More strictly, though, the term belongs to Blaise Pascal (*Pensées*), François de La Rochefoucauld (*Réflexions, ou sentences et maximes*

*morales*), La Fontaine (*Fables*), and Jean de La Bruyère (*Les caractères, ou les mœurs de ce siècle*). The moralists' concerns were not so much based on "morals," per se, as on certain "customs or manners (*mœurs*)" (329) of the time, which were associated with "highly abstract concepts [such as] self-love (*amour-propre*), vanity, taste, passion, merit, ambition, and so on" (331).

In opposition to moralism, Barbey begins his text with a rather poetical and philosophical assertion:

Sentiments have their destiny. Toward one of them, vanity, the whole world is pitiless. The moralists have decried it in their books, even those who have best shown how large a place it occupies in our souls. Worldlings, who are also moralists of a kind, as they have to judge of life twenty times a day, have endorsed the moralist's condemnation of this sentiment, according to them the lowest of all.

Things may be ill treated as well as men, and if vanity is the lowest in the hierarchy of the sentiments of our soul, yet in place, why should we despise it? [ . . . ] (23)

Barbey personifies "vanity" as though he were beginning a moralist play in which all the characters were to be human sentiments, thus blurring the distinction between the moralists and himself. The author also indicates that vanity holds a rightful place in the hierarchy of sentiments and does not deserve to be assailed by "the whole world." Because of the attention given to vanity, Barbey notes his surprise that those "moralists [who] have decried it in their books" haven't recognized its value, especially since they themselves have "best shown how large a place it occupies in our souls."

By beginning the biography of Brummell with the trope of vanity construed as a versatile and useful sentiment, Barbey suggests that it can both hold its own in the cast of sentiments and also stand in for the subject of the text because it is an apt figure for

Brummell. In his double characterization of vanity, then, Barbey is deflecting criticism from Beau Brummell by leading up to a heroic portrait of a man who best popularized and embodied vanity--the thing that occupies so much space "in our souls." This approach--to at once personify vanity and to use it as the stand-in for Brummell himself--is Barbey's very intentional way of avoiding the banal introductions and details of an unremarkable early life that might have otherwise characterized Brummell and begun his biography. Furthermore, the details of Brummell's life, which Barbey does finally begin to offer in the middle of the short text, would not show his critics that his vanity deserved praise or that idleness actually served a social good. Instead, Barbey turns our focus to the notable "place" that Brummell held, unwittingly, simply by capturing the world's attention with his grace and impertinence. While vanity may have merely captured the attention of "moralists" and "worldlings" and become the subject of texts, Brummell captured the attention of high society, amusing his audience and giving them pleasure simply with his person. To Barbey, this is what gives his performance "social importance," since play and entertainment are vital to any evolved society:

What gives value to the sentiments is their social importance: granting this, can anything in the hierarchy of sentiments be of greater use to society than the anxious research of the other's approval, this quenchless thirst for the applause of the gallery, which is called love of glory in great things, in small ones vanity? Are love, friendship, or pride of greater use? Love with its thousand shades and manifold derivatives, even friendship and pride, start from a preference for another, or for several others, or for oneself, and that preference is exclusive. Vanity at any rate pays attention to everything. (23)

In this passage we start to see a subtle divide between the character of vanity and the unspoken yet present character of Beau Brummell, because we have already been told

that vanity, while holding a place in the minds of moralists, was never applauded by them. Brummell, on the other hand, sought to entertain.

Therefore, whereas someone such as Quentin Crisp, who struggles to understand Brummell, declares in the preface to the 1988 edition of Barbey's text that "[Brummell's] weakness was his vanity which drove him to seek the approval of men superior to him by birth or by reason of their wealth" (10), Barbey shows us that vanity was the power he wielded and the reason for his success and his glory, ultimately making him the "greatest of the vain" (24). But Brummell's was a defiant act of refusal, not, as Crisp argues, an obsequious attempt at approval. Despite Brummell's origins, his nearly groundless vanity would be revealed as a hard-earned if exceedingly believable and oft-applaudable performance of self-worth.

But Brummell's aloof disposition was not put solely in the service of his vanity; instead, he often sought to entertain and delight those with whom he came in contact. In chapter five of *Dandyism*, Barbey embraces this facet of the Beau's performance as that which made it art: "Dandyism is almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define. Those who see things only from a narrow point of view have imagined it to be especially the art of dress, a bold and felicitous dictatorship in the matter of clothes and exterior elegance. That it most certainly is, but much more besides. Dandyism is a complete theory of life and its material is not its only side" (31). Clearly, in naming "[t]hose who see" the performance as merely a sartorial one, Barbey is referring to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (1838). In chapter ten, "The Dandiacal Body," the narrator, a fictional professor Teufelsdröckh, declares that "A

Dandy is a clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consist in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress.” Ellen Moers tells us that this chapter “served as the Victorian epitaph for Regency dandyism, . . . chastising the mighty and working conversion among them” (178) because “living to dress” was now considered immoral.

Barbey’s response to Carlyle’s reductive summation of dandyism sets up an interesting tension in his own text, where we start to see an opposition of style between the body of the text and the footnotes. While Barbey wants the biography to maintain the aesthetic “grace” of a dandy, he cannot seem to resist stating more directly, and perhaps less indifferently, exactly to whom the attack is addressed. To this end, Barbey names Carlyle in the footnote to the lines quoted above on the definition of a dandy:

Everyone is wrong on this question, even the English! Carlyle, the author of *Sartor Resartus*, has lately thought it necessary to speak of Dandyism and Dandies in a book called the *Philosophy of Clothes*. But Carlyle has drawn a fashion-plate with the pencil of drunken Hogarth and has said, “That is Dandyism!” It is not even a caricature, for a caricature exaggerates everything and suppresses nothing. Caricature is the exasperated exaggeration of reality and Dandyism is social, human and intellectual. It is not a suit of clothes walking about by itself! On the contrary, it is the particular way of wearing these clothes which constitutes Dandyism. One may be a dandy in creased clothes. . . . Incredible though it may seem, the Dandies once had a fancy for *torn clothes*. [ . . . ]

Thomas Carlyle, who has written another book called the *Heroes* and given us the Hero Poet, the Hero King, the Hero Man of Letters, the Hero Priest, the Hero Prophet, and even the Hero God, might have given us the Hero of elegant idleness--the Hero Dandy; but he has forgotten him. [ . . . ] (31-32)

While it is true that even Carlyle said his idea for *Sartor Resartus* was to write

“nonsense” about “clothes” (Moers), his motivation was to debase the art of fashion and

the fashionables themselves more than to mock his own work. But Barbey makes a clever move in this passage when he deflates the self-importance of Carlyle by comparing him to William Hogarth, the “drunken” 18th-century satirist and cartoonist. Furthermore, Barbey speaks honestly about the history of fashion and the negligible importance of clothing itself, hinting, likely, at the very solemn philosophy of the Romantic poet Wordsworth, who was at that same time declaring that the relationship between clothes and the body was akin to the relationship of language and thought.<sup>v</sup>

Another poet of Barbey’s time, Lord Byron, had famously stated that he would have rather been Beau Brummell than Napoleon (this comment, recorded not by Byron himself but in variants by others, is often quoted or serves as a chapter epigram in several texts on dandyism), although he admired both men, and that Brummell was in fact a “hero” for the performance he made famous. But Carlyle was a member of the English conservative critics of Barbey’s time who were known as the “Antidandiacals” (Moers). The Antidandiacals wrote for *Fraser’s Magazine* in England, first published in 1830 (fourteen years into Brummell’s exile from the Isles and fifteen years before the publication of *Dandyism*), heralding the Victorian era with scathing diatribes against dandyism and Regency England.

Indeed, the backlash against Regency decadence had built up long before *Fraser’s* published its first diatribes, and Beau Brummell’s legacy during that era was not one this new generation of moralists wanted to remember or idealize--partly because they felt that

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<sup>v</sup> Wordsworth’s *Essays on Epitaphs* (1810) argued that clothes were to the body what language is to thought: the former can only suggest the latter; yet, the creative mind could bridge the gap, so that with creativity words were no longer opaque ornaments to meaning but reflected their essence.

the Beau's best friend, the Prince Regent, had humiliated and demoralized the monarchical system, and partly because Brummell himself was a (low-born) symptom of the ease with which Regency society had let itself go and made itself vulnerable to low-class immorality. Ellen Moers explains the atmosphere created by the Regency, and especially by the Prince Regent, as tumultuous, since the Prince Regent was much more decadent than his father, George III, who had "passed finally into the blind, dear and mad limbo of his old age." In response to his new power, George IV, "celebrated his ascent to the Regency by removing a bust of Charles James Fox from his sitting-room in Carlton House to a prominent position in the Council Chamber, where it glared alarmingly at the Tory ministers. It was an act symbolic of George's political partiality for the Whigs . . . and also of his predilection for wit and for his own circle" (40). The Whigs generally opposed autocratic rule and tended to be more liberal than the Tories, and so the Tories were upset by the Prince, but so were the citizens and workers who were being taxed more, "necessitated," Moers tells us, "by his eternal indebtedness" (41). Most people, lower- and upper-class, also "disapproved of his open immorality" (41). Charles Fox, a macaroni who had dined with Beau's father (who was serving as a valet) and first introduced the young Brummell to the elegant style, represented everything that the right-wing Tories and their followers hated: effeminacy (based on their love of fashion and care of self) and immorality (for flagrant drinking, gambling, and debauchery). Worse still, he was a liberal Whig politician who campaigned against slavery and supported both the American and the French Revolutions, splitting the Whig party between those who supported the French Revolution and those who did not. Therefore, a bust of Fox in the



heart of England's nation-state was a slap in the face to conservative royalists, although for the new king himself it was probably meant more as an insult to his father's regime, because Charles Fox had been a fervent critic of George III.

In 1830, King George IV died, replaced by his Brother William who would only reign until his death in 1837 (to be succeeded by Queen Victoria). Brummell had been in exile, running to France to escape his debtors, for fourteen years; the First Reform Act was on its way to passing (it would pass in 1832), which granted seats in the House of Commons and hence voting privileges to the inhabitants of the large cities that had sprung up during the Industrial Revolution; and this was when "*Fraser's Magazine* was born" (Moers 167) and took the dandy as its arch-enemy. But Brummell's dandyism was still a popular subject for moralizing in early Victorian England, as he had become a poster child for the decadence, snobbery, and immorality of the idle Regency dandies. As James Laver notes, "[t]o the Victorians he was the very type to point a moral if not to adorn a tale, [often] dismissed as an example of a wasted life" (*Dandies* 27). By the time of the publication of *Fraser's* in 1830, therefore, the political turmoil surrounding Regency England was still boiling in the blood of its conservative journalists, who quickly became known as the "Fraserians" and included not just Carlyle but other well-known writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Makepeace Thackeray. The Fraserians made every effort to protect and maintain the image of a powerful and masculine monarch as the figure of England, which was difficult to do after the humiliating madness of George III and the effeminate frivolity of his son, George IV.

In addition to the figure of the monarch, that of the gentleman was called into question in this period. As Moers explains, it was no longer clear what it meant to be a real “gentleman” in England and there were no solid role models upon which to draw. But Brummell and the dandies seemed to make a mockery of the whole pressing issue; indeed, the aristocracy was losing its ideological hold in Europe, now that monarchies had been revealed as corrupt, disposable (in France, especially), and neither divinely ordained nor essentially, spiritually, superior:

The dandy made his first, impeccable bow in the uneasy atmosphere of shifting perspectives and sinking values that followed on the French Revolution. The closing years of the eighteenth century had shaken Monarchy and rattled the foundations of Aristocracy; the new century inevitably felt the need to justify the rights and redefine the manners of the essential superior being. To the question--*What is a gentleman?*--which was to obsess poets and philosophers, novelists and divines, radicals and conservatives, the dandy made the most frivolous answer conceivable. He *was* a gentleman--it was a visible fact--by virtue of a “certain something,” a “je-ne-sais-quoi” which could not be defined--or denied. (17)

A particularly popular development of this obsession was the birth of the fashionable novels, also called the “silver fork” novels, which were one of the legacies of the widespread intrigue generated by the Beau and his dandy followers. According to Ian Kelly, Brummell “was re-created, in barely concealed fictional form, in novels that appeared within his lifetime and were considered by him--more or less reluctantly--to be true likenesses: *Pelham* by Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton, himself a dandy, and *Granby*, by T.H. Lister” (12). Nevertheless, these were still fictional and unverifiable imitations of Brummell, much like the biographies still written today.

Some of these novels were misread as promotions of dandyism, whereas they were written, in fact, to criticize the dandy. As Moers tells us, “the dandy’s oddities of

pose and manner were inspiration to an army of contemporary scribblers--few of whom could have hoped to gain admission to his exclusive company. Many of the Regency fashionable novels owed all their interest to a retelling of the Brummell story; almost all made at least passing reference to his fame” (23). And the writers of *Fraser’s*, who, as Moers tells us, maintained a “gruff Philistine tone of no-nonsense and old-fashioned English common sense” (176), were offended by the glorification of the dandy in the novels. To these men, the dandy represented the ruin of the English monarchy and his threat was made more potent by these fictional works, which they believed were corrupting the kingdom. As Moers explains “His Majesty is a Man—this was *Fraser’s* way of saying he was a gentleman: a rough, unassuming, old-fashioned, sturdy, manly Englishman, stupid perhaps (it was a charm rather than a defect) but untainted by foreign affectations or native effeminacies. The opposite of a Man was a dandy, the non-man; throughout its attack on ‘Lytton Bulwerism’ *Fraser’s* emphasized (by innuendo only) the vices of effeminacy and penalties of emasculation . . . ” (176). This creed is particularly ironic because many of the writers of *Fraser’s* were not originally from England.<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps one of the underlying motivations, then, was that they saw a chance to redefine English mannerisms and masculinity by imbuing it with their own.

Nevertheless, the conservatives believed that *Pelham*, published in 1828, perpetuated and glorified dandyism, whereas its author, Bulwer-Lytton, meant it to serve as a warning against vanity and decadence. Bulwer-Lytton struggled to show that the dandy’s vanity was an act and was therefore undeserving of the prestige and power it

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<sup>vi</sup> Carlyle had grown up in Scotland, the son of a noble Scottish woman; the owner of *Fraser’s*, William McGinn, was from Scotland; even Thackeray was born in Calcutta, though to English parents. Scotland joined the United Kingdom in 1707.

gained. The writers of *Fraser's*, though, were apparently too convinced by the glory of the literary performance, and therefore launched an attack on Bulwer-Lytton and his publisher, Colburn, who had “brought out [the novel] with all the folderol of anonymity and suggestive puffs” (Moers 69), and on “Pelhamitism” of all forms:

. . . Pelham presents himself first to the reader as an outrageous puppy of a dandy. Only gradually does he reveal that his dandyism is a pose: not a “mere” pose, but an immensely difficult, conscious and effective pose. It is a training for power. Pelham’s dandy maxim runs: “Manage *yourself* well, and you may manage all the world.”

. . . Readers far less narrow-minded than Carlyle could not decide whether Bulwer was for his dandy hero or against him, whether Pelham was the author’s self or the author’s villain. The confusion was in the author’s mind as well as in his novel. Bulwer saw the evils of the Regency; he predicted its political collapse and later he personally fought for the passage of the Reform Bill, which more than any other event brought an end to Regency ways. In Bulwer’s novel Pelham speaks the Radical’s criticism of social irresponsibility—but Pelham speaks as a dandy, the most irresponsible of beings. The political and social system is rotten; but it created me, and I am sublime. (Moers 76)

Therefore, “[s]imply because it was the most brilliant and outrageous of the fashionable novels, *Pelham* became a warning beacon to the early Victorians, a light marking dangerous shoals, attitudes to be rejected and for ever [sic] avoided” (68). At the same time, the novels were creating the first literary tropes of dandyism in post-Brummell England. Barbey’s adoption of the battle between the critics of *Fraser's* and the dandy tropes was one that would characterize a new generation of dandyism in France, because now the trope was given an intellectual grounding whereas before it had simply been--while still political--entertaining.

Indeed, the magazine criticized dandyism because it took a hard and unforgiving stance against any art that was socially irresponsible, and its writers even came out with a

“summary of its intended victims: Lytton-Bulwerism, Colburn-and-Bentleyism, Pelhamites and Exclusivites, all of them purveyors of ‘cant and humbug,—of fraud, folly, and foppery’” (Moers 170). Between *Pelham*’s original publication in 1828 and the several years of attacks made in *Fraser*’s, “particularly by Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Bulwer would edit out of his novel all of what was wicked, most of what was naughty and a great deal of what was amusing. Between 1828 and 1835 Bulwer had witnessed the destruction of a world he had been brought up to take for granted. Since 1836, *Pelham* has never been reprinted in its entirety” (69). Bulwer himself became a Victorian and fought for the passage of the Reform Bill, but, according to Moers, remained nostalgic nonetheless for the Regency dandyism of his youth; such complexity went into his modeling of the literary dandy, from *Pelham* onward into the novels *Paul Clifford* (1830), *Godolphin* (1833), and the 1834 publication of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, in which he envisaged “Regency London destroyed by a sudden eruption,” an image that pleased Beau Brummell, who read it “in raptures” (Moers 83).

Barbey, too, longed for a return to the Regency, as Susanne Rossbach explains in her text, “Dandyism in the Works of Barbey D’Aurevilly,” saying he was “a staunch monarchist who deeply resented the nineteenth-century bourgeois society” (1). To Barbey, Brummell’s was an aristocratic position and one that flouted the boundaries of class; therefore, it was both shocking and highly entertaining. To Barbey, this was the stance of royalty, and so Brummell’s popularity was fodder for the promotion of the monarchy. Indeed, Beau Brummell’s dandyism required an audience, since the popular gaze would have to be on him if he were to promote himself above them in social status,

and yet it required that he remain aloof, above, and separate from the masses. In short, it was princely. Barbey was also a member of the nobility in Normandy, reclaiming the noble name “D’Aurevilly” just decades after the French Revolution. Above all, Barbey desired a return to an idealized France of the past:

Like many of his contemporaries, he yearned for an idealized society in France’s prerevolutionary past, believing his own time to be an era of decline and decay, “un siècle malade,” “grossièrement matérialiste et utilitaire.” Dandyism and the aristocratic, stoic, and aesthetic lifestyle it stood for represented a means of revolt for the Catholic and reactionary Barbey who called the French revolution “[la] fille de Satan” and “une révolution contre Dieu.” It enabled him to react against the increasingly utilitarian and democratic society that his declared enemy, the bourgeoisie, epitomized. As a philosophy of life for the superior man, dandyism also represented for Barbey an avenue to power and authority. (Rossbach 82)

Rossbach here quotes a couple of pertinent French sayings about the mid-19th century, that it was “grossièrement matérialiste et utilitaire,” or grossly materialistic and utilitarian, and for that reason, a “sick century.” There had been many political shifts after the Revolution towards a more secular nation-state that funneled less money (and hence power) into the church and embraced the Jacobin ideals of supporting and educating the working classes. To men such as Barbey, this was a sort of heresy, and therefore the Revolution was indeed termed “against God” or “the daughter of Satan.” Barbey’s *Dandyism* situated dandyism within an idealized lost past (it did spring from the time of the English Regency under George IV) and envisioned the dandy as the divinely appointed heir to a more regal and noble monarchy than the bourgeois-friendly July Monarchy (1830-1848) under Louis-Phillipe. But the “aristocratic, stoic, and aesthetic lifestyle [the dandy] stood for” was actually Brummell’s lower-class creation, one that had a democratizing effect and in fact worked against the monarchy to which Barbey

sought a return. Therefore, the textual dandy he based on Beau Brummell defied its author's vision: had Barbey not created this trope of the dandy and adopted the mannerisms himself, it is likely that the phenomenon of dandyism would have ended with the English Regency from which it was born. Instead, Barbey's adoption and promotion of Brummell's dandyism would later work against his royalist politics in its adoption by Baudelaire, who, just a few years after the publication of *Dandyism*, appointed the dandy-poet and -artist as the new spiritual heirs to the monarchs. Baudelaire recognized in Brummell's performance the "spleen" of an artist: a man of the crowd who was bored, decadent, despairing in a capitalistic society, and yet always searching himself and the world for beauty. To Baudelaire, whose dandy costume consisted almost entirely of black, it was an age of mourning. In this light, the artist's disposition was a divine inheritance, a greater, more spiritual inheritance than royal blood (the aristocrats were considered "barbarians" to Baudelaire, according to Moers), and the dandy's stance was an intellectual revolt against mediocrity. In this instance, Barbey's attempt to use the dandy to create political change worked primarily to promote art, whereas Beau Brummell's performance of dandyism, which attempted only to be art (to create an effect), promoted political change.

In effect, a performance is what Barbey accomplished in his "dandy" of a text, owing especially to the style, wit, and clever omissions he made in recounting Brummell's life. As Douglas Ainslie states in his translator's preface, "Barbey D'Aurevilly was all his life an idealist. Before inditing [sic] this monograph he had a preconceived theory of Dandyism, which he fitted onto Brummell, very adroitly, it is

true, but not without glossing over or accentuating certain points in his hero's life, which did not reconcile themselves with his theory" (16). One example of this incompatibility is Barbey's insistence on the stoic nature of the dandy, which necessitates at all times that he refrain from showing any passion; Barbey himself, though, writes passionately at times and thereby betrays the dandyism he tries to create. Furthermore, the effect that his text had was not the desired one: "[Barbey] loved the isolation, the aristocratic reserve, the impertinent self-concentration of the Dandy, and transferred [sic] to thought what, with such as Brummell, reveals itself in action" (16). In other words, aristocratic idleness was what Barbey valued and what signaled to him the societal importance of a monarchy, and yet the concept of performing "aristocratic reserve" became a revolutionary idea to many poets and writers of Barbey's time. These poets saw through Barbey's omissions of the "trivial and often unpleasant details" (17) of Brummell's life. For them, Brummell's incredible transformation from lower class to upper class through a performance of superiority--the right to be aloof and well-dressed regardless of class--signaled to them a revolutionary spirit.

#### THE ELUSIVE HISTORY OF THE UR-DANDY BEAU BRUMMELL

The act of dandyism itself is often misunderstood because it was founded first and foremost on a jarring precept, which was that the Beau could take his place among (and eventually above) the aristocracy to which he did not, by birth or wealth, belong. But his fans and biographers sometimes forget that this shocking self-promotion was not easily attained. Indeed, even in the preface to the 1988 edition of Douglas Ainslie's translation of *Dandyism*, Quentin Crisp hints that dandyism was created from within the upper class,



declaring, “[t]he British aristocracy and those who managed to run with them were probably the freest group of human beings that ever lived . . . In such an atmosphere, dandyism was almost bound to flourish” (7). While it may be true that the aristocracy consisted of wealthy heirs who were free to do with their time whatever pleased them, Beau Brummell was merely one of “those who managed to run with them,” not one of them himself, but he did gain entrance to their exclusive circles and lead them in popularity; this was a position he attained despite his family’s low economic status, and not, as Crisp says, because he was “one of the freest [. . .] human beings that ever lived.”

As Ellen Moers explains, “Brummell was descended from the upper-servant class, an origin perhaps less odious to the society in which he moved than the new, monied upper-middle class” (24). Indeed, “the society in which he moved” was easily bored by stories of middle-class heritage, and preferred the entertainment of a sordid tale of rack and ruin. Luckily, Brummell’s grandfather was a servant, as Carlo Maria Franzero explains in a (typically) largely novelistic and anecdotal biography, *Beau Brummell, His Life and Times*: “Yes, Grandfather William Brummell had been a valet. The family tree went no farther than the year 1734, when a young man of twenty-five called William Brummell had been engaged as valet by Charles Monson of Broxbourne and Spring Gardens, Vauxhall . . .” According to Franzero, William Brummell “loved his calling as an art, and remained in the service of the Monsons all his life” (17). But William had saved some money, being “a man of thrift,” and rented some rooms in a nice neighborhood where he rented to and served the upper classes. It was through these private apartments that the family came to be acquainted with the upper classes, who

were drawn to the rooms both because the owner was, as Franzero says, a former valet, and because his young son posted the “Apartments to Let” sign with very nice handwriting. It was Beau’s father, Bill, who had written the notice, and luck had it that the man who admired the notice was “Mr. Charles Jenkinson, who was to become the first Lord Liverpool” (17).

Later, according to Franzero, Jenkinson “took an interest in the young man who had written the notice” and offered Bill Brummell “a clerkship in [the Treasury] office and made him his Confidential Secretary,” a position which would last twelve years (through the next Treasury with Lord North) and would account for large bonuses and later even high-paid sinecures (19). Indeed, it was largely due to this type of luck that the Brummells became acquainted with the upper classes, some of whom took to Beau’s father Bill and lifted him out of the servant class altogether. That luck would continue with the admittance, upon the suggestion of Lord North, of George Bryan the Beau Brummell and his brother to Eton.

It was at his father’s table that the young Beau learned the mannerisms and political opinions (for which he cared little) of the wealthy, and where he was first introduced to that period’s version of dandyism, the macaronis, in Charles Fox and Richard Sheridan, “whom he had, as a mere lad, so often seen at Donnington round his father’s table” (22). Therefore, the young Beau Brummell had had some dandy-like influences in his youth, although the term dandy was not yet in use. Still, Fox and Sheridan both were famous wits in England, Fox being at one time the “leader of the fashionable ‘macaronis’ at Brook’s Club” (21). It is remarkable, nevertheless, that

Brummell, the son of a clerk and grandson of a servant, was capable of adopting the mannerisms of the macaronis, later creating his own art of mannerisms and the new art of dandyism itself.

Since the Beau's upper-class infiltration required that he have a family background that would satisfy the wealthy upper classes, the only option was to shock, since he had no account of upper-class ancestry. Therefore, perpetuating tales of both gentility and lower-class abjection would do, since the mystery in such inconsistency was entertaining to the aristocracy. Even now, the history of Brummell's mother remains unclear: Franzero tells us that Brummell's father had managed to marry a woman, Beau's mother, who had come from "several generations of gentility" (24), while Ian Kelly says that the Beau's mother was a "courtesan" (2) who lived with his father long before marrying him. Perhaps both are true, but neither biographer extends such a theory. Nevertheless, Brummell's father had secured a stable life of sinecures after having been a "respected and influential civil servant" (Franzera 24), and so the Beau knew that his aesthetic and public persona would be tainted by this background. Therefore, he chose the more storied past to highlight and add mystery to his elegance and perfection. As Moers tells us, "Brummell made no secret of his humble grandfather, and forestalled gibes at his birth by minimizing the status of his parents" (24). In short, it was not in the "atmosphere" of aristocracy that the Beau's dandyism flourished, but largely in service of it and against it, and it was this very creation and performance with which Brummell opened the doors to the world of aristocracy and to such esteemed friends as the Prince Regent, later known as King George IV.

Beau Brummell's first meeting with the Prince Regent was, much like his father and grandfather's introduction to high society, largely thanks to luck. The Beau himself would later say that his "first encounter with the Prince of Wales was bucolic" (Franzera 22). According to Franzera, this comment plays on the fact that they met in Green Park, which was at that time not much more than a large field bordering a farmyard where Brummell's aunt, Mrs. Searle, worked or lived, depending on the biography. Franzera recounts the fateful meeting in typical anecdotal style: "One day in 1793 the Prince of Wales and the Marchioness of Salisbury crossed the Green Park and entered Mrs. Searle's farm-yard. Her ladyship pulled up her skirts and went to help, or at least to watch, Mrs. Searle milking her cows, while the Prince of Wales remained in the yard chatting affably with a striking and pleasant young lad of about fifteen years of age. 'This is my nephew, George Bryan Brummell, Your Highness,' called Mrs. Searle from the stable. 'He has just finished his schooling at Eton, and this very year he will go to Oxford. A very good boy is my nephew George, and clever too'" (23). As this story goes, the Prince found Brummell handsome and offered him a position in his own regiment once he finished school.

According to Ian Kelly, this is only one of several anecdotes told about Brummell's first meeting with the Prince: others insist that the Beau would have certainly met the Prince first at Eton. Nevertheless, Kelly believes that the anecdote of Green Park could be true, with some minor differences (according to Kelly, Brummell's aunt worked in a dairy bordering the park--she did not have a farm there, and according to Roger Boutet de Monvel, George III "had placed [Brummell's aunt] in charge of this little domain" (30), though he does not tell us how or why this appointment came about). For

Kelly, the suggestion that the young Brummell declared to the Prince “that he wanted to be an officer in the prince’s own regiment” (59) supports a typical Brummellian “combination of cheek and ambition[, which] gives this story some credibility. The prince laughed and said George should write to him when he left Eton” (59). Indeed, Brummell must have been strategic to some extent: he must have known that the Prince made a habit of strolling through Green Park and perhaps even stopping by the bordering farms or dairies to have a look at the pastoral life (as Franzero hints in the anecdote about the Prince’s sister watching the milking of a cow), and, if so, Brummell’s ambition would have led him there to meet the Prince.

Still, the remarkable luck of being introduced to the Prince on this occasion is mentioned by both Franzero and Barbey. Franzero explains that Brummell was so well aware of his good luck and his dependence upon it that he carried a good luck charm in his pocket throughout his life, only losing it toward the end in Caen, when he was so low on money that he accidentally flipped the charm into a cabdriver’s hand and later sought it out to no avail. Barbey, too, emphasizes the good fortune enjoyed by Brummell, and intentionally avoids any suggestion that Brummell might have been strategic about meeting the Prince, declaring about the Beau in general that “[i]n that mixture, which is called Society by politeness, destiny is nearly always greater than the faculties, or the faculties than destiny. But, by exception, there existed in Brummell a harmony between nature and destiny, between genius and fortune” (29). Focusing instead on a mythical and kingly quality, Barbey portrays a young man who was divinely fated to meet the Prince.

## THE RISE OF THE BEAU

It is true, either way, that Brummell would meet the Prince once again a few years later, and cleverly hold the Prince to the promise of engaging him in the tenth Hussars--a post for which the Beau gladly left Oxford, and quickly became the Prince's most esteemed friend. But Barbey describes these events with a passion forbidden by the dandy creed of stoicism, betraying a mystical and nostalgic belief that the cosmos and the kings of society were in harmony:

From this moment Brummell was the fashion, and it was Brummell, the son of the simple Esquire, of the private secretary, with a merchant for a grandfather, who was chosen, in preference to all the great names of England, to fill the post of best-man to the heir-apparent on his marriage with Caroline of Brunswick. Such a mark of favour secured for him immediately, on the terms of the most agreeable intimacy, the society of the great . . . Up to this point there was nothing to be surprised at: he was merely fortunate, a man born with a silver spoon in his mouth, as the English say. He had in his favour that incomprehensible something, which we call *our star*, and which decides our course in life without justice or reason; but what was really astonishing and justifies his good fortune is that he was able to make it permanent. The spoiled child of fortune became the spoiled child of society. (*Dandyism* 46-47)

Indeed, Barbey feels compelled to acknowledge the role that luck and fate played in Brummell's life, and he is careful to avoid any suggestion that the Beau might have striven for his success and popularity. To this end, he omits many of the factual details of the Beau's life and hardships, selecting instead to portray the charmed life of a charming man. Nevertheless, Barbey does assert that Brummell's promotion to the Prince Regent's favor was "astonishing," as was his ability to maintain his status.

While Barbey attributes Brummell's elevation to his good luck, Ian Kelly argues that what Barbey emphasizes and glorifies in Brummell is not what he "achieved," but

simply his divine existence: “[W]ithin a few years of Brummell’s death, an amateur French philosopher, Count Jules Amédée Barbey D’Aurevilly, was arguing that Brummell was instructive *not* in his achievements . . . but rather he was instructive ‘*in his person*’” (Kelly’s italics, 4). Barbey was attempting to single out Brummell from the masses right at birth, suggesting that his was a noble spirit, whose value was “immediately realizable”: “He was a great artist in a his way, but his art was not specialized nor manifested within a limited time. It was his life itself, the eternal brilliancy of faculties which are for ever active in a man created to live with his fellows. He pleased with his person as others please with their works. His value was immediately realizable” (54). My argument is that he, once in these exclusive circles, dissociated from them, demonstrating a haughty refusal to have to work for or achieve anything at all. In other words, once Brummell gained entrance into high society, he further set himself apart by distancing that society’s access to him: once he conquered a seat on the upper-crust, he wrapped himself in a sort of regal cloak, not allowing anyone to know him too well or too closely to lift the veil of mystery.

Brummell did this in several ways, the most notable being his stoic, unimpassioned disposition towards people, even those of aristocratic rank. According to Barbey, this “distinguishing characteristic” set the Beau apart from history’s great men, and lay in Brummell’s performance alone: it required that he remain, even in the face of great luck and success, a paragon of noble “disinterestedness”:

Women, who, like the priests, are always on the side of power, sounded with their red lips the trumpets of his fame; they did not advance beyond this point, for here steps in Brummell’s distinguishing characteristic; the point where he differs from Richelieu and from almost

all others, born to fascinate. He was not what the world calls a libertine. Richelieu was too much inclined to imitate those Tartar conquerors who made for themselves a bed of women interlaced. He had none of this booty nor of these victorious trophies; he did not care to steep his vanity in burning blood. Impenetrable scales, all the more fascinating, alas, as they were the more dangerous, covered the thighs of the Sirens, those daughters of the sea, whose voices are irresistible.

And his vanity did not suffer from this; on the contrary, since it never collided with an opposing passion in equipoise, it was all the stronger as it reigned alone, for to love, even in the least lofty acceptance of the word--to desire--is always to depend, to be the slave of one's desire . . . His triumphs had all the insolence of disinterestedness. He never felt the vertigo of the heads he turned. (47-8)

Indeed, Brummell's dandy performance consisted of a complete absence of passion (or a show thereof) and a stoic presentation of self. This presentation of self was essentially the presentation of a piece of art: whether a painting is loved or hated, it remains indifferent and almost insolently asserts itself, just as Brummell "had all the insolence of disinterestedness." Brummell believed in vainly and stoically presenting himself as art to such an extent that when he decorated his apartment, which would be one of the many self-fashioned theatres within which he would present himself, he "spent little on paintings, for fear, perhaps, that they might distract from the main artwork he intended his guests to admire: himself" (Kelly 94). It was this God-given indifference, according to Barbey, that succeeded in winning over the Prince of Wales and his circle of exclusives, and it is this second imperative of Brummell's performance--dissociation--that is fundamental to the act of dandyism.

Another aspect of Brummell's unsatisfied vanity was never to marry, according to Kelly, who describes Brummell's oft-questioned sexuality in terms of this same refusal to be pigeon-holed by any concrete alignment, explanation, artwork, or document. Kelly



believes that “the apparent enigma of Brummell’s sexuality” (205) was probably a construct set up by Brummell himself to further his mythical status and to add intrigue to his public persona. “He knew,” says Kelly, “that an element of his renown needed to be ill-defined, uncaptured. To this extent, those who have argued that a true dandy can never marry are right” (205). In addition, his status would be lowered and he might be less desired if “his status was clearly attached to one person” (205), so it was a gamble he would not risk.

He also kept people in the dark about how he achieved his polished look. To Barbey, only the fatuous would be inclined to have a “record of how [they] dressed,” while the Beau remained at all times original and mysterious. Once again, though, it is important to remember that all Brummell had was dandyism: he was not an aristocrat and therefore had little to offer in terms of making any permanent records about his life or in terms of having something to offer a potential wife. As Barbey explains: “Brummell was indeed only a Dandy. Richelieu on the contrary, before he became the sort of beau that his name suggests, was a great noble in an expiring aristocracy....He had for him all the forces of life. But take away the Dandy and what remains of Brummell? He was fit for nothing more and for nothing less than to be the greatest dandy of his own or of any time” (29). And yet this, according to Barbey, does not mean that Brummell was lacking in anything; instead, “[h]e profited by this want; for reduced to that force alone, which distinguished him, he rose to the rank of an idea, he was Dandyism itself” (30). In short, Richelieu had settled into a happy fatuousness, while Beau had to be at all times astonishing and alienated, never to cast his vanity in a stable mold. Arguably, the

performance is never static, since it continues to be founded on the fracturing of economic and social systems in any given culture and era. In other words, it can never be repeated because historical conditions are never repeated, but it can be performed in its own historical timeframe and in so doing be always already new.

“THE BRIGHTEST OF BUTTERFLIES”

Barbey credits the Beau’s success to more than just indifference--he was also able to astonish his audience with a blend of “Impertinence and Grace,” characteristics of an ideal aristocrat. It is therefore apt that Barbey famously called Brummell “the brightest of butterflies” (Crisp 11), owing to the fantastic metamorphoses of which Brummell was capable, though Barbey probably meant it more simply in terms of crediting Brummell’s beauty in style and dress. This observation also speaks to Brummell’s wit, humor, and entertaining performance: not only was Brummell’s ability to penetrate the upper class indeed butterfly-like, since the exclusivism of Regency England was so strictly adhered to and so difficult to enter, but he did it with a grace and style that was worth paying attention to and, in all, exceedingly pleasing. Ellen Moers explains that “exclusivism” (a term associated with the behaviors of the exclusive and alienating circles) developed a language all its own; I add to that the observation that Brummell’s creativity in negotiation this language and even creating one of his own to trump theirs is where his gift in entertaining lay and is what comprises the third imperative of his performance:

What marks Regency society as unique is the determined way it went about exclusion, the innumerable hedges against intruders, the explicit, almost codified rules for membership, and the elaborate sub-rules for the behaviour of members. In no other society has the mechanism of exclusion

been so prominent, elaborate and efficient. It was the universal, often the only, interest. Regency Society called itself exclusive, its members the exclusives, and its ruling principle exclusivism. A whole language, expressing the subtleties of the mechanism, grew up around the central words. (41)

Indeed, as James Laver states in *Dandies*, “the world in which [Brummell] finally established himself included the cream of the British aristocracy, a society which, at that time, was not at all welcoming to the *parvenu*” (34). But Brummell’s performance of vanity and inner nobility was so thorough that he went so far as to make up a coat of arms and a title all his own, silently insisting to his countrymen and fellow exclusives that these class distinctions were arbitrary, and that the power of an elegant performance--minus any outward emotional dependence of a performer on his audience--trumped the elegance and popularity of even the most divinely born. And the highly born, too, were so entertained by his stories that he was loved by everyone.

Furthermore, the only title required by Mr. Brummell was “Mr. Brummell”--as such, the Beau’s assured performance of self earned him the title of “*arbiter elegantiarum*”: “The dandy, as Brummell made him, stands on an isolated pedestal of self. He has no coat of arms on his carriage (indeed, Brummell kept no carriage), no ancestral portraits along his halls (and no ancestral halls), no decorations on his uniform (he had rejected the uniform), and no title but Mr. Brummell, *arbiter elegantiarum* or, in the language of Brummell’s day, ‘top of the male ton’” (18). It was this wit and, arguably, humor, that made him the most elegant and certainly the most clever in his ability to play the game, subvert the game, and keep the players smiling. Knowing this, we could not argue that Brummell’s dandyism flourished because of the climate of freedom

surrounding the upper classes, but in his ability to outdo them, thereby overcoming the class system and its protocol and in that move dismantling the hierarchy. As Laver tells us, quoting Paul H. Nystrom in *The Economics of Fashion*, “the development of this movement of dandyism, if it may be so termed, rose during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a protest against the rule of kings in the field of fashion, as democracy rose as a protest against the rule of kings in politics” (9-10). Granted, Brummell’s “protest” was for no one other than Brummell himself; the wave of equal rights that was partly created by the Beau’s performance was not intended by him and would not really be manifest ubiquitously for another hundred years. Still, in just a few decades Baudelaire would adopt the performance as the embodiment of a divine, artistic soul, and Barbey sought to capture it in both his life and his work, offering what Crisp calls a biography that is a “dandy in the highest sense of the word” (11) because of the witty, aloof, and aphoristic style of which it was comprised.

As Ian Kelly sees it, Brummell’s performance was a “stage trick”: “Brummell was not an aristocrat, yet he lorded it over the richest and most class-bound capital in the world: it was a stage trick in part based on his performed masculinity. His masquerade of superiority was noted by contemporaries and admired. The role had obvious uses and appeal: anyone could do it” (7). In short, he borrowed from the aristocracy the one thing that could be performed, and performed it so well that he surpassed them in popularity. Indeed, it becomes clear that, if we fill in the gaps left by Barbey’s biography, Brummell’s was a performance that “anyone could do,” and it is this realization that makes Brummell’s performance not only an achievement but a useful--and even

revolutionary--concept in Regency England. For my purposes, the performance of both accessing an upper class and creating a new class--furthermore, maintaining oneself as the only member of that class--continues to be, as I will show in the following chapters, a revolutionary “stage trick” by such dandies as George Walker and the zoot suiters.

But in Barbey’s time, there was not yet a language to describe the sort of performance that Brummell offered, which is arguably the reason why Barbey declares that “Dandyism is almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define. . . . Dandyism is a complete theory of life and its material is not its only side. It is a way of existing, made up entirely of shades . . .” (31). Understandably, then, the performance was equally hard to pin down for the dandy-hopefuls of Brummell’s time, which gave the performance its quality of originality and made it especially entertaining. It was ephemeral, as Barbey explains, using almost Christ-like imagery to convey the effect Brummell had on his observers: “His action upon others was more direct than the action of speech. He influenced by an intonation, a look, a gesture, by obvious intention, by silence itself” (57). To Barbey, Brummell’s performance was characteristically aristocratic because it had adopted the gestures, silences, and poses of the wealthy, and yet Brummell had an inner guide that allowed him to reinvent the act so that it was presented in brief, portrait-like intervals, as Barbey explains:

Later on, he became intoxicated with the exceptional position which he had acquired, and abandoned the habit of dancing, as too common-place for him. He used to stand for a few minutes at the door of the ballroom, glance round, criticize it in a sentence, and disappear, applying the famous maxim of Dandyism:-- “In society, stop until you have made your impression, then go.” (48-9)

Indeed, the boredom demonstrated by Brummell is at once inherently characteristic of a dandy and yet reveals a refusal to completely mimic the celebrating, dancing aristocrats: first, the dandy must be at all times original (a trait Barbey calls naturally “English”) and therefore make new rules for fashionables and their presentations at parties; another, perhaps less convincing than the first but nevertheless arguable, is that he didn’t find as much joy in these scenes as the aristocrats did, and found a form of protest in changing the rules at their gatherings; finally, he is indeed inventing dandyism, and therefore must imbue it with new meanings and new actions into which his audience was welcome to create and project meanings, keeping them at all times entertained.

We have numerous anecdotes showing how Brummell protected his performances from imitation. Part of the performance hinged on his refusal to explain it to dotting impersonators. To restate the power of this performance in Barbey’s words, the Beau never revealed his vanity as “satisfied” (25) enough to be explained, shared, or reproduced. To Barbey, “Satisfied vanity revealed becomes fatuity” (25); therefore, the performance of dandyism had to be impromptu and always already new in each instance and, importantly, given an audience at all times. As Ian Kelly has shown, the ability to delight his followers hinged on whetting his audience’s appetite without revealing too many of his secrets. An important part of this performance was Brummell’s long process of washing and dressing himself, which he did before an audience every evening. In short, once Brummell left the military and established himself in an apartment on Chesterfield Street, his dressing room there became a main theatrical attraction to the dandy-hopefuls of London:

Quite soon after Brummell's acquisition of 4 Chesterfield Street this upper room became, bizarrely, as important a focus of London society for fashionable young men as Ranelagh or Vauxhall Gardens, Drury Lane or the Oxford Street Pantheon had been to their parents. The front dressing room at 4 Chesterfield Street was the inner sanctum where Brummell's levee took place, and this became a sophisticated diversion in its own right. Brummell's coterie, many of them former dragoon officers launching their London careers in politics, the arts or society, was attracted to Chesterfield Street to watch how he dressed. . . .

[T]he way he dressed, in an age when the rules of attire were changing, was considered so remarkable that men en route to Tattershall's to see their horses, to Carlton House to see the prince or to Berry Brothers to order port wine and have themselves weighed, first called in on Chesterfield Street to see how they should dress to be considered--from all angles--gentlemen. (93)

And Brummell gave them a thorough show, according to Kelly, because “[t]hose visitors who were allowed upstairs into Brummell's dressing room” (96) were exposed to Brummell's nudity, which was “an unexpected sight”: “Brummell kept the door to his bedroom ajar so that he could carry on a conversation while he washed, shaved and dressed. For some or all of this he was totally or partially naked, ‘in the buffs, *in naturabilis*,’ as he put it, which was part of the reason, no doubt, that his physique[, graceful and masculine when he was young,] was noted in so many memoirs” (Kelly's italics, 96). In the nude, Brummell demonstrates what Barbey had said in contrast to Carlyle's assertion that the dandy was only a “clothes-wearing man”: dandyism is more than just “a bold and felicitous dictatorship in the matter of clothes and exterior elegance” (31); it is a theory of life and of expressing oneself as art, whether in a state of dress or undress.

Even more astounding is the extent to which Brummell and his servant went out of their way to display the Beau's daily performance of dressing, the descriptions of which are worth citing at length here:

The initial tying of the neckcloth was only the first move. The Dandiacal Body who gathered to watch were more interested in Brummell's next move. Slowly he lowered his chin in a series of small 'declensions' that rucked down the necktie. Ideally it held the contours of the neck rather than bulging out or folding inward. It was this moment of self-sculpting that men came to study and emulate, because it was this that framed the face as well as dictating the angle of the head. Once the starched cloth was pressed into place, and the whole rubbed with an older shirt to preserve the pleats, it would stand the rigors of the day. 'If the cravat was not properly tied at the first effort it was always rejected.' Often the shirts, too, would have to come off: perfection cost in laundering as well as in time. Wealth and style were no longer to be flaunted with lace and spangles but in a perfection of line that the cognoscenti would recognize, and cost the wearer in other ways. So the theatricality of understated chic became signal, with Brummell casting himself--even in this first adornment of the day--as both protagonist and *metteur-en-scène*.

. . . Not all of Brummell's morning guests were honored with a personal audience. Many waited downstairs. However, they were not altogether denied an element of the theatrical experience enacted in the dressing room. Robinson the valet made a point of passing the downstairs room with 'a quantity of tumbled neckcloths under one arm' and, naturally, this was noted by the gentlemen. On being interrogated, Robinson would solemnly reply, 'Oh, these sir? These are our failures.' Certainly something of Brummell's deadpan style had rubbed off on the valet. More tellingly, the arrangement of 4 Chesterfield Street makes it apparent that Robinson had to go out of his way to pass the first-floor rooms. The 'tumbled neckcloths' were part of Brummell's stagecraft. (97-98)

Brummell had staged these performances to serve more than merely his vanity, as there is a salient sense of humor involved in the execution of each staging and in the training of his servant to play a role in displaying the neckcloths and even including the downstairs guests in some aspect of the spectacle. Therefore, we can see why Barbey asserts a



difference between the performance of vanity and the fatuousness of a “satisfied vanity revealed”: if the Beau had been fatuous, he would have engaged the spectators in the question-and-answer portion of the shows and satisfied the guests with explanations. But he refused to answer questions, write style books, or even, as Kelly tells us, to have his full portrait painted, because all of these things would have suggested that his performance was reproducible, satisfied, and essentially accomplishable through mimesis. Instead, the Beau maintained the performance as an ephemeral, living, in-the-moment piece of art.

Indeed, Brummell seemed to laugh at the idea of allowing others to imitate him, encouraging it only to the point of amusing his audience (and perhaps himself), but never actually revealing the performance: “He enjoyed,” explains Ellen Moers, “mystifying anxious imitators who inquired about his relations with tailors and suppliers, and about the time and credit he devoted to the minutiae of costume. All wanted to know how the famous cravat was tied, and how much time the Beau gave to the performance” (31). If anyone were able to really impersonate the Beau, his performance would be too common and reproducible, so it was indeed a fine line he maintained between creating a fashion and a pose that *could* be accomplished by anyone without necessarily making some kind of uniform out of dandyism and rendering it totally banal. Barbey explains, “Independence makes the Dandy. There would otherwise be a code of dandyism, but there is not. Every Dandy *dares*, but he dares with tact, and stops in time at the famous point...between originality and eccentricity. That is why Brummell could not bend to military discipline, which is also a kind of uniform” (51). To avoid becoming too satisfied

and fatuous, Brummell deflected imitators' questions with witticisms, maintaining his independence with a famous sense of humor and a subtle refusal to take himself and high society seriously, even if he expected others to do so. For example, when one of his admirers "[a]sked for the secret of his highly polished boots he replied that for blacking he never used anything but the froth of champagne," a joke that was later immortalized by a "versifier of the day" (Moers 31). As Kelly explains, "[a] talent to amuse remained a signal part of his attraction to the wider world: an ability to enliven the inherent tedium of society rituals with well-placed impertinences and pronouncements designed to make people laugh" (131). While Brummell had placed himself in society, the dandyism he created served by amusing it while at the same time subverting its most rigid boundaries. Therefore, Kelly says, it was "the perfect insider's revolt, and Brummell seems to have known the essential ridiculousness of being radically fashionable" (125). Certainly the Beau and his servant demonstrated this sense of ridiculousness by parading the tumbled neckcloths past the downstairs guests, and this is what reveals Brummell's performance as a self-conscious performance of a character, the dandy.

#### THE DANDY IN REVOLT

Barbey, while agreeing that the performance was a conscious troubling of the aristocracy, argued that the Beau simply enjoyed playing with conventions. These playful mutations, therefore, contrary to what Kelly believes, were not merely a revolt, but a manner of play that was successful because it took place in a "very old and very civilised societ[y], where comedy becomes so rare" (31). As Barbey describes it, the Beau's dandyism was not the "revolt of the individual against the established order . . .

Dandyism on the contrary, while still respecting the conventionalities, plays with them” (33). Indeed, in such a bored and “civilized” society, it was possible for Brummell to reflect the hypocrisy of high society and yet shock and amuse its players which, according to Barbey, is the most salient “characteristic...of Dandyism”: “always to produce the unexpected, that which could not logically be anticipated by those accustomed to the yoke of rules” (33). Nevertheless, we can start to see in these discrepancies of opinion between today’s biographers and Barbey just how much Barbey’s royalism limits the meanings of the Beau’s performance, reducing them to a single meaning that revealed and supported the aristocracy rather than disrupting it. Indeed, the manner in which Brummell executed his own personal revolt (a term I will adopt despite Barbey) within society must have been “unexpected” because it unwittingly insisted on a new democracy--since it did not require wealth to accomplish it--and yet mocked, as Kelly said above, the importance of fashion in dictating the boundaries of class. For Brummell, explains Kelly, “[the neckcloth] was . . . the beginning of his antistyle style: a simple perfection of line that took attention and know-how (and Brummell to set the fashion), but did not, per se, require wealth” (98). This was a potent combination in Regency England, at once mocking it and revealing its hypocrisy while at the same time becoming master of it--and keeping his audience laughing: “Brummell’s dandy pose held the world in satirical contempt just as much as it held tailoring to be the supreme art, while a subversive and sardonic manner, then as now, begot a crowd. Beyond this Brummell’s personal warmth and his wit--often lost in the retelling of those jokes that closely equate snobbery with humor--brought him many admirers” (Kelly 133).

And Brummell took full advantage of this wealth of admirers, putting every effort into displaying himself throughout society and making a stage out of every social venue.

For example, while the Beau did not have a box of his own in the theater, a wealthy friend had extended permanent rights to the usage of his theater box, a right of which Brummell took advantage regularly to display himself in society. According to the memoirs of Prince Puckler-Muskau, the theater boxes were designed to display the audience members within them more than the actors on the stage: “The lighting [of a theater box] is better adapted for being seen than for seeing, . . . [I]n front of every box hangs a chandelier which dazzles one and throws the actors into shade” (Kelly 169). “Of course,” says Kelly, “Brummell’s box was . . . a stage in its own right” (169). The theater, like the clubs throughout London, was an important organizing principle of society, and it was imperative that the Beau take his place in this vast arrangement (even if he did not pay for it himself, which is perhaps equally important here): “One’s appearance in a particular box at the theater signaled the shifting allegiances and relative status within society. It announced one’s presence in London and participation in its life. How one was received and acknowledged, whom one invited in, or to which boxes one was invited, all served to illustrate the changing web of alliances: financial, sexual, or political” (169).

And the same could be said of the fashionable men’s clubs, where the Beau (once again paid for at the club) became the leading man of society to such a degree that he was the eponymous master of the famous window at White’s, where the fashionable men could be seen by passersby, who were subjected to their ridicule and jokes:

The facade of White’s clubhouse--formerly the home of the Countess of Northumberland--was remodeled during the second half of the eighteenth

century, and a little later a bay window was added over a former doorway that became a landmark on St. James's Street. Here Brummell held court in the afternoons, in a bow window that became known as the Beau Window. The men of the Dandiacal Body re-formed several hours after they had gone their separate ways from Chesterfield Street, 'mustered in force' around Brummell's chair in the Beau Window, watching the world go by and telling jokes. (150)

Brummell made use of the aristocratic stages, the theater, the opera, and the clubs, but he "played" with the performance of wealth and the structure of class systems, redefining an age that was tiring of the aristocracy. He did so with a very performative creation of self that did not put an essential aristocrat, male, or individual at the center of this stage, but instead put forth a character. The power of Brummell's dandyism lies in the fact that it was a creation, one that had to be experienced, on site, in a moment, and without the possibility of reproduction.

While this arguably revolutionary performance requires that its maker come from the depths, the margins, to breach its borders and beyond, to Barbey, no common character could have gotten away, by mere performance, with the behaviors attributed to Beau Brummell. Instead, Brummell's dandyism was a "[h]eaven-born elegance" (33), and one that not only plays with conventionalities but one that, at base, works by "admitting their power, it suffers from and revenges itself upon them, and pleads them as an excuse against themselves; dominates and is dominated by them in turn" (33). This is important because, as Ian Kelly explains, this performance is born in a liminal space, standing both as an effigy of the dandy's culture and era and yet looks forward and opens the door to other possibilities: "Baudelaire was the first writer to recognize the prescience of the dandy: holding the dying culture and a new one in congruence, not just enjoying

the liminal but defining it” (8). Barbey calls this position “the stupefying turf [that] has taken the place of Dandyism”(60), a position from which Brummell “fell,” “bearing with him a kind of perfection which has not since reappeared, save in a degraded form” (60). For Barbey, the text of *Dandyism* is meant to reveal Brummell’s “vocation,” which was “to reign” (75).

In a last effort at defining Brummell’s performance, Barbey reaffirms its theatrical quality, and points to the “degree of refinement” (75) that the English must have attained in order to be so bored as to need a character such as Brummell: “It is a sad admission for the chaste lovers of truth in everything, that, had his grace been more sincere, he would not have had the same influence; nor have seduced and captivated an artificial society” (75). Then Barbey prophesies that dandyism of this caliber will die with its era, saying, “Dandyism will perish the day the society which produced it is transformed, for aristocratic and Protestant England has changed so much in the last twenty years that, although she clings to her old customs with a tenacity akin to slavishness, yet Dandyism is already but the tradition of a day” (76). In other words, Barbey believes that the historical and enacted dandyism of Brummell eventually would be ineffective.

On the other hand, Barbey believes that the literary and “intellectual” dandyism created in his text would live on and continue to transform cultures: “There will never be another Brummell; but we may be certain that there will always be Dandies . . . They are witness to the marvellous variety of the divine work; they are as eternal as Caprice” (78). A dandy himself, Barbey carried on the tradition as a philosophy much like Baudelaire’s (with whom he became close friends), which held mediocrity and bourgeois values in

contempt. Armand Chartier explains in his 1977 biography, *Barbey D'Aurevilly*, that as dandyism's "theoretician, historian and practitioner," Barbey never stopped trying "to improve upon it, perceiving it as a psychological discipline, a code of ethics, the mark of a superior man, an aristocracy of the soul, without relation to any particular society" (55). Barbey's dandy would live on and impact future societies, just as Brummell unwittingly transformed his and helped bring about the collapse of the aristocratic culture Barbey mourns. As Moers states, "It is extraordinary with what clarity the fashionables themselves remarked the piecemeal destruction of exclusivism which took place throughout the early 'thirties. With conviction, even with relief, they dated the ebb of Regency attitudes from the death, in 1830, of George IV, a monarch more quickly forgotten and less sincerely mourned, as *Fraser's* noted in its obituary, than any other" (184). While Brummell helped to disrupt the coherence of his aristocratic culture, he, unlike Barbey, did not mourn the loss. Furthermore, Brummell's legacy continues to burn brighter than that of the monarchs of his day. Nevertheless, Barbey's literary dandy had a great future, because, as Ellen Moers tells us, "Barbey's originality is to make dandyism available as an intellectual pose" (263). Whether that pose was intended by Barbey to promote monarchism, as Chartier argues, or whether it was meant to be "the archetype of all artists," as Moers argues, the dandy that Barbey created in his text is a literary trope, and one whose meanings far exceeded the author's ideas. But performance always exceeds perceptions and takes new contexts and new iterations. Dandyism therefore becomes an effigy (in Joseph Roach's terms) of an era and a performance that

can be adopted, inherited, and embedded with new cultural meanings, as we will see in the following chapters on George Walker and the zoot suit dandies.



## Chapter Two

### The New Beau Brummell: George Walker and the Emergence of Black Dandyism

The dandy is, at all times and in every culture and generation that takes up the performance, unique: he reenacts shock, alienation, and entertainment in each cultural moment from which he arises, whether that be Brummell's London society in the 1820s or, as I intend to show, turn-of-the-century New York, where George Walker took the stage. George Walker's life and works have been brought to light by recent texts such as Camille Forbes' *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* and Barbara Webb's "The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study of Genealogical Method." He was a famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century minstrel, vaudeville performer, and partner to Bert Williams of the eponymous act Williams and Walker. Working against the tide of a racist culture that only recently had freed the slaves, Walker's was both a stage performance and a life performance: re-imagining perceived notions of "blackness" in the racist tropes of old "Zip Coon" dandies on stage, he also fashioned and updated the poses, gestures, and clothes to frame a new dandyism in real life. Like Beau Brummell, he had to promote himself above the marginalization and oppression of his day--but the stakes were higher for Walker. His expression in the world would not hinge merely on overcoming rigid class boundaries, but also on supplanting a demoralizing and often threatening cultural view of blackness. As Stuart Cosgrove states, dandyism is a "refusal"; for George Walker, it was a refusal to be limited by his class, his race, or, as a stage performer, to be commodified. The ways in which Walker overcame these limitations and acquired social uplift can, as in the case of Beau Brummell, be

characterized by three main tenets of the performance of dandyism, to shock, to set himself apart from, and to entertain the public. But Walker was a consummate businessman, and as such he played a role on stage that, while a stereotype, allowed him to maintain control over his career and to access the sort of public idle elegance that played at *not* equaling his onstage character. Walker's dandyism must also be highlighted in its uniqueness and in the nuances of his particular acts of resistance. Walker stepped onto the dandy stage a century after Brummell and on the other side of the Atlantic; nevertheless, the three tenets of dandyism, to shock, dissociate, and entertain, were employed in different ways from his own unique position as a black man in turn-of-the-century America, where he was already alienated from mainstream middle America and had to use his business acumen to achieve the sort of frivolity that was more easily accessed by Beau Brummell.

Later called "the new Beau Brummell" (Webb 18) for his as-yet unqualified similarities to the famous first dandy, George Walker began his career as a minstrel performer in Lawrence, Kansas: "A diminutive dark-skinned young man with confidence and charisma, George had been born in Lawrence in 1873, the youngest of three children. He got his start working with twelve other young black boys in a company of minstrels, and although only amateurs, they reaped success with their annual performances" (Forbes 16). At the time, Walker's performances with the black minstrel troupe kept intact the stereotypes and characters preferred by white audiences, but Walker maintained them with the idea that they could be performed better by blacks than by whites: "A Negro company sent on the road by whites, the minstrel troupe typically played to type. In those

annual performances--organized and supported by white men not long after the 1863 emancipation of slaves--they presented caricatures of happy, contented slaves, dancing and singing for their audiences” (16). Still, Forbes tells us, “even as a young boy in that environment, George hoped for more: ‘I started out with the idea that it was possible for the black performer to do better,’ he would later say” (16). After leaving Kansas in 1893 to make his way to San Francisco, the twenty-year old began a journey that would lead to the eventual acquaintance of Bert Williams, another young performer in California. Williams’ and Walker’s gifted performances--and Walker’s acute business sense--would later elevate the representations of African Americans. The duo took some cues from the white performers’ tactics for uplifting themselves above the characters they played while also transforming the image of blackness. Indeed, Walker was entering a tradition with a long and complex history, minstrelsy, which was staged initially by working-class whites who sought to caricature and ridicule the other (blacks, the very poor, and the upper class), and later embraced by the middle class, too, who found a common enemy in the African American.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF MINSTRELSY

American minstrelsy was first created around hero-figures, such as the great pioneer, and then incorporated black characters to both belittle African Americans and elevate white Americans’ social status. The history of American minstrelsy, Robert C. Toll tells us in his text, *Blacking Up: the Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, was filled with American folk heroes such as Davy Crockett and James Fenimore Cooper’s backwoodsmen--characters “that glorified American democracy and the

average white man”(3) after the War of 1812. These characters set white Americans apart, too, from the stuffy European. In short, Toll tells us, “[b]efore audiences defined blacks, in minstrelsy, they forged positive stage images of themselves” (13). In addition, Toll says, the “rural immigrants, cut off from their fold groups, had to establish new definitions of themselves as Americans and to find new ‘rules’ to govern and explain their situation” (5) now that they had moved to cities; therefore, the “popular arts emerged to fill these needs.” It is for this reason that most scholars, from Eric Lott (*Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*) to Robert C. Toll (*Blacking Up*) to William J. Mahar (*Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Culture*), qualify minstrelsy, the art that took up this space, as very eclectic and encompassing not only the needs of the varied working peoples now found in the cities but also from the various art forms brought therein: traditional Irish and Scottish folk music imported from earlier European minstrel shows, dance traditions (taken) from the slaves, instruments from the Appalachians, stories and tropes from folk tales, and so on.

Furthermore, the first minstrel shows involved audience participation, encouraging working-class spectators to make their presence known and to define a theatre that would resist the pretensions of upper-class entertainments such as the opera, where people wait for interludes to cough or clear their throats. To this end, as Eric Lott asserts in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, the genre was “eclectic in origin, primitive in execution, and raucous in effect” (64). Indeed, the audiences were petitioned to involve themselves to such extremes that the theatre

boasted signs demanding that they “‘Spit [their tobacco] all over the floor’” (12) and smoke cigars flagrantly; for what else had they paid?

The Yankee was the hero of the day. Following Toll, it was the “actor James Hackett [who] established the Yankee as the most significant American stage character. This ‘simple,’ rustic, Brother Jonathan--proud, independent, morally strong, brave, and nationalistic--delighted audiences throughout the country with his triumphs over ‘high-falutin,’ pretentious characters and scheming, immoral city slickers” (13). In response to the “Yankee Doodle” mocked by the British, the minstrel Yankee boasted of his uncouthness and his democratic “man of the people” colloquialisms and behaviors, though still upholding a certain family-values morality, turning the European condescension on its head and creating a “debunking counterattack against those very standards of civilization and refinement . . . He represented American Everyman, arisen and triumphant” (13). In short, he was Yankee Doodle with a vengeance, gaining prominence especially after the attacks on American honor by the British in the three-year War of 1812.

The minstrel show eventually took the stage mostly at circuses throughout the 1830s, with P.T. Barnum at the forefront, entertaining the masses with freak shows, bearded ladies, and comical minstrel performances. According to Toll, the white man in black-face character surfaced across the nation in solo tours and was adopted by Barnum and brought into the minstrel shows, adding to the spectacular curiosities the “black man” (25). Alexander Saxton’s 1990 article, “Blackface Minstrelsy” explains that after a rash of solo performances throughout the nation, the first minstrel troupe surfaced:

“Three men, Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett, and E.P. Christy, are generally recognized as founders of blackface minstrelsy” (68). Dan Emmett joined in the formation of what scholars agree is the first recognized minstrel troupe in 1841, which comprised Emmett, Frank Brower, Billy Whitlock, and Dick Pelham, who together created a stand-alone minstrel show. They joined forces, according to Charles Day’s article, “Fun in Black,” “for the purpose of playing a benefit for Pelham” (*Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 46). But many other solo performers had not yet united as quartets or whole shows, and so remained individual oddities whose songs and dances were taking hold across the country and in traveling circuses.

Saxton notes that, interestingly, the majority of white, blackface minstrels were “Northern” and “urban” and not typically from the South or the backwoods. As rising entertainers, they had to compete with the new material being put on in big cities such as New York and San Francisco, and so, having travelled the South, they brought back slave dances and rhythms, and thought nothing of stealing these performances. Saxton argues that this pilfered music is the major reason for the “popularity and staying power of minstrel entertainment” in the latter half of the 19th century (71), because so few had been exposed to these forms of entertainment and because the dances were so rich. Indeed, as Camille Forbes explains in her very thorough study entitled *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America’s First Black Star*, by the 1830s, blackface minstrelsy took over minstrelsy like wildfire and “became overwhelmingly popular. And it was blackface minstrelsy that had the most lingering and damaging effects for blacks” (22):

Historians typically mark the beginning of blackface minstrelsy's widespread fame with Thomas Dartmouth Rice's supposed 1828 appropriation and subsequent popularization of an old black man's idiosyncratic dance and song: "Weel about and turn about and do jus so; / Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." It was not only Rice's performance style and material that mimicked blacks, however; mixing burnt champagne corks with either water or a viscous material like petroleum jelly, Rice covered his face, marking himself as racially black in his portrayals of the Other. He multiplied these effects by going even further, creating exaggerated full lips; playing a shuffling, slow-moving, dim-witted Negro; and speaking in an invented "darky" dialect. The character and stereotype took the name of the song: "Jim Crow." (22)

In short, blackface minstrelsy took over as a better means to both boost the working-class white man's self-assurance and to ease his fears of freed urban blacks by creating a venue in which to humiliate blacks and keep them marginalized in society, "pronounc[ing] that blacks were a lesser people, subordinate to whites. It provided its Northern urban audiences a venue in which to release through laughter their uncomfortable feelings about blacks--who lived in the cities among them. Minstrelsy was a space in which whites could reject the notion that blacks needed to be incorporated into society, and they achieved this by demonstrating blacks' immanent inferiority" (Forbes 22). Clearly, this space revealed the anxieties of the whites who created it in the very particular caricatures constructed, the fearful assertions of superiority, and the nervous tendency to mock the marginalized.

To make their minstrel performances fresh and interesting to common men in the big cities, these white men had to modernize the typical backwoodsman and Yankee tropes that had dominated comedy earlier in the century. And so the urban dandy character was born: "The Broadway dandy," Saxton says, "was in one respect a transplant of the swaggering Southwest frontier hero, already widely rendered in blackface. But the

dandy also caricatured a new social type in the United States--the urban free black” (71). Up until that point, minstrel performers had been proponents of Jacksonian racial politics, preferring to accept slavery as a “peculiar institution” (as Jackson had said) in the South. Clearly, minstrelsy’s subject matter--slaves--pointed to a congruently pro-slavery stance. Therefore, minstrelsy was instrumental in affecting American racial politics. To Eric Lott, minstrelsy not only played a role in the racial politics of 1830-1850, but “it *was* the racial politics of its time” (Lott’s italics, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” 225). But it was not only racially politicized: it set itself against the wealthy, the white “bumpkin,” and the blacks--pre- and post-slavery--in the form of the plantation slave character and the free, urban black.

For this reason, the already-eclectic and politically loaded national pastime “helped constitute a break,” Lott tells us, “(and thus an anxious discourse about that break) between elite, genteel, and low cultures which would be fundamental by our century . . . . Indeed, by the early 1840s minstrelsy . . . was ranged explicitly against the opera, the ‘legitimate’ theater, and the concert hall, the American beginnings of what Andreas Huyssen has called the ‘great divide’” (64). When, in the latter part of the century, Walker and Williams began to perform as minstrels and take up the tropes created by racist white minstrels, they problematized an already complex relationship set up by the stage performer in opposition to the black man, the poor, and the upper classes. Where would a “real” black man fit in? Dandyism, a topsy-turvy performance both onstage and off, could buoy these complexities and create something new and astonishing. George Walker was the one to create this new form.



## LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE BLACK DANDY

As Barbara Webb explains in “The Black Dandyism of George Walker,” the dandy, like the black man, was taken up in minstrelsy because he was, as we have seen with Beau Brummell, already a threat to the status quo and to the unstable delineations of class. But with “the minstrel dandy, race and class became inextricable from each other. Blackness functioned both as a signifier of working-class agency (as in the case of a Jim Crow or endman character) and a contaminant with which to ‘sully’ the white dandy’s pretensions by changing his color with the blackface convention, while class parody returned the black man to his ‘proper’ place of low status” (12-13). Together, the black man and the dandy served a dual purpose in putting blackness and the performance of resistance (dandyism) in one grotesque and laughable form. As Webb says, “[t]he black dandy dared to claim humanity, and all dandies rejected a commoner’s class status, providing minstrel performers with the setup for an eagerly accepted joke” (13). In this way, the entertainment medium was revealing in what it disclosed about the fears of white working- and middle-class Americans: the threat of the freed black man who would now have the potential to be a wage-earner and to stake claim as a human, a rightful American, and an equal citizen, and the threat of those such as the dandy who crossed class lines with his performance.

Indeed, the urban black, growing in numbers due to an upsurge in freed blacks moving North, became a special target of the minstrel act, manifesting onstage as a sort of comical wannabe dandy. As Forbes explains, “not long after [Thomas D. Rice’s] Jim Crow character[, in 1834,] came ‘Zip Coon,’ or ‘Jim Dandy,’ created by George Washington Dixon” (22). Forbes tells us that this character “made a mockery of free

blacks” by having pretensions to be “[a]n urban man-about-town” while in fact he used poor grammar and acted and looked like a fool, all qualities that were especially set off by his exaggerated costume, which comprised “a long-tailed coat with padded shoulders, a high ruffled collar, white gloves, an eye-piece and a long watch chain” (22). While Zip Coon attempted to dress in a high-falutin style, the character was consistently shown to be incapable of adapting to freedom. He was lazy, childish, and incorrectly parroting higher class citizens rather than being one. This dandy, unlike Brummell and Walker, certainly missed the mark: he could neither upstage the upper classes nor outwit the masses, and his performance was anything but stunning: it was abominably predictable. It was not the first time, though, that the dandy character had been used to mock a marginalized group’s aspiration toward empowerment; it was mocked, as we saw in chapter one, in the song “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” whose pretensions toward European elegance were dismissed as equal to putting lipstick on a pig.

When blackface minstrelsy adopted the dandy buffoons such as Zip Coon, the intention was largely the same as the penning of “Yankee Doodle Dandy”—to mock. As Barbara Webb explains, the “satire” of the black dandy trope was his “pretension to be ‘real,’” which “provided an outlet for the [working Americans’] anxieties” about free blacks. “A satirical treatment of the black dandy in antebellum minstrelsy offered assurance that a black man who placed his aspirations above the very bottom of the social heap would remain laughable rather than legitimate” (12). Indeed, this satire of free black men would be welcome after the embarrassments of 1812 and, later, it would ease the fear of losing ground to a newly freed and upwardly mobile people. Arguably, the post-

emancipation black would have had to perform his insistence on freedom and upward mobility in order to attain it, requiring the same dandyist refusal to be limited to any lesser status. Nevertheless, the portrayal of anyone pretending to be above his social, political, or economic status was easily transcribed into a debasing and comical dandyism in the character of Zip Coon, just as Yankee Doodle had been conceived to put the American male in his place in England. In this way, Zip Coon was a preemptive attack on blacks' ability to perform as rightfully free Americans.

Still, the European dandy had made strides, since Brummell, in refusing to be limited by the class to which he was born, so the dandy would seem an odd choice, perhaps, were it not for the fact that the white minstrels entertained working-class Americans, and so the upper-class airs of the dandy, regardless of his class, remained a threat to working-class values. Therefore, as Barbara Webb explains, the minstrel performances of dandies and of black men served the same purpose, which was to emasculate both groups and shore up white male working-class superiority:

Simultaneously, these early blackface critiques of white dandies lent themselves easily to the policing of black male identity. The "black" character on stage occupied a space of tension, assuming the dual role of both joke-maker and the object of ridicule. This pairing of the white dandy and the black man as the butts of the same joke would seem unlikely, but consider that racial anxiety has been part and parcel of class anxiety for as long as free blacks have been visible in Western societies. In the early days of minstrelsy, both the humanity of the black man and the cultural pretensions of the dandy threatened to expose the provisional nature of class affiliation in North America. The claims of the former to equality and of the latter to superiority required a disavowal, or "returning to place" through minstrel satire, which reiterated boundaries defining "we" and "they" in terms of race and class. (9-10)

In other words, the classes to which both the freed black man and the dandy were ascribed were re-written, and the European dandy, regardless of how Brummell had broken the class boundaries of the performance, served as a bookend to the freed black man. In the center of these bookends lay a now-unified group of white, working- and middle-class men fighting to maintain superiority over common enemies. If these new Zip Coon and Jim Dandy characters could pull the rug out from under “the humanity of the black man,” making him seem more animal and buffoon-like than human, and at the same time mock “the cultural pretensions of the dandy,” then both the working and the middle classes would be safe from either of these subjectivities chipping away at them. According to Eric Lott, the attempts made at transcribing the urban black into minstrel characters was, as would be expected, flawed. But even the gaps in the minstrel caricatures, or the “distortions and displacements” of the “representations acknowledged the possibility of a working-class racial radicalism even as they diagnosed the factors making it unlikely” (*Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* 113). In other words, the Zip Coon and Jim Dandy tropes were putting versions of urban blacks in the public gaze, which actually may have helped to normalize the black dandy while it had only sought to undermine it. Lott argues that the black dandy was designed to be an “ideological fiction through which certain . . . conflicts were lived” (13), but instead it became a site, onstage, of radical political transgression.

The dandy’s history of transgressing boundaries threatened the tenuous class boundaries that white men were trying to protect from the newly freed slaves and especially from the new, more urban black man, but the wave of free blacks was one that

would be impossible to quell. Hence, exposure to prominent blacks in the cities would grow, as would blacks' status, which meant that the minstrel "satires" that calumniated blacks would have to keep up with the times and in large part keep tabs on blacks in order to mock and undermine them. To this end, Webb explains, whites went beyond the stage, crossed the proscenium, and began to "circulat[e] caricatures that lampooned the idea of blacks dressing in fine clothes and aspiring to social graces" (11). In addition, when "free African Americans in Northern cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York claimed their rights to public spaces by holding parades and balls in which fancy dress played a prominent role," whites attacked the very carriages and the people within them (Webb 22, citing White and White 1998:95-115). Therefore, the danger of simply being black was compounded by an insistence on dressing nicely--the same insistence the white dandy made a century before--but now the performance provoked life-threatening violence. This double refusal, as Webb shows, "signified a rebellion not only against a prescribed class station, as did his white counterparts, but also against a prescribed position in the racial order" (11). But the dynamic was about to become even more complex with the introduction of "actual" black males performing as onstage minstrels, who would have the burden of performing "blackness" onstage with characters such as Zip Coon and Jim Dandy and at the same time trying to uplift the image of African Americans for their black audiences while not offending their white audiences.

When the first blacks began to take the stage performing blackface dandies and their plantation counterparts, Forbes tells us, the performances did little to uplift the image of blacks in America, and may have even reified the stereotypes used against them

by offering some sense of onstage authenticity to the characters: “When blacks began to work as minstrels in the mid-1850s, becoming established as performers by the 1860s, their contribution ironically did little to alter the tradition. Indeed, it may well have deepened the truth-value of minstrelsy, an idea already ingrained both in the theater and in the society. Able to participate in the theatrical form only by virtue of their declarations of authenticity, black entertainers claimed expertise as the ‘real’ thing” (24). The result, states Forbes, was a kind of “hyper-performance of blackness staged for both white and black audiences alike” (24). Nevertheless, Forbes continues, “black audiences read against the grain of such performances, undercutting prevailing stereotypes that rendered blacks a despised and alien population,” while “white audiences accepted those representations” (25). For the white audiences, these onstage characterizations easily crossed over into perceptions of blacks, who, as entertainers, were unwittingly giving credence to such portrayals:

Performers’ onstage representations often further reified the notion that their performances merely reproduced reality. Indeed, their performances helped to elide the space between the real and the representational. Although the conditional acceptance of black performance facilitated blacks’ involvement in the premiere American art form, it also ossified stereotypical images, despite performers’ attempts to resist them. And as the black entertainers performed the stereotypes, the damage extended even further: they risked ossifying their own representations. (25)

Nevertheless, as more African Americans entered the stage, largely due to the public’s curiosity about blacks and their desire for authenticity (despite earlier American notions that kept blacks from performing onstage simply because they were actually black and therefore undesirable), the space of performance was opening up possibilities for new interpretations of Zip Coon and Jim Dandy. In short, the presence of more black

entertainers would eventually lead to an evolution in the characterizations of blacks, but most notably with the entrance of George Walker, who extended the dandy performance into real life and effected his own combination of shock, alienation, and entertainment. First, he shocked the art world with a new, black minstrel who did not wear burnt cork, subverting the trope and forever changing both its racist meanings and the constructions of blackness onstage; second, he set himself apart with his extraordinary talent and his assertion of self-styling both onstage and off, while at the same time unifying the black community; third, he entertained on stages world-wide and was a shrewd businessman, becoming one of the most celebrated performers and one of the most admired stylish dandies in everyday life.

#### WILLIAMS AND WALKER TAKE (OVER) THE STAGE: THE REINVENTION OF THE BLACK DANDY

Toward the latter half of the century, a newer format in minstrelsy took hold, whereby a straight man was set against a comic foil. The Zip Coon character morphed into a simpler black dandy serving as the straight man, and the Jim Crow character morphed into his comic opposite. But even the straight-man, or black dandy, was made to appear foolish and was maintained as such: “A preposterous stump speech served as the highlight of this second act, during which a performer spoke in outrageous malapropisms as he lectured. In many ways reminiscent of the hilarious pomposity of Zip Coon, the stump speech deliverer aspired to great wisdom and intelligence, but always ultimately appeared foolish and ignorant” (Forbes 24). It wasn’t until Walker and Williams that

these stage personas would begin to be uplifted into an astonishing new character, the *actual* black dandy.

One of the first steps they took to promote a distinction between a comical black dandy and an actual one was to publish photos of themselves on the fliers, dapperly dressed and distinguished as they were in real life. Indeed, white blackface minstrels before Williams and Walker had published photos of themselves on their sheet music as well, in order to clarify to their audiences that they were neither the simple characters they performed onstage nor, most importantly, actually black. For Williams and Walker, putting photos of themselves on the playbills was an important move, signifying that, though they were indeed black, they were neither the simple nor the stereotypical black characters portrayed onstage.

By including their photos on the playbills and sheet music, Williams and Walker were making an important assertion, which was to distinguish playing a character from being the actor that plays it. In effect, this move highlighted the fact that Zip Coon and Jim Crow were indeed characters, not representational blacks. As Forbes explains, the photos portrayed the actors “[w]earing elegant tailored suits that they donned offstage,” creating a real-life dapper black man to juxtapose the bumpkin buffoon tropes they were committed to playing in such an established medium as minstrelsy. “What this seemed to express is that, although they played to type, their stereotypical roles did not equal reality” (49). This was, as Forbes articulates, a very “strategic self-presentation,” and one that began to remove the black man from the trope of the black man so many were accustomed to seeing in the theatre. Nevertheless, Forbes argues, the lyrics may have



trumped the images in this new formation of subjectivity, weighing down the image of an empowered black man with songs that still suggested his impossibility.

Another change that occurred in Walker's and later minstrels' depictions of the dandy character, though, was that his dress became less comical and more elegant. Barbara Webb explains that this not only served to create a new black dandy, but it was also an effort to offer audiences a more pleasing and entertaining spectacle, through costume. This, too, worked against the trope of a laughable character incapably putting on airs, and instead "stunned audiences with calculated elegance" (14). Even the speech patterns had improved in the hands of black performers, according to Webb, so that now the black dandy's "dress and speech suggested an upper-class identity" (14).

Nevertheless, the dandy-esque character, known commonly as Mr. Interlocutor, though he dressed elegantly and perhaps even spoke more eloquently later in the century, would still be fooled and overcome by his comic foil in the old Jim Crow character-form. It was almost as though the dandy character had been cleaned up and promoted "only for the purpose of being knocked down by the more comically exaggerated [characters of plantation blacks such as] Tambo and Bones" (14). Just as the urban black was taking a stronger role in American cities, the straight-man character was rising above earlier notions of the dandy, ultimately to be demeaned. Consistently, then, the black dandy had to be ridiculed in the end so that his representation would be safely maintained by middle-class America as a mockery and as nothing to be feared.

While George-as-dandy would have the double onus of transgressing racial and class lines, it must also be noted that this would be tricky considering that the

performance of dandyism is essentially a performance of idleness: a work of art in everyday life who need never work. Therefore, while whites had set up the black dandy character to mock his pretensions of becoming an urban “man about town,” the dandy trope was able, in turn, to mock the working classes. Barbara Webb cites an 1874 playlet, *Old Zip Coon*, in which “Zip Coon, a name that usually signified a nonambiguous comic dandy, seems to be taking jabs at the white working-class audience in one surviving skit. He sips mint juleps and says to Cuff, who is looking for a job: ‘You wouldn’t degrade you’self by workin’ would you? Well, go out dere among de white trash, den’ (in Lewis 1996:270)” (15). Here, we can again see where the power of the performance of leisure served to uplift marginalized blacks nearly a century after it served to uplift Brummell.

But the black man had already been figured as resisting work, not because he was innately superior and above it, like the dandy, but because he was considered lazy. As Lott explains, “If in an age of industry men were supposed to be frugal and productive, black men quite evidently came to represent laziness and license . . . Onstage these fantasies were partly represented by a vexing and unmeaning linguistic creativity, a proliferation of huge, ungainly, and onomatopoeic words that were meant to ridicule the speaker but which also called attention to the grain of voices, the wagging of tongues, the fatness of painted lips” (122). Therefore, the performance of a black dandy who need not work might not be the best way to transgress racial stigmas. In order to transcend the working-class image, though, Walker both entertained and promoted his act through profitable business decisions. It was entertainment and a sharp business sense that figured Walker as neither belonging to the working class nor exemplifying laziness.

To this end, Williams and Walker found a stronghold on the vaudeville stage by claiming black authenticity, “billing themselves as ‘Two Real Coons’” (Forbes 58). Williams continued to wear burnt cork because he was lighter skinned and because he felt a certain transformation behind the makeup that helped him to manifest the characters before his audiences. After all, he was playing an African American to begin with, whereas he actually came from the Bahamas and was not, natively, American. Walker, on the other hand, was smaller and darker skinned, and had never worn the makeup; it was his theory that if whites wanted to see performances of blackness onstage, who better to offer these performances than blacks, who could “outdo whites in their claims of authenticity in the performance of blackness” (58): “In 1908,” Forbes explains, “George would smartly express that choice: ‘We thought that as there seemed to be a great demand for black faces on the stage, we would do all we could to get what we felt belonged to us by the law of nature.’ Such decisions, encouraged by Walker as an emerging business manager, helped Bert and George secure their singular place in entertainment” (58). Indeed, George Walker used the very thing that had oppressed blacks--skin color--to assert his superiority. In addition, Walker was making a name for himself more and more, not just as a well-dressed and well-spoken dandy, but also as the business mind of the duo and a man with very clear ideals and very noble intentions, not just for himself, but for all African Americans.

Newer vaudeville audiences, too, had been seeking a more “authentic” representation of blacks on stage, and so Walker’s decision to promote their skin color was a smart one indeed. Williams and Walker named themselves “Two Real Coons,”

Forbes tells us, as “a recognizable response to th[e] demand” for authenticity: “The two refused the degenerate stereotype, however, reshaping the caricature of white minstrels by replacing those inauthentic portrayals with their ‘authentic’ presentation. Utilizing the exact language invoked by white performers, the two carved out a space for themselves by reference to the genuine blackness evidenced by their pigmentation” (Forbes 58).

Williams still played the “country-bumpkin” and “dressed in oversized, ill-fitting clothing as the indolent, ignorant character. George, on the other hand, played the Zip Coon or Jim Dandy, the urban man-about-town character George Washington Dixon developed. He dressed in high style, and acted the part of the smooth talker” (58). Walker’s dandy, though, overcame the burnt-cork minstrel and emerged as an “authentic” black-skinned dandy who now dressed finely and, importantly, spoke correctly in high diction.

In addition, the duo made some important changes in the characters, focusing instead on the witty repartee of the straight-man/comic man act rather than including “the more odious elements of those stereotypes.” As Forbes explains: “[T]hey focused on the strength of their performance as opposites. In rapid-fire dialogues, Williams and Walker utilized the Jim Crow and Zip Coon characters but chose to underplay dialect, instead focusing on the exchange between Williams as the innocent and Walker as the wily schemer” (58). Here, the dandy is shifted in his next form not as the simple and easily overcome sycophant, but as the self-important speaker who, somewhat less foolish than before, is also somewhat evil in his coyote-like schemes. Arguably, turning the smooth-talker into a schemer--the bad guy--was a smart way to uplift the Jim Crow character,

who now would be able to take his place as one smart enough to outwit the bad guy, and, even further, emerge as the good guy.

Indeed, the duo adopted new narratives for their characters, whereby Williams' bumpkin character would wind up, much like Molière's poorly spoken but ultimately successful servants seen in such plays as *L'Etourdi* and *Le Misanthrope*, outwitting his oppressors and aggressors through plays on words. But, again, Williams and Walker changed the tropes: the characters now represented the urban or native character versus the country or immigrant character. Nevertheless, according to Forbes, Williams and Walker "resisted the typical rendering of the stereotypes" of the incompetent immigrant working against the too-confident native. Instead, Bert's bumpkin character "triumphed" over the dandy by out-talking him, by "verbal trickery," and by "engag[ing] in a rare but incisive verbal manipulation, revealing his surprising awareness of the social order, despite his recognized identity as simpleton. Thus, rather than drawing attention to stereotypes through dialect and raucous clowning, Bert and George settled their performance in the relationship between two characters whose divergent natures and manners of doing things resulted in comical situations" (61-62). Both Williams' and Walker's stage characters were surprising new reinventions of the old tropes, elevating the speech and costumes, and turning the satire around a point of simple human difference rather than around the point of opaque stereotypes.

In addition, George's everyday life dandyism helped to refine his stage dandy. While the minstrel dandy had at first been a scathing caricature of the Northern black man, Walker's vaudeville dandy shifted the joke away from the perception of black men

and instead toward a verbal interchange. Walker's onstage dandy was situated both within and against the European dandy and the minstrel dandy. While many have compared his dandy character to the minstrel dandies, Barbara Webb explains, there is an inherent problem in that the minstrel dandy is more of a construction of types rather than "a self-evident performance character" (9). The difference, explains Webb, is important, since Walker could not have performed in real life the type of dandy that Americans were accustomed to seeing onstage, and so "[t]he perception of Walker's performance lineage changes, . . . and more interpretive possibilities open up, if we consider that the minstrel dandy was not a coherent stage type, but a spectrum of performance options. A minstrel dandy could be played out in character songs such as 'Zip Coon,' 'Long Tail Blue,' and 'Dandy Jim from Caroline'; in the costuming conventions of individual companies; and in the idiosyncratic portrayal of stage types such as the interlocutor" (9). The real-life dandy, on the other hand, must have served Walker's stage character more, as he was at least a coherent and theorized performance of spiritual nobility and art. As Webb says, "[o]ne method of categorizing the varieties of minstrel dandies within their field is to situate them along a spectrum on which degrees of 'being' the dandy give way to degrees of satirizing the dandy. This approach leaves room to discuss Walker's relationship to the extreme examples of 'being' European and American dandies who were the cultural models for the minstrel stage types" (9). In short, Walker had to both "be" the dandy and create an entertaining and comical dandy persona for the stage, a two-fold task that could only be negotiated by a powerful performance in each case.

THE DANDY IMPERATIVE: TO SET HIMSELF APART

In order to “be” a dandy, George Walker had to set himself apart: he had to place himself above his societal and racial status to perform superiority. Being a popular stage performer, Walker had more art at his disposal than did dandies such as Beau Brummell, who had only his mannerisms and wit on which to rely. Walker, on the other hand, had all of that plus good looks, entrepreneurial dynamism, and musical talent. For example, some of the songs and dances that the duo Williams and Walker created became so famous, owing largely to Walker’s astute self-promotion and business acumen as well as to the masterful songs, that Walker gained a powerful ability to both set himself apart and to influence perceptions of a black dandy and of blackness in everyday life.

Walker was followed closely by the African American community and took special care to remain within their gaze. It was important to Walker to reach out to the community and in so doing to maintain an audience for the Williams and Walker company. For example, Sotiropoulos notes how, one Christmas in 1899, Williams and Walker placed a full-page ad to wish holiday greetings to their audiences and community “from ‘Two Real Coons,’ they were clearly two distinguished actors who had made it big with a comedy act. As was typical of reviews in the black press, the images included were portraits of the actors offstage and in formal wear, rather than onstage and in makeup” (99). In this way, Walker was making sure to control and promote his own visibility, “signifying on,” as Monica Miller says about Du Bois’s dandy in her article, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Dandy as Diasporic Race Man,” rather than being signified *by*, his dandyism: “In *Dark Princess*, . . . Du Bois realizes a long-standing wish for racial leadership by ‘men who were--different’ with a kind of activist-dandy, whose nattily-clad

body *signifies on*--rather than blindly accepts--masculine tropes (DP 272)" (740). In other words, blacks, according to Du Bois, had long been constructed as an absence, according to Forbes, and it would be the aim of the "New Negro," "which required two things: the creation of a 'presentable' image and the shedding of the past--the 'old Negro,' defined in opposition to the new" (94). Arguably, this is exactly what Walker and Williams were doing with the full-page Christmas greetings ad, which was to delineate their own leadership and signify the direction it would take, rather than to accept whatever direction the white world would choose to take it and whatever offstage spectacle it would choose to place them in.

Furthermore, the comedic value of invoking their satirical stage name "Two Real Coons" in a black newspaper cannot be denied: the ad calls out to the community to come and be entertained, while at the same time it makes the call to come and help them subvert the tropes that they played, clearly set apart from themselves by the images of the actors both in and out of costume. In all, the greeting was an amusing summon to enjoy and support the show. As we can see here, not only was Walker placing himself in the public eye both on and off the stage, but he was also actively making known his views in the media so that no one else controlled the perceptions of his "persona." Indeed, "Walker seemed conscious of the ways his wardrobe both sustained a form of persona commodification and offered access to self-authoring as well" (Brooks 260); as was his *modus operandi*, he took every opportunity to maintain and control that public persona.

A good example of how Walker further alienated himself from early perceptions of the black dandy is that Walker's dandy combined music and dance, comedy, and his



own brand of real-life dandyism onstage to gain acclaim. The duo adopted a dance, the Cakewalk, and made it so famous that people sometimes cite them as its creator, which they were not. The Cakewalk was a dance whose origins date back to “African tribal rituals” (Forbes 64) that was adopted by plantation slaves and to satirize the dances of the white plantation owners, for whom it was performed and to whom it was not recognizable as a caricature. The dance was named for its original purpose, which was that whoever was the best dancer won a prize, a cake, from the mistress of the house.

The dance was adopted by minstrelsy and performed by whites, who likely did not recognize, either, that they were playing as blacks who were originally playing as whites. “By the time Williams and Walker performed it, the irony was even further heightened--or deepened--as these blacks now performed a dance imitating whites who mocked blacks who satirized whites’ pretentious and fussy mannerisms” (Forbes 65). Walker performed it with his wife, Ada, who was herself a talented actress and dancer. Because of Williams’ and Walker’s performance, Forbes tells us, the Cakewalk “reached the height of popularity and fashion as evidenced by the insatiable demand of elite society. The city and the nation’s upper class eagerly sought Ada’s instruction as they desired to learn and master the cakewalk. In later years, Williams and Walker would present the dance in their musical comedy productions to great acclaim” (65). Nevertheless, Forbes asserts, the dances, songs, and characters were still moored in a racist tradition, and therefore it was impossible to ferret out the harmful caricatures from the uplifted portrayals that Williams and Walker sought to establish: “Regardless of George’s reframing of the stereotype through his own endeavor to deepen the character

and give it specificity, the lingering images of Zip Coon maintained. For every move that Bert and George made against the stereotypes that had earlier served their venture into entertainment, the constant reminder of their accommodation to those stereotypes persisted” (84). Still, the more famous the duo became and the wealthier Walker became, the more power he had to promote himself. It is his move onto this pedestal of self, particularly against such a complex confluence of social limitations, that marks Walker’s dandyism, like Brummell’s, as a very self-aware creation of a revolutionary new subjectivity.

This accomplishment is evidenced in Walker’s adaptation of “The Hottest Coon in Dixie,” a song originally written for the musical *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*, by Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar. *Clorindy* was the first all-black performance in a large New York theatre house around 1897. The show was originally written for Williams and Walker to perform in, but they were still traveling with their vaudeville show, so another famous black actor, Ernest Hogan, performed instead. While the show was a great success, it was still anchored in a racist minstrel tradition that, according to Marva Griffin Carter, embarrassed Dunbar as he sat in the “special box seat reserved for authors and their guests” on opening night (“Removing the ‘Minstrel Mask’ in the Musicals of Will Marion Cook” 208). He was mortified both that blacks were offering themselves as a mockery and that blacks in the audience were the ones laughing, and he said afterward that he would never write lyrics again in this tradition.

Later, Walker made his own version of the “The Hottest Coon in Dixie” that, according to Forbes, still “worked within the conventions of the coon song . . . It described the dapper character Walker played as he attempted to push beyond the simple meanings of the offensive term and image” (83). Not only did Walker look and act the part of the dandy, but he also made assertions in this song of what was and was not good enough for the “hottest coon,” singing “Behold the hottest coon, / Your eyes e’er lit on, / Velvet ain’t good enough, / For him to sit on; / When he goes to town, / Folks yell like sixty, / Behold the hottest coon in Dixie” (83). In these lyrics, Walker is announcing that whether you are black or white there is a standard for the dandy, and that standard is above whatever the common man accepted for himself. Furthermore, the term “coon,” once so derogatory, has been turned on its head by Williams’ and Walker’s appropriation of it in naming themselves “Two Real Coons” and in restating that claim with “The Hottest Coon in Dixie”: the term becomes, like “Yankee Doodle” had before it, a mark of pride and a subversive refusal to be limited.

Walker and Williams, too, were tired of the stereotypes in minstrelsy, and so they created the all-black company, the Williams and Walker Company (Forbes 131), with the profound and meaningful goal of changing the whole entertainment medium. Forbes tells us how Walker once pronounced, “there is no reason why we should be forced to do these old-time nigger acts. It’s all rot, this slap-stick-bandanna handkerchief-bladder in the face act, with which negro acting is associated. It ought to die out and we are trying hard to kill it” (142). In addition, he planned out how they were going to “kill it,” and what kind of theatre he envisioned creating, saying that it must be a place “where negro boys and

girls can be taught to respect themselves, their qualities and their abilities. You can't get the best out of a boy by telling him that his hair should be straight instead of kinky[,] that his nose should be classic instead of flat. Nor can you expect a colored girl to realize the best there is in her if you make her believe that a black skin cannot be beautiful" (Forbes' brackets, 143). Once they had garnered world-wide fame for their talent, Walker and Williams stepped forward as great role models for the future of African Americans. And "while Williams took the fore as comic, George took the fore as spokesman. He reassured the black community of their shared concerns, even as he managed Williams and Walker's business interests" (Forbes 97). According to Forbes, Walker "did a stellar job in his role . . . Williams and Walker became exemplary" (97).

In a fresh dandy perspective, Walker asserted that the black man had been made to work too hard, even in entertainment. Barbara Webb tells us that Walker "explicitly" rejected what he called "'hard labor' for black performers on the vaudeville stage. In 1908, Walker reminisced on the origins of the team's success, writing that 'we noticed that colored men had to be comedians and athletic comedians at that . . . so we figured: the white man gets the desired results without perspiring--why?'" (18) Instead, Webb continues, "Williams and Walker developed a style of black entertainment based, as critics often noted, on subtlety and grace rather than on athleticism. Thus, the dandyist rejection of work that formed the basis for the minstrel stereotype became, in the hands of this African American dandy, a rebellious claim to a freedom not contingent on physical subjection and social submission" (19). In this light, Walker's performance is an especially complex one, in that he asserts his dandyism, like Brummell, as a work of art

in everyday life, but now he is more concerned with his audience, since he is performing from a “specifically African American point of view.” Of course, we could also say that Brummell’s performance was for a strictly white upper-class audience, and therefore we can see that the dandy performance has now subverted, with Walker, both the race and class of the desired audience. No longer would the dandy represent a white aristocratic superiority, but a black, rising working-class triumph.

In a bold move of creative agency and autonomy, Williams and Walker put together a show produced in 1903, *In Dahomey*, that moved away from minstrelsy and explored African culture. Since *Clorindy*, Paul Laurence Dunbar was not alone in his disdain for the minstrel tradition. Black audiences, too, were becoming more concerned with “the nagging issue of representation” (Forbes 92) and the need to uplift the image of blacks. To this end, the duo decided to explore African characters in a show that would be “their biggest and brightest musical yet” (Forbes 99). Karen Sotiropoulos explains in *Staging Race* that Williams and Walker were “[f]ully engaged in contemporary issues” and always “brought a black political agenda to their stage productions, even though they worked in commercial theater” (4). Indeed, addressing political issues in for-profit theatre is still a tricky business today. But Williams and Walker, Sotiropoulos tells us, wanted to subvert the “dominant culture[‘s]” misconceptions about Africa and instead look towards “addressing African Americans’ interest in emigrating to Liberia and their pride in Ethiopia’s independence during Europe’s late-nineteenth-century scramble to colonize Africa” (4). Walker and Williams had become familiar with Dahomey when they went to the Midwinter Exposition in 1894, in San Francisco, and had to stand in for “actual

Dahomeans (from the part of Africa now known as Benin), who were late in arriving” (Forbes 30). As Sotiropoulos tells us, this was a life-changing experience for the two: “Meeting Africans at the West Coast fair shaped the careers of Bert Williams and George Walker, the San Francisco “Dahomeans.” ‘It was there, for the first time, that we were brought into close touch with native Africans,’ explained Walker, and ‘we were not long in deciding that if we ever reached the point of having a show of our own, we would delineate and feature native African characters as far as we could’” (26). Again, Williams and Walker set themselves apart by addressing contemporary issues and celebrating difference.

With *In Dahomey*, Williams and Walker set themselves apart in a notably different way than Brummell had, such that their performance, while being unique and placed above the common tropes and stage jokes, actually moved towards incorporating their community rather than, as in Brummell’s case, alienating it. Taking what they had learned from “Dahomey Village” and working with a tide of interest in the media about Dahomey, which had “established itself as a military power” and “assert[ed] itself strongly in its resistance to French conquest” (Forbes 30), Williams and Walker wrote a musical comedy that would contradict the images Americans were receiving of Dahomeans as savage cannibals and “barbaric backward peoples” (30). According to Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent*, the “crusade” for a new representation of Africa and of blackness in general had the support of some of the greatest composers, actors, and writers in the business, and was bound to reach new heights. She tells us that the company was “[c]alled by some the ‘strongest theatrical combination’ of the early

twentieth century,” and that “the Williams and Walker Company served as a base for black performers and theatre workers to imagine and execute forms of expression which flagrantly transgressed the color line” (218).

*In Dahomey* opened in 1903, and it was the first all-black company on Broadway, transgressing “the color line on Broadway” (Sotiropoulos 7). According to Brooks, the show combatted the image of the primitive, loin-clothed African with wildly extravagant and luxurious costumes and settings. The costumes worked in combination with Walker’s already flashy style to highlight the black “body as a text of artistic manipulation and as a form of cultural critique. In short, *In Dahomey* complicate[d] the trope of black cross-dressing by linking Williams and Walker’s (over)abundance of costuming . . . to George Walker’s spectacular offstage dress” (259). While Brummell’s dandy performed himself as a work of art in everyday life, Walker’s dandy performed himself both *in art* and *as art*, combining his body, music, dance, and gestures in a revolutionary remaking of dandyism.

The success of *In Dahomey* was so great that the King of England commissioned it for a private performance, an experience that not only led to *In Dahomey* going on tour and giving 250 performances in London alone, but to a new sensibility in black men, who began to see themselves as American men rather than simply black men. As Forbes tells us, the treatment of “King Edward VII, as an audience to Williams and Walker, would confirm blacks’ entitlement to a standard of treatment far superior to that which they received” (125). In other words, the pair was lauded not just as performers, but as human beings. This accomplishment not only bolstered their professional careers, but furthered Walker’s empowered and autonomous sensibility, placing him above Americans in

general as a world-renowned celebrity. In true dandy fashion, George Walker kept his emotions in check, at all times a stoic and polished performance of self. In addition, Forbes tells us, he did not kowtow to the royals nor truckle to their children: “For George, although the command performance had been an honor, he chose to speak casually of the nobility. He thereby subtly affirmed his viewpoint by using diminutive terms to refer to the children, although royalty, rather than feeling compelled to use honorific titles” (126). The similarities here between Walker and Brummell are evident: both refused to compromise themselves as dandies worthy of respect, and both continued to become what it was they performed, which was not only a work of art in everyday life, but also a new and representational form of high society. In Walker’s case, though, the stakes were higher--life and death in Jim Crow America--and he was setting himself above it all in order to set a whole people above it all, which is where he most differs from Brummell, who performed only for his own self-promotion, which had, nevertheless, a revolutionary effect.

Furthermore, Walker earned fame and glory with his remarkable talents and great entrepreneurial sense, while Brummell merely performed wealth and fame and thus gained them. The difference doesn’t diminish the power of Brummell’s dandyism, though, since it was the democracy that Brummell helped to bring about by destabilizing aristocratic privilege and exclusiveness that Walker wanted to claim as a space for blacks. Still, the difference is an important one, because Walker’s performance both on and offstage propelled his status and his wealth and secured a future that allowed him to uplift his community. For example, while Brummell had gained entrance to (and become



master of) the exclusive men's clubs of London, Walker was a trailblazer in forming his own exclusive clubs, which combined the importance of musical talent with the need for a union-like promotion of African Americans in the arts. As Forbes explains, Walker, “[a]lways a man of vision as well as the businessman of the pair, George took the fore in leveraging the team’s incredible achievements” (130). He insisted on more creative control and implemented new strategies to unify African American artists, starting the “Williams and Walker Glee Club,” which was “made up,” Forbes tells us, “of company members” (130). Walker brought his club members into the company of such esteemed artists as Booker T. Washington, for whom they performed in 1905.

Rather than alienating himself as Brummell had, Walker was committed “to racial uplift”: “George, seen as ‘somewhat of a philanthropist as well as a comedian and actor,’ was fashioning himself into a ‘large-hearted and sympathetic’ man. He offered the Glee Club to the artistic community on behalf of both himself and his partner. Through the Club, members sought ‘not merely the acquisition of money and fame, but also their [members’] development along artistic, personal, and moral lines,’ which was increasingly a refrain in George’s discussions with the black press” (Forbes’ brackets, 130-131). Indeed, Walker was a tireless promotor for the duo, always seeking out better venues and more money for their performances. Again, though, the self-promotion here elevated not just himself, but African Americans as a whole as worthy artists, businessmen, and citizens. In short, he created the space for blacks to be, if they chose, works of art as dandies and at the same time effective and industrious in society, a feat

which would have been nearly impossible for anyone, let alone for someone who had to transgress race and class limitations in order to carve out this new subjectivity.

Granted, it was almost impossible for Walker, too, as evidenced by the trouble he had in forming, in 1908, the incorporated social group he called “The Frogs.” Their mission, according to Susan Curtis in her study entitled *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way*, “was to promote ‘social intercourse between the representative members of the Negro theatrical profession and to those connected directly or indirectly with art, literature, music, scientific, and liberal professions and the patrons of the arts.’ The Frogs helped to maintain a library devoted especially to the history, folklore, music, and literature of African Americans and to keep a record of ‘all worthy achievements’ by members of the race” (44). The group first formed at George Walker’s home, and later they assigned officers (Bert Williams, according to Henry T. Sampson’s *The Ghost Walks: a Chronological History of Black in Show Business, 1865-1910*, pp.431, was in the Art Committee with Bob Cole) and wrote up documents to apply for incorporation in New York State. But, as Curtis explains, the acceptance of such an application would be hard won:

The first judge to examine the petition refused to grant the black artists the right to incorporate. “Art” and “frogs,” Judge Goff argued, did not jibe. Within days of the decision, editorials denouncing Judge Goff’s decision appeared in the *New York Tribune*, *New York World*, *New York Sun*, *Brooklyn Eagle*, and *New Haven Register*--all reminding the hapless justice of Aristophanes. Lester A. Walton of the *New York Age*, one of the group’s charter members, left it to his white fellow journalists to “question the knowledge of Justice Goff on Grecian history,” but he identified a more pointed issue. “It could be possible that it was not the combination of art and frogs that appeared so incongruous to the learned Judge as it was the combination of Negro and art.” The judge continued to refuse to approve the charter for incorporation and ordered his secretary to fire off a

heated rebuttal to Walton's accusation of racism. Indeed, it was not until August 18, 1908, when Justice Henry Bischoff heard the case on appeal, that The Frogs won recognition in the state of New York as a legitimate association for black performers. (45)

Once this right was won, Curtis tells us, The Frogs became a center for black entertainers in New York, attracting "the leading black stars in the city" and organizing a yearly event called "The frolic of the Frogs," which was "an evening of entertainment put on by members, accompanied by music, food, and dancing. Its offices became, in a way, the focal point for the black stars in New York's world of entertainment, and until the hard times of the 1930s depression, the club stood as a reminder of the race's efforts to promote excellence in entertainment" (45). Impressively, Walker not only took the lead and started his own social club rather than having to join something fashionable and fit himself to its standards, but he also made enormous strides for the uplift of all African Americans in the arts.

In addition, he carved out a space of performance that, like Brummell's chambers which drew dandy hopefuls from all over London, became the most popular site of artistic exploration for anyone seeking to grow in their metier. It was thanks to Walker that, according to Daphne Brooks, "Midtown Manhattan's Tenderloin area took root as the space where black actors, musicians, and managers began to congregate and create aesthetic as well as political coalitions. George Walker was a major organizer in this regard. In addition to his keen managerial skills, the actor was quick to establish a space, known as 'the Williams and Walker flat,' where black theatre artists congregated" (*Bodies in Dissent* 221). It is in this way that Walker's dandyism, always original, took a fresh

turn from Brummell's: it was guided by a powerful and radical philosophy from the beginning, and consciously worked to tear down margins.

#### GEORGE WALKER: THE ALWAYS-ENTERTAINING DANDY

Walker was lauded for his style, his business sense, and his public personality, but he was also very clear about his desire to entertain, admitting that, since he was a child, the stage “ha[d] always fascinated [him]” (Forbes 16). He added, “To stand before the footlights and entertain large audiences has ever been the dream of my life” (16).

Nevertheless, Walker faced the difficulty of presenting himself, in everyday life as well as onstage, pleasingly to both white audiences and blacks. White audiences wanted a “real coon,” while black audiences were expecting the suave, cultured, self-empowered New Negro. This complexity, Forbes tells us, “encapsulated the historical African American struggle for self-definition and reminded blacks that this struggle had still not been won” (158). Later, Walker was direct with the media and his fans about both his style and his intentions onstage and off:

He once commented in the *Indianapolis Freeman* that the American public “expects to see me as a flashy sort of a darky and I do not disappoint them as far as that goes” (1908:5; also in Krasner 1997: 149). Not only did Walker dress well onstage, he also carried his performance persona into the sphere of the everyday, appearing much the same on the street as he did for a show. Walker was able to afford these clothes in the first place because he was a smart businessman as well as a performer, and the cultivation of his everyday public appearance was part of his “product.” A writer for the *Indianapolis Freeman* wrote that dress “is George Walker’s stock and trade. It is part of his method of making business” (1908:5). (Webb 17)

It is nearly impossible to read the *Indianapolis Freeman* quotation without being reminded of Carlyle’s famous statement that the “dandy is a clothes-wearing man, a man

whose trade, office and existence consist in the wearing of clothes” (*Sartor Resartus*).

And this is exactly what George Walker was performing: a fashionable work of art both on the stage and off of it in everyday life. But Walker’s trade and office was moored, above all, in the pursuit of entertainment.

While always entertaining, Walker’s performance became manifest in real life as it was performed, much in the same way that Brummell produced himself as an admired high-society man. As Webb states, “Walker both garnered publicity and presented himself as a force that theatre managers and bookers had to reckon with. In the process, Walker *actually became* a wealthy black man. As one of Walker’s contemporaries described Beau Brummell, ‘He was the living example of the debated philosophical theory that Appearance is Reality’ (Jerrold 1910:10).” (17). Walker’s appearance was so astonishingly sophisticated that he would often be approached by people on the street and questioned, admiringly, about his fashionable attire, as we learn from his partner, Bert Williams, in one rare example of Williams taking the fore<sup>vii</sup> and offering some anecdotes to a reporter. The reporter, according to Sotiropoulos, “[n]ot unlike the two white men who had encountered George Walker on a streetcar and had invited him for a drink after questioning him about his flashy clothes, . . . asked Williams about his views on racism. Like Walker’s admirers, this reporter considered Williams both respectable and familiar enough to ask provocative questions” (100). Indeed, Walker was outwardly admired not just for his characters, songs, and dances, but also for his everyday presentations. It must be remembered, though, that part of the public’s curiosity lay in the fact that Walker was

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<sup>vii</sup> According to Forbes, he often preferred to stand in the background in real life and tended toward brooding, while Walker was the real-life frontman.

a black man. “For Walker,” Daphne Brooks tells us, “the dandy aesthetic seemed to operate as its own phenomenal will to power, a nightly transgression of social boundaries that had often appeared impermeable. By re-dressing the black male body within the material codes of sybaritic pleasure offstage, Walker flaunted the visual poetics of class fluidity. Yet the volatility of this kind of image alone was enough to incur a legacy of white supremacist scorn, ridicule, and sometimes violence” (*Bodies in Dissent* 260). Indeed, the issue of visibility and of making oneself a spectacle was made much more complex by the issue of race, which was already shadowed by its visibility under the watchful and suspicious eye of the white world.

To Walker, a true entertainer performed so subtly that his performance seemed to flow naturally from his being. To that end, he made an emphasis on “naturalness” that was very similar to Beau Brummell’s dandy-assertion of “insolently assert[ing]” himself, as D’Aurevilly had said, with “impertinence and grace.” According to Sotiropoulos, “Naturalness, according to Walker, meant representations that were closer to actual daily life and distinct from characteristics interpreted as ‘native’ or ‘primitive’ by white folks. Walker went on to credit his partner with being ‘the first man that I know of our race to attempt to delineate a ‘darky’ in a perfectly natural way’” (106). According to Brooks, Williams and Walker had been working on a “natural” performance of blackness since the beginning, often going to the theatres on their nights off to witness how the white actors in burnt cork were attempting to perform blackness. In a 1906 piece in *Theatre Magazine*, Walker relayed what they discovered about those performances:

“When we were not working,” Walker reports, “we frequented the playhouses just the same. In those days black-faced white comedians were

numerous and very popular. They billed themselves ‘coons.’ Bert and I watched the white ‘coons,’ and were often much amused at seeing white men with black cork on their faces trying to imitate black folk. Nothing about these white men’s actions was natural and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way.” (216)

Brooks then highlights the craft that had clearly gone into the research and performance of naturalness, and concludes that “[t]he most stunning detail of Walker’s narrative is his description of how he and Bert would ‘watc[h] the white ‘coons’” with a mixture of amusement and seeming disregard as these performers floundered in what he reads as a hopeless effort to embody the ‘natural’” (217). Indeed, it must have been amusing for someone such as Walker, who not only had mastered the art of performing dandyism and performing onstage “blackness,” but also a whole new set of class boundaries in so doing.

Walker’s real performance, arguably, was the one that he pulled off on the streets, and one for which he had to construct a character rather than subvert a caricature. And he took this role at least as seriously as those he performed onstage. He was described by theatre critics as sporting “exceedingly ‘proud clothes,’” Brookes quotes. “‘Dressed,’ as [one critic] admiringly put it, ‘in the richest teutonic style and with his large cluster of real diamonds, George Walker’ distinguished himself as the ‘colored fashion plate’ of his race’” (259). But while Brummell’s lavish style earned him favorable notoriety, “Walker’s lush formal street attire and his love for top hats, white gloves, and elegant suits offstage provoked puzzled and obsessive disdain from the white press. A shrewd businessman, Walker used ‘his own clever manipulation of the press to create an aura of stardom about himself’” (259). At the time, Brookes notes, black celebrities were so few that Walker was highly visible, but he did not allow that visibility to become a means for

dominant culture to regulate his clothes and behaviors; instead, even though his pricey clothing sometimes elicited “demand[s]” that he “provide an explanation for his dress” (259), the bemusement nevertheless rendered him even more newsworthy and kept him in the public eye. In other words, while his style and dandy-pose may have provoked the white press, it nevertheless served to excite their gaze toward him and toward his stage work, creating a buzz that would only bolster his fame, just Oscar Wilde had famously asserted the dandy maxim that the only thing worse than being talked about is *not* being talked about.

And George Walker was talked about for decades after his passing, leaving a legacy of dandyism and stage performance that others would strive to imitate. Even the attempt to imitate him, according to the *Indianapolis Freeman*, was glorious if indeed the imitator “is recognized as doing George Walker” (Webb 18, citing Lewis 1911). In addition to his style, poise, and talent, George Walker created an on and offstage dandy that served to redress the images of African Americans and to reappropriate the black body in the public and private sphere; in addition, his creation was made with the fervent point to serve and uplift all members of the race, leaving no one behind. As Brooks states, George Walker’s “dandyism was both a threat and a catalyst toward the public adulation of the black body. Walker seemed conscious of the ways his wardrobe both sustained a form of persona commodification and offered access to self-authoring as well” (260). Walker’s tightrope act served, much like Brummell’s performance in the nineteenth century, to disrupt the boundaries that dictated one’s socioeconomic and sociocultural status; in effect, Walker’s dandy refused to be limited by his class or race and effected a



performance of himself-as-art that triumphed in the face of cultural adversity. In the end, Walker redrew the possibilities for transcending and mastering the performance of subjectivity.

### Chapter Three

#### Zoot Suit Dandyism: from Cab Calloway to Pachuco/a Culture and the Zoot Suit Riots

While the previous two chapters engaged dandy performances by Beau Brummell and George Walker in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively, in this chapter I will interrogate the performance of zoot suit dandyism in 1930s-40s America and its similarities and differences to Brummell's and Walker's manners of shocking, alienating, and entertaining. Zoot suiters took the country by storm from Los Angeles to New York, wearing suits tapered tightly at the ankles and extending outward grandly in the shoulders. The fad took hold among America's young people, crossing racial, gender, class, and political boundaries, ultimately unifying a fairly new, or at least newly recognized, group: youths. With the country at war, all citizens were in uniform, whether it was the work clothes of the factory or the military uniform; youths, especially of color, were left out of those roles and created one of their own, donning spectacular dandy costumes and taking to the streets, representing the entertaining response to alienation we have seen with Brummell and Walker, and shocking the nation into a riotous panic.

The zoot suit craze, too, had its anchor in entertainment. The film, Broadway, and radio jazz legend Cab Calloway helped lead the fad, entertaining the country with what he termed the "hep," or hip, style of dress and speech, and helping to construct zoot suit dandyism for young, marginalized people of color; young people, in turn, adopted the zoot suit pose of musicians such as Calloway in the years leading up to and during WWII, when the family structure was shifting due to the need for men in war, for women

to take their places in the factories, and for minorities to move toward cities to take on factory and farm work that was now needed. Minority youths were especially displaced, as they lost not only their two-parent households but also the communities from which they moved. They were thus thrown into white America with little social or familial support. These youths, in turn, set themselves apart from mainstream America by coming together as zoot suiters and forming what appeared to white middle-class America to be “gangs,” largely because they were misunderstood youths of color, and shocking the nation into a widespread fear of child delinquency, ultimately creating a “zoot suit war” here at home. But the zoot suit phenomenon shared the same defining characteristics of Brummell’s and Walker’s dandyism: the personal aesthetic was styled after entertainers and geared towards the delight and admiration of its viewers, asserting a refusal from the margins to be characterized as a lower class; in addition, the youths, while being alienated in wartime America from their working families, displaced communities, and white, mainstream culture, set themselves apart through unifying and creating a new youth culture; finally, the shock created by this bizarrely dressed, esoterically spoken movement was so widespread and media-fueled that it incited nationwide panic and even international discord.

#### A SARTORIAL MYSTERY: THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE ZOOT SUIT

While stories have circulated about who came up with the first zoot suit, none of them have been supported by scholars. Stuart Cosgrove gives a very succinct summary of the most popular theories on the origin of the zoot suit in his article, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare”: “At the height of the Los Angeles riots of June 1943, the *New York Times*

carried a front page article which claimed without reservation that the first zoot suit had been purchased by a black bus worker, Clyde Duncan, from a tailor's shop in Gainesville, Georgia. Allegedly, Duncan had been inspired by the film *Gone with the Wind* and had set out to look like Rhett Butler” (78). Indeed, *Gone with the Wind* appears in many zoot suit origin stories, but what is being implied in this tale is the foolishness of a minority figure who tried to accomplish the style of a famous white male actor, and instead arrived at an exaggerated and somewhat clownish version of the white man’s suit. Nevertheless, as one might expect in Jim Crow America, “This explanation clearly found favour [sic] throughout the USA” (78). Examining the original source, entitled “Zoot Suit Originated in Georgia; Bus Boy Ordered First One in ’40” (June 11, 1943), we learn that a “fashion editor for Men’s Apparel Reporter,” J.V.D. Carlyle, had received photos from the busboy and published them in February of 1940; according to the *New York Times* reporter, Meyer Berger, the fashion editor, “made much of the point that the zoot suit originated among financially poor people,” but he doesn’t explain this contention nor the speaker’s insistence upon it. In addition, Berger asserts that “[h]ep-cat terms for the zoot suit are actually meaningless. A ‘reat pleat’ is merely an exaggerated pleat. It had its origin in assonance which colors all hep-cat slang. ‘Zoot suit’ is another example.” In short, according to this reporter, the style “simply display[ed] the hep-cat’s tendency toward exaggeration in all things.” Arguably, these words resonate with the middle-class leanings towards mocking minorities and the working class, ascribing the same qualities of exaggeration and meaningless rhetoric to the zoot suiters as had been attributed to the urban black dandy in the minstrel form of Zip Coon and Jim Dandy. Whether the raced

zoot suiter's origins were ascribed to his imitation of Clark Gable or to his "meaningless" exaggeration in everything, the sentiment remains the same: a foolish and babbling impersonator of the higher classes, incapable of their style and grace.

Still, Cosgrove continues, "[t]he national press forwarded countless other" reports trying to locate the origins of the zoot suit: "Some reports claimed that the zoot suit was an invention of Harlem nigh' life, others suggested it grew out of jazz culture and the exhibitionist stage costumes of the band leaders, and some argued that the zoot suit was derived from military uniforms and imported from Britain." The first three explanations above are a tapestry of the same elements: Harlem "nigh'" life (or "night" life), jazz culture, and "exhibitionist" stage costumes of band leaders are all peas in the pod of black entertainment in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, Cosgrove argues that "[t]he alternative and independent press, particularly *Crisis* and *Negro Quarterly*, more convincingly argued that the zoot suit was the product of a particular social context. They emphasized the importance of Mexican-American youths, or pachucos, in the emergence of zoot suit style and, in tentative ways, tried to relate their appearance on the streets to the concept of pachuquismo" (78). Pachucos were young Mexican Americans who wore zoot suits and spent a lot of time together in public to present themselves and their style; they were often construed as hoodlums and gangsters, not owing to any criminal activity, but because they were young and of color and were out in public. Nevertheless, the presence of pachucos was not recognized in America until the late 30s, and so the "particular social context[s]" that created the zoot suit was more likely surrounding Cab Calloway and other jazz musicians who donned spectacular and even

famous zoot suits, tapered at the ankles and broadened at the shoulders, at the Cotton Club and the Savoy as early as 1927.

#### THE HI-DI-HO MAN: CAB CALLOWAY'S ZOOT SUIT DANDYISM

Cab Calloway's stage costume carried on the elegance and dandified extravagance with which George Walker had entertained just two decades earlier. George Walker's stage costume and Cab Calloway's earliest costumes show striking similarities: gloves, tails, and ascots ruled the stage. While we can't be certain who wore the first zoot suit, scholars agree that the term "zoot" was part of jazz musicians' vernacular, and meant, according to Shane and Graham White in their book *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, "something done or worn in an exaggerated style" (254). Stuart Cosgrove specifies, though, that "zoot" pertained more to something "worn or performed," adding, "and since many young blacks wore suits with outrageously padded shoulders and trousers that were fiercely tapered at the ankles, the term zoot suit passed into everyday usage. In the sub-cultural world of Harlem's nightlife, the language of rhyming slang succinctly described the zoot suit's unmistakable style: 'a killer-diller coat with a drapeshape, real-pleats and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell'" (77). Indeed, the suit comprised these exaggerated angles at the shoulders and ankles, and was often topped with a "pancake" hat, which extended the brim outward by several inches and into which, in characteristic dandy style, a long feather--in this case, exceedingly long, in "exaggerated" form--was placed.

But the early incarnations of the zoot suit were more subtle, if one studies the evolution of the suits worn by Cab Calloway, the great band leader of the 30s and 40s,

otherwise known as the “Hi-Di-Ho man” from his stellar composition, *Minnie the Moocher*. Originally from Baltimore, Calloway made it to New York with his band, The Alabamians, who got their biggest break opening at The Savoy in 1929, “barely a month after the crash” (*Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* 71), and had to prove themselves as hip in the North rather than just an “old-time,” standard swing band. Calloway explains, “As I made the rounds of New York jazz clubs and variety shows, I began to realize that my little band was in for trouble. We had come out of the Midwest playing old-time, unhip, novelty tunes with a little weak dixieland jazz. Compared to the jumping jazz they were playing in New York, we were strictly from the sticks” (71). But his band members couldn’t see the gap that Cab saw, which was “a disastrous mistake” in his early career. Smartly, Calloway and the band dressed as the finest Northern dandies, knowing, as George Walker had known before them, that gloves and tails would prevent people from considering them as less distinguished and out of place in the big city. It was here that Calloway began dressing the part of the urban dandy, and his stage suit would begin to grow. As Bruce M. Tyler explains in “Black Jive and White Repression,” “Harlem had a long tradition of converting many black country folk into dandies. It resulted in racial and status tensions and major confrontations during World War II as blacks became more urban and adopted jazz and jive. In 1927, it was common for rural blacks to make radical conversions from country to urban culture” (38). Therefore, the difference between a black dandy and a Southerner was easily remarked and swiftly reacted to, adding a new Northern/Southern classification to and further skewing the racial and economic stratifications. But Cab Calloway made sure that there would be no question, at least

sartorially, that these were urban dandies: “Man, we looked like a million dollars. The guys were eleven pieces of pure gold, dressed sharp as a tack--black Prince Albert coats and straight trousers, ascots, and black Oxford shoes spit-shined so you could see your reflection in them. Then I jumped out cool as an ice cube in a white tuxedo with a white baton” (72). Prince Albert coats were popular in England during the early nineteenth century and were characterized by the jacket’s mid-thigh length and straight-across hem. Only in Calloway’s time did the shoulders become padded and later termed the “American shoulder.” The Prince Albert coat was the unquestioned uniform of the dandy by the turn of the twentieth century, and Calloway helped to promote and maintain it as such.

The Alabamians certainly had the style right, but unfortunately once they started in playing “that dipsy-doodle music from the Midwest[,] . . . the damned dance floor cleaned out” (72-3). When he was asked to join the house band at the Cotton Club, called the Missourians, because Duke Ellington was too busy on the road to stay with it, Calloway accepted: “The Missourians were a hell of a step up from the Alabamians. I never compared what I was doing with the great bands of the day, Duke or Jimmie Lunceford or Fletcher Henderson, but I knew that I was getting better all the time. I was on the way up and nothing was going to stop me” (78). Nothing did stop him, and he became one of the most famous musicians in the country. When the Missourians were asked to come back to the Cotton Club in 1930, Calloway had finally made it big: “We went back to the Cotton Club for the second time in the fall of 1930, and again we were a smash. Suddenly I was one of those celebrities that I had been watching from a distance.



Everywhere I went people knew Cab Calloway, and Jesus, what money I was making-- more than I'd ever expected in my life" (108). In fact, even towns that Cab hadn't visited were getting to know his Cotton Club shows, because the recordings were being broadcast late at night across the country, making him a youth-culture sensation and leading the way to popularizing zoot suit style: "[T]he national radio networks were building up a national following for our band. College kids throughout the Midwest, Southwest, and Far West used to stay up into the wee hours of the morning to listen to the Cotton Club show. We had become pop heroes around the country without knowing it" (142). The shows took place sometime between 1933-35, and now that the Missourians had found their New York sound, it was becoming the soundtrack of youths, who were increasingly adopting the sounds, costume, and pose of jazz culture.

#### CAB CALLOWAY'S JAZZ VERNACULAR AS A UNIFYING AND ALIENATING AMERICAN PHENOMENON

But Calloway led the way in more ways than just costume; he also trail blazed the dissemination of jazz-musician speech, which had spliced entirely new words and meter into everyday American vernacular. Along with the music, the lingo used by jazz musicians was beginning to spread through the radios across the nation, and so Calloway took the reins and decided to write and publish *Cab Calloway's Hepster's Dictionary* in 1938. "Hepster" was the new term for anyone who followed the times and dressed and spoke to suit them; today we use the term "hipster" in a similar fashion, suggesting someone who performs the gestures, dress, and pose of only the most modern trends. Calloway made sure to keep the trends modern and to disseminate them regularly, thus

following up his *Hepster's Dictionary* with a bigger edition called *Professor Cab Calloway's Swingformation Bureau*. In addition, “[f]or a full year in 1942, Calloway did a vaudeville radio show on Sunday called ‘Quizzicale,’ which was broadcast from the road on NBC’s Blue Network. It was a parody of big band leader Kay Kayser’s ‘College of Musical Knowledge,’” Tyler explains. In the show, “Calloway and several band members answered questions about music and musicians. They ‘shucked and jived’ by speaking the ‘slick’ and highly developed Harlesemese subculture street and entertainment language that was actually a dialect in its own right. It became the language of the jazz world. . . . Calloway called the language, ‘Negro slang, the super-hip language of the times’” (31). Interestingly, the “shucking and jiving” Calloway and his band members performed was a style of lying and story-telling that sought to outwit an interlocutor. While its origins are unknown (most say it originated with slavery), the term could anachronistically but appropriately be applied to the repartee engaged in by Walker and Williams. Arguably, the terms may owe some of their “hipness” to the Williams’ and Walker Company’s transformations of earlier Zip Coon and Jim Crow stage exchanges, which became, under the skillful art of Williams and Walker, modern and clever as opposed to oafish or embarrassing. Like Williams’ and Walker’s stage repartee, too, in Calloway’s time the language was not just a “street” dialect that served to unify its speakers and alienate others, but it was also a form of entertainment, as it had been in the minstrel days.

Calloway’s goal was to entertain rather than alienate, which is why he continued to popularize the hipster language and to promote its usage. Cab “taught people how to apply the words in the [Hepster’s] dictionary,” he explained, and felt like he was giving

something to his people, Americans, in so doing. He also added that it was very “gratifying” to have contributed “to the tongue of a great people,” and felt honored to see so many of his linguistic and cultural offerings absorbed by his nation and his people: “Jive had passed into everyday language. English had absorbed many quaint expressions that had their origin in Harlem. It was not uncommon to hear people in all walks of life say that a band sounded corny (from the brassy sound of the coronet) or that they were in the groove” (114). While the lingo was entertaining and hip to the youth, the older generations felt alienated and even fearful of it. The spread of the dialect and the older generation’s reactions to it are evident in a May 9, 1943, article in the *New York Times* entitled “Jive, as a Hep-Cat Hears it.” The article was written, the editor notes, by a “17-year-old office boy” at the behest of his boss who, along with much of the older generation, felt isolated and even threatened by the rise of jive in young people’s language. According to the editor, the boy “felt so strongly about the doleful reflections of his seniors that he . . . set down his own report” to help clarify and promote the influence of jazz and jazz culture. To this end, the youth compels his audience, or his “Jacks and Jills,” to understand why “[a]ll New York has gone trumpet mad” for jazz musician Harry James. The editorial is metered out rhythmically and the prose is so consistently “jive” language that he was called upon to write a glossary to put with it as an addendum, “for the benefit of the older generation and for the Editor [sic].” Indeed, the contrast between the editor’s (though humorous) disdain and the office boy’s appreciation for jazz and jazz culture is salient in the article.

But jive was not only an entertaining language that had taken the nation's youth by storm, it was also a language of equality for blacks, who used jazz vernacular to subvert diminutive referential terms such as "boy" and to replace them with uplifting and empowering ones, addressing each other conscientiously as "man." In this way, Robin D. G. Kelley explains in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, "the language and culture of the 'hipster' represented a privileging of ethnic identity and masculinity, and a rejection of subservience." In addition, Kelley argues that the "fast-paced, improvisational language . . . sharply contrasted with the passive stereotype of the stuttering, tongue-tied Sambo" (66), and conflated "gendered and racial meanings" so that they "were inseparable; opposition to racist oppression was mediated through masculinity" (66). It was a language of racial uplift, and it was metered with an upbeat tempo in the fashion of jazz. To Cab Calloway, the language and the music represented joy and uplift for everyone; he argued that everything "hep" transmitted a carefree feeling that the entire country was in need of during the Depression, saying, "Scat singing, all that hi-de-hoing, those zoot suits and wide-brimmed hats, they were all a way of communicating joy to people. They were a way of telling people, 'Listen, I know it's rough out there, but drop that heavy load for a while. Laugh and enjoy yourself. Life is too short for anything else'" (Tyler 32). Nevertheless, America wasn't ready to let a black man lead the way, and so as early as the 30s Cab Calloway became a widely caricatured public figure in racist cartoons.

As was *de riguer* in that day, Cab's new music, language, and the message he sought to convey were misunderstood and feared by the older generation. Rather than

joining the scat revolution and singing away fears caused by the Depression and the looming war, most Americans started to demonize jazz musicians and their followers as un-American and unpatriotic, since they appeared never to do manual labor or to hold middle-class jobs. This wasn't true, and even if it had been, the purpose of the entertainer is to entertain; in addition, the dandy has, since Beau Brummell, maintained the gap between art and labor. As Tyler explains, though, "[w]ell-dressed black dandies and 'sportin' life women outraged many whites, who associated such behavior and dress codes as an arrogant public rejection of menial labor roles" (39). Hence, racist and unpatriotic images of Calloway abounded: in one frame from a 1944 Warner Bros. cartoon entitled "Swooner Crooner," we see Calloway as a chicken, suggesting an anti-war, fumbling and fearful animal disposition. Cartoons by the 1940s had made much material of blacks in their racist stereotypes, arguably replacing minstrelsy's legacy of lampooning African Americans.

But the film industry had carried on the minstrel tradition, too, and the new face of black minstrelsy was none other than Cab Calloway himself, playing the urban black dandy (in George Walker style) to a (white) Al Jolsen's blackface Sambo-like character. The new blackface minstrelsy in film sought a return to old stereotypes of blacks as slaves and once again demonized the black dandy. The hit song "I Love to Singa" was performed three times in the film, *The Singing Kid*, in which Al Jolsen donned burnt cork and crooned songs about missing "mammy" and the old South, while Calloway appears cool and polished in his stage costumes, leading the bands and singing as the straight-man to Jolsen's blackface bumpkin. But Calloway's cool dandyism is not maintained as a

respectable or passive performance in the film: when Jolsen in burnt cork enters the theatre in which Calloway is leading the band, Jolsen begins a song about wanting to sing and live the highlife, still in blackface, and Calloway's character becomes a diabolical black dandy whose ways will surely lead to Hell. Halfway through the long ballad, Calloway's outfit changes from the traditional Walkeresque white tux to a seemingly more sinister zoot suit version, further lengthening the bottom of the jacket and puffing out the shoulders, as Cab himself sings the dangers of the hi-de-ho highlife. *The Singing Kid* premiered across the country in 1936, accompanied by a *Merrie Melodies* cartoon in which Jolsen's character was now a baby owl, named "Owl Jolsen," who has been thrown out and spit upon by his highbrow father, until his version of "I Love to Singa" wins a talent contest and, hence, earns the family money. Many of these racist cartoons have since been banned, but Cab Calloway remained an oft-caricatured figure in the late 30s and early 40s.

Outside of the United States, Cab's career had also taken off. The band was invited, like Walker and Williams, to perform for the British royalty in 1935, a time when "only a few big bands had gone to Europe. Duke had been a great success in 1933, but the only other Negro big band that had gone to Europe as far as I know was Sam Wooding's," Cab recalls. "This was a command performance for the Prince of Wales, who was one of my biggest fans. He had visited the Cotton Club when he was in New York and came over afterwards and told me that he had heard our records and loved them" (135-7). Calloway says that the British had the dances down to a T, and were surprisingly hip to the music and the steps. Indeed, Cab Calloway was the most

celebrated black dandy of the 30s and 40s, and not all rumors were negative, he jokes: “During the forties they used to say that I had forty suits and forty pairs of shoes. It ain’t true. I had fifty suits and fifty pairs of shoes and fifty pairs of pearl-gray gloves too” (248). Arguably, Calloway’s dandyism had all the shock of Brummell’s and the entertainment of Walker’s, but it didn’t alienate society nor seek to dissociate from it. Nevertheless, the hep-cat style and language self select, such that only a hip young community was open to dressing and speaking in this new way. Mexican-American youths were particularly open to a style that would set them apart from a society that neglected them, and took the reins of zoot suit dandyism, performing on the streets what had once only been performed on New York stages and across radio transmissions. It was the young Mexican Americans’ zoot suit dandyism, reinterpreted in a new context in the 1940s, that would dissociate from society, push back against the threat of erasure, and lead the country into a state of shock and panic to such a degree that a war began on the home front.

#### A WAR ABROAD, A WAR AT HOME: THE UNPATRIOTIC ZOOT SUITER

As World War II loomed in the early 40s, the tides were working against the spectacular style of zoot suits and the perceived arrogance of zoot suiters themselves, such that by March, 1942, the outfit was banned under the pretext that all clothes using wool needed to be rationed. The zoot suit and any clothing that used more yardage than necessary became un-American and untenable if we were to win the war abroad.

Catherine S. Ramirez explains in *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*: “Order L-85 ‘attempted to control yardage’ and introduced what was called the ‘silhouette,’ a uniform dress design

to be worn by all American women, while Order L-224 put restrictions on men's clothing and effectively banned the zoot suit. Nonetheless, in their contraband stockings, long coats, broad-brimmed hats, and ballooning trousers, [the zoot suiters] continued to sport a flamboyant look that flew in the face of the WPB's requirements and the exigencies of the workplace" (61). In March of that same year, though, an article in the *New York Times* entitled "WPB Bars 'Zoot Suit' Made in any Material" announces the ban of the zoot suit itself, regardless of the material used to make it. The article states that Frank Walton, "deputy chief of WPB's textile, clothing and leather branch," argued that all cloths were "essential" and could be used toward the manufacturing of military uniforms and necessities, saying that "[i]n a war we cannot afford the luxury of wasteful garments." This idea, along with the outrageous and flamboyant cut, is probably what made Cab's *Stormy Weather* zoot suit so famous, since it cost a fortune and was unlikely to have been made before the ban, as the Whites explain in *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*: "[T]he most famous zoot suit was one of those worn by Cab Calloway, the leader of the band in which Gillespie played. The suit in question, which Calloway claimed to have had made up just before the rationing orders were introduced, cost what was then a phenomenal \$185" (255). Though we can probably assume that the suit was in fact made before the ban and even the film recording finished before March of 1942 (*Stormy Weather* was released in 1943), one can imagine that the mere sight of Calloway in a spectacular zoot suit after the ban would have been uproarious in its apparent defiance. Even "hep" language was now being attacked in the press, as a *Los Angeles Times* article on September 12, 1943, declares its joy at the zoot



suit ban with a mocking “hepster” headline: “Zoot Suits Out; War Board ‘Hep.’” In this article, Walton is quoted as calling the suit a “so-called garment,” and assures himself and the press that “all people, young and old, will co-operate to eliminate the waste of cloth.” But it wasn’t just the waste of cloth that would create such a mass resistance to the zoot suiters, it was also the alienating and self-promoting dandyism that the zooters represented.

The media attacks on zoot suiters was not gendered, but had taken on all minority youths. In a September 3, 1942, article of the *New York Times* entitled “‘Zoot Suit’ models Rouse Ire of WPB,” the female version of the suit, here called the “juke jacket,” is targeted as un-American. In the article, the outfits are explained as “strange garments affected by the jitterbugs” that had to be described in detail to the “puzzled reporters” who “never had seen any of these” garments. In addition, an explanation for the outfit is offered in the article by a “WPB messenger,” who tells the readers that the outfit serves as a “time-saving idea as the usual cat wears a coat-hanger inside the jacket, unnoticeably, so that when he gets home from digging the platters and smoking some tea he does not have to stumble around in the dark to knock himself out hanging up his favorite wrap-around.” The outfit, for both females and males, is described as offering space for the wearers to dance freely, drink, smoke drugs, and look good while doing it. But these articles planted fear in their readers of a rising delinquent youth culture that was jitter-bugging out of control.

In addition to being subject to a ban for wasting cloth, the suit was gaining a reputation as anti-war because of zoot suiters who avoided the draft and those who were

drafted but altered the style of their uniforms. Indeed, a movement had formed in black communities where the men were refusing to join the war, feeling instead that they were needed here at home because a race war was being waged by whites against blacks, as Eric Lott explains in “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style”:

A zoot-suited participant later declared the zootish disposition to be at odds with the desire to fight a white America’s war when conditions at home were the problem: “By the time you read this I will be fighting for Uncle Sam, the bitches, and I do not like it worth a damn. I’m not a spy or a saboteur, but I don’t like goin’ over there fightin’ for the white man--so be it.” Psychologist Kenneth Clark termed the new militancy “The Zoot Effect in Personality,” but his early attempt to read a subculture proved only that liberal psychologists were as defensive as the new style was dangerous. To stiff-arm the alleged provocateurs--zoots were also in open defiance of the War Production Board’s rationing of clothing, a visible sign of anti-patriotism--the L.A. City Council even debated declaring zoot suits illegal. (598)

The zoot suit became, therefore, the uniform of both the hipsters in Harlem and abroad, as well as the style for those who refused to don a military uniform. While stories proliferated about zoot suiters dodging the draft, so did stories about zooters refusing to take it off once in the military. According to Lott’s interviews, many zoot suiters just didn’t realize that they weren’t allowed to wear the style when they had their military uniforms tailored, which spawned the opinion that zooters saw themselves as above wearing the military uniform and were therefore disagreeable and ostentatiously unpatriotic.

Furthermore, newspapers across the country began running political cartoons representing zoot suiters as draft dodgers, Uncle Toms, and even animals in wide-brimmed hats, often accompanied by slogans such as “clothes do not make the man.” For those who were pro-war, the zoot suiters were abominable and ruining perceptions about

black Americans who were “patriotic” and supported the war. By January of 1943, Tyler explains, a cartoon in the *Pittsburgh Courier* “implied that zooters were bringing opprobrium upon blacks as a race and endangering the political and military [pro-war] campaign. The war crisis exacerbated race relations as well as the internal political, regional, social, linguistic and cultural differences among blacks” (42). But the zoot suit revolution had dawned: even Malcolm X, Tyler tells us, donned one of his most outlandish zoot suits when he was drafted, and spoke to the recruiting officers in the most confusing Harlesemese jive he could muster, a performance which kept him, his friend Shorty, and countless other zooters out of the armed forces. As Tyler explains, “Harlem dandies, zoot suiters and hustlers, and their counter-parts across the country, reenacted this scenario often enough to make a lasting impression and gain an unsavory reputation as being anti-war in a time of fervent patriotism” (35). This behavior, as well as the isolated pedestal of zoot suit dandyism and the evident refusal to be subservient, resulted in a very bad image for the zoot suiters, an image that soon became much worse in the press.

#### ZOOT SUIT DANDYISM SPURS NATIONWIDE PANIC IN THE PRESS

Even in the North, where racism wasn’t usually quite as rampant as in the South, the attitude toward zoot suiters “displaying their bodies in wartime America was no longer something to be dismissed as a joke, a raised eyebrow, a shake of the head, or an expression of annoyance; it was something they cared deeply about. In the summer of 1943, wearing a zoot suit was an illegal and, more importantly, a dramatically unpatriotic act” (White 255). It didn’t matter that zoot suiters were also joining the war effort and

accepting their draft certificates; the illegality of the outfit alone was a contentious point. Further, calumny in the press against zoot suiters was only helping politicize the outfit as a stance against fascism at home, and a claim to dignity in the face of a nation that had mistreated minorities for four hundred years, no matter what they were wearing.

The mistreatment of all nonwhites--zoot suiters, musicians, military, or otherwise--was creating an angry youth culture, which was increasingly unifying and taking to the streets, mobilizing against their vilification in the media. The war was largely responsible for isolating the youths from their families, who were now displaced from home and either at war or at work, leaving open a space for youth culture to emerge. Luis Alvarez, in his thorough study of zoot suiters in *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II*, explains how the war alienated the youth from the family structure:

The major social change brought about by the United States' involvement in the war was the recruitment to the armed forces of over four million civilians and the entrance of over five million women into the war-time labour force. The rapid increase in military recruitment and the radical shift in the composition of the labour force led in turn to changes in family life, particularly the erosion of parental control and authority. The large scale and prolonged separation of millions of families precipitated an unprecedented increase in the rate of juvenile crime and delinquency. By the summer of 1943 it was commonplace for teenagers to be left to their own initiatives whilst their parents were either on active military service or involved in war work. The increase in night work compounded the problem. With their parents or guardians working unsocial hours, it became possible for many more young people to gather late into the night at major urban centers or simply on the street corners. (79)

With the dissolution of strong family structures, it was often in the streets that the youth sought out social delineations, which was not an easy place for a person of color at that time to form their subjectivity. Racism wasn't directed solely against blacks; it had

always been extended to Mexicans and other nonwhites. It was now rampant and heavily entrenched in Los Angeles against Mexican Americans, as Alvarez explains: “From late 1941 to late 1943, the relationship between LAPD and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles was hostile and explosive. Harassment of Mexican American youth was evident on city streets; in theaters, restaurants, and nightclubs; and even on playgrounds” (26). These youths had been separated from their families by the war and were eagerly seeking out a powerful performance with which to stem the tide of harassment. Coming together in groups was one way for them to cope with these absences.

By April 20, 1943, the media on the West Coast, too, had adopted the sensational topic of zoot suiters, to such an extent that the first page of the *Los Angeles Times* declares that a “war” is on against youths. The title of the article reads, “Delinquency War Mapped: Educators Told They [Must] Learn Jive Language in Battle on Crime,” and the article declares that a “racial and cultural scramble in Los Angeles aggravated by a wartime economy formed the knottiest problem considered yesterday by 600 delegates to the state-wide elementary school principals and district superintendents convention at the Biltmore.” The text following the second subheading, “Zoot Suit Symbol,” explains that “Mexican juvenile delinquency” is “greater than the general average” and, in short, that Mexican parents fall short in “understand[ing] the objectives of American education.” The recommendation in the article is that educators begin making visits to Mexican homes in order to instill in the parents these objectives. It is also suggested that educators learn “the jive language” in order to understand and communicate with zoot suited Mexicans and the “[i]nflux of Negroes . . . who with their parents are arriving in large

numbers in Southern California, mostly from the South.” As we saw in New York with the influx of freed slaves during George Walker’s time, the qualification of Southern helped to demean and stereotype blacks.

But the more the media, the police, and society pushed the youth of color into these stereotypes, the more they helped create the criminal, as the youths picked up performances of power and began to wear the zoot suit as a refusal to be treated the way their parents had been treated. As Alvarez explains, “juvenile delinquency came to be viewed in racial terms and as purported crime waves among young nonwhites came to be viewed as threats to wartime unity, the activities of African American and Mexican American youth were increasingly monitored by their own communities, city police, and powerful politicians” (41). Again, the families were largely at a loss to support the youth or to rally around them, probably also fearing calumny themselves in such a racist, hyperpatriotic historical moment. This left the characterization and condemnation of the youth to the media: “As the racialization of juvenile delinquency intensified, many Americans sought to shape the discourse and perceptions about African American and Mexican American youth in the United States, but only by speaking for them rather than listening to them” (Alvarez 41). Furthermore, the idea of “juvenile delinquency” became a damaging sensational media campaign that sent a wave of panic across the country and in turn resulted in widespread mistrust and mistreatment of youths, especially those of color.

At the same time, young people turned to popular music and musicians for guidance, and therefore to the zoot suit style, which was now perpetuated more by other

youths than by adults. Therefore, White asserts, “[a]t the most basic level, the zoot suit was about youth culture: the suit’s emergence, and the associated riots, marked the beginnings of the modern invention of ‘juvenile delinquency’ and of teen culture, both of which would flourish in the 1950s” (259). Teenagers, now left to their own devices, congregated in the streets and demonstrated the laid-back disposition of the dandy, represented by the zoot suit style, listening to music, “‘hanging out,’ and valuing leisure, to produce a cultural world and a set of social relationships that helped them make sense of wartime society” (Alvarez 80). In this way, the dandyism of zoot suit culture alienated itself from mainstream America, which had already marginalized the youths. Also, in an uprising similar to that of dandies before them, the zooters pushed back, creating new, revolutionary margins, and a new class: youth culture.

The new class was stylish, young, and leisurely. They were very modern and trendy, and interesting to look at and to listen to. While the performance was a surprising dissent in the face of a country at war, and while it was constructed in an alienation that it then protected, it was still an entertaining and artistic dandyism. In Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, the main character comes upon a group of zoot-suited youths in the streets, “young and elegantly dressed.” Ellison describes the young men, according to Cosgrove, “not simply [as] grotesque dandies parading the city’s secret underworld,” but as “‘the stewards of something uncomfortable,’ a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference” (17). It wasn’t just in novels or on symbolic street corners in major cities that the zoot suiters were being seen, since so many Americans had to take public transportation which, as Kelley explains, became a new

kind of theatre in which the classes mixed and interacted, and which highlighted the differences in dress: “The commoditized nature of public transportation, the growing number of black and white working-class passengers, and the highly charged political atmosphere caused by the war turned buses and streetcars into theaters in the sense of small war zones as well. They provided microcosms of race, class, and gender conflict that raged in other social spaces throughout the city . . . ” (62). Essentially, the soldiers, workers, and zoot suiters were all thrown into the same mass transit systems, making it impossible to avoid each other, and highlighting their differences as well as the different struggles for equality and security.

Indeed, every American seemed to be in one uniform or another, each of which represented their stance on the war or at least their participation in it, such that some wore the military uniform, some wore the zoot suit, and still others, showing a willingness to work safely in the factories in fitted, rather than loose, clothing, wore the straight-line clothing that had been mandated by the government. The zoot was not only exaggerated in its appearance, but contrasted sharply with these now-codified accoutrements of society. For this reason, too, the zoot suiters became a new class:

Despite racial, regional, and gender differences among zoot suiters, their struggles for dignity linked them as a class, where class functioned not just as a predefined group of people identified by similar relations of subordination or exploitation to capital but also as a group based on members’ *insubordination* to domination. The class nature of zoot culture was, in part, a relationship of struggle shared by youth who experienced antagonism between their own social practices or creativity (work in the broadest sense) and dehumanization at the hands of local authorities, through home-front rhetoric, or in the wartime political economy. Zoot struggles for dignity may be understood as the convergence of different *dignities* that simultaneously recognized and transcended ethnic or race-based identity. Rather than erase the differences among them or ignore



their engagement with the home front more generally, zoot suiters regenerated style, fashion, and wartime popular culture to make their lives more livable, meaningful, and dignified in the face of poverty, patriarchy, and violence, as well as discrimination in war industries. (Alvarez 79)

And while the zoot suit wasn't limited to nonwhites or to youths, it became increasingly associated with them, and with the idea of delinquency, especially in Los Angeles, where "the clothing style of nonwhite youth was used to identify them as delinquent and their masculinity as deviant" (64). Articles abounded in papers from coast to coast, warning of "zoot suit gangsters" from 1942-1943, drumming up public panic with headlines such as "Zoot Gangsters Rob More Victims" (*Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1942), "Ten Zoot Suit Boys Trip Gayly Out of County Jail in Error" (*Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1942), "New Zoot Gangster Attacks Result in Arrest of 100" (*Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1942). The last headline actually refers merely to "unlawful assemblage" as "gangster attacks."

Increasingly, the suit became associated not just with delinquency but with Mexican Americans, especially in Los Angeles, even though "the zoot crossed racial, ethnic, and regional boundaries. . . . [T]he zoot was also popular among Filipino, Japanese, and Euro-American young men and women all over the country" (Alvarez 84). Therefore, the media and the common public began taking up zoot suiters in conversation and codifying them as dangerous gang members and, even worse, as dirty, naughty, and deviant, as Alvarez explains:

Popular discourse characterizing nonwhite youth as animal-like, hypersexual, and criminal marked their bodies as "other" and, when coming from city officials and the press, served to help construct for the public a social meaning of African and Mexican American youth. In these ways, the physical and discursive bodies of nonwhite youth were the sites

upon which their dignity was denied. Just as police violence and race discrimination denied them equal participation in home-front democracy, their depiction in such a negative light marked them as alien. Once the United States was fully engaged in the war, nonwhite youth became a much talked-about public enemy on the home front, second only perhaps to Japanese Americans. (43)

It wasn't long, then, before the media "sensationalized nonwhite youth crime waves with condemning headlines such as 'Mexican Goon Squads,' 'Zoot Suit Gangs,' [and] 'Pachuco Killers,'" Alvarez tells us. "Exposés on the illegal activities of zoot suiters were published regularly under titles that explicitly linked Mexican American and African American youth to violence and crime" (53). But the zoot suiters were largely *not* involved in gangs, and some civil rights groups began to take notice. In a December 8, 1942, *Los Angeles Times* article entitled "Side of Youths in 'Gangs' Told," we learn that a "Mexican Aid Group" "complained to the Sheriff about the manner in which deputies reportedly 'rousted' Mexican youths in investigating juvenile gang disorders." It goes on to say that the committee argued that the "fault" was not with the youth but with "propaganda against them" and then argued that the Mexicans were being treated as "an 'inferior' class." In addition, the Los Angeles Sheriff was accused of adding to the mudslinging himself by writing a "pulp magazine article about the local juvenile delinquency situation" under the pen-name "Clem Peoples," but the accusation was denied. By January, 1943, headlines announced fears that zoot suiters were being aided by "Axis agents"—Nazis—to help break up Allied homelands.

In reality, zoot suiters were often considered by gang members to be too young and too pretty to be dangerous. The zoot suit was considered to be more of a childish fad than the stylings of a dangerous gang member (Alvarez). Logically, this makes more

sense than the idea that they were either dangerous or animal-like, since it was evident that the zoot suiters went out of their way to style their hair, polish their shoes, and spend good money on their clothing, such that they were unlikely to be willing to muss it up fighting. Instead, the zoot suit was a statement of a refusal to be subservient, an assertion that they, too, had confidence and masculinity, and that they took pride in it. But minority pride was a thing to fear, and a refusal to capitulate was a dangerous thing coming from the margins:

These young men used their physical bodies to exhibit confidence, security, and dignity--attributes markedly different from popular images of zoot suiters as morally and culturally bankrupt. The carefully manicured style and purposeful demeanor of those who valued their zoot style countered allegations that they were savage and dirty, animal-like carriers of disease. In fact, their attention to style and looks put forth an identity that was the opposite--sharp, clean, and extremely well maintained. If anything, zoot suiters prioritized impeccable grooming and expensive dress and paid attention to every last detail of their appearance. (Alvarez 95)

Indeed, such care was anything but animalistic or dangerous. It was politicized merely by the fact that it asserted the opposite qualities, and therefore, for the zoot suiters as least, “[t]he mobilization and stylization of their bodies was part of zoot suiters’ experimentation with what amounted to a politics of the possible in which zoot suiters explore the possibilities and limits of wartime race and gender identities” (Alvarez 81). It is precisely in this way that the zoot suiters were revolutionary: they created a class that subverted the status quo, unified youths and nonwhites across cultural and class differences, and insolently asserted their dignity by performing the polished aesthetic of the dandy. In addition, zoot suiters’ music and language continued to be perpetuated through radio, thus bridging the gap from New York to Los Angeles, so that the style and

language of the performance was kept in tact across the country. Indeed, the radio helped to create, unify, and maintain zoot suit culture.

#### ALL THAT JAZZ: ZOOT SUIT DANDYISM IN PERFORMANCE

One of the ways in which zoot suiters asserted this appropriation of dignity was to display themselves in public spaces, silently broadcasting their affinity for leisure by inhabiting the gaze of a public who was largely in transit between home, military, and work duties. The zoot suiters adoption of leisure as a means of refusal moved into a Brummellian pursuit of pleasure to such an extent that any physical exertion other than dancing was considered work. To this end, jive language adopted a terminology for work to make it sound as pejorative as possible. For example, according to Kelley, the zoot suiters used the expression “slave” instead of saying a “job,” because it “not only encapsulated their understanding of wage work as exploitative, alienating, and unfulfilling, but it implies a refusal to all *work* to become the primary signifier of identity. . . . Implied, too, is a rejection of a work ethic, a privileging of leisure, and an emphasis on ‘fast money’ with little or no physical labor” (174). The connection being made by the zoot suiters between the word “slave” and “job” is that the only work available to them put them in a position of working for and being owned by a consumerist, racist society to which they did not belong or refused to belong. Like George Walker and Beau Brummell, the zoot suiters elevated themselves above the sweating masses by presenting a cool, leisurely role in society and, as Cosgrove says, this display was “a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience” (78); at the same time, this performance worked against a classification of

laziness, since the zoot suiters took such care in their appearance and in their presentation, such that it wasn't the suit alone that made the zoot suiter, but began to include highly stylized hairdos and body art. Alvarez elucidates how the dazzling exhibitions of self "helped nonwhite youth regain control over their own bodies" and "craft[ed] a public presence that demanded attention" (89). But such care had its roots in entertainment, amazing people with the height of the "conk" in New York which brought the hair, often dyed a flashy color, forward off of the forehead into a kind of cone shape, while the hairstyle for Mexican Americans on the West coast comprised a sort of pompadour with a duck-tail shape in the back of the hair, falling into a point along the neck.

Importantly, the Mexican American zoot suiters were gaining recognition in the early 1940s and were called "pachucos," though no one knows from where this term derives nor how it came to be applied to the young Mexican American males. Catherine S. Ramirez explains in *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*, "For several contemporary observers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, pachucas and pachucos constituted a 'lost generation.' They had been rejected by the United States but also appeared to have renounced all things Mexican, including their own parents. Consequently, they were pitied or ridiculed as cultural orphans, as *pochas* and *pochos* (Americanized Mexicans)," (3). As Ramirez notes, it was Octavio Paz, in his nobel-winning novel, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, who termed the pachucos as a lost generation: "The *pachucos* are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in Southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior as well as by the clothing they affect. They

are instinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them more than once. But the *pachucos* do not attempt to vindicate their race or the nationality of their forebears. Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination--it is an ambiguous one, as we will see--not to be like those around them” (13-14). While Paz is unforgiving toward the pachuco, considering him neither American nor Mexican and suggesting that this is what could happen to Mexicans because of their inherently aloof air, the pachuco built his own legacy in Southern California. His was a new breed of gang, and one that was a threat to the status quo by its insistence on style and superiority rather than one that threatened with violence. In addition, the pachuco/a participation in zoot suit culture was an integral part of the zoot suit legacy: first, the pachuco/a demonstrates the power of “possibility” that the performance allowed all races, ages, and geographical groups; and secondly, the pachuco/a demonstrated the power of performance to be appropriated and adapted to work against a new, specific set of cultural limitations.

In the face of being considered neither American nor Mexican, the pachucos appropriated ambiguity and highlighted it, preferring to conspicuously throw that classification back at society with a revolutionary twist, essentially asserting that if they were neither here nor there, they would prefer to look good and enjoy the leisure that this bias had given them. As Maurice Mazón explains in his text, *The Zoot Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*, “Zoot suiters were nonsensical because among other things they took pride in their ambiguity. . . . They seemed to be simply marking time while the rest of the country intensified the war effort. If there was a commitment, it

was to nothing more enduring than sporting the zoot suit way of life, with the emphasis on exhibiting themselves and indulging in their favourite [sic] forms of entertainment” (9). Furthermore, the zoot suiters were no longer a group limited to men refusing emasculation: pachuco culture had its counterpart, the pachuca, who extended the limits of the zoot’s power by adding the dimension of gender and the refusal to be subservient as a female, which flew in the face not just of society, but also in the face of oppression by all males, zoot suiters or otherwise.

At the same time, the pachucas were under scrutiny by female Mexican Americans, who perceived the pose as one that threatened the family structure; therefore, the pachucas came to be perceived as disloyal and immoral, as Ramirez found in her interviews with women from that cultural era: “In these interviews, I detected the mixed emotions and responses that *la pachuca* stirred: many of the women with whom I spoke regarded her with a combination of fear, shame, condemnation, admiration, and respect. I believe some actively distanced themselves from *la pachuca* not only because she symbolized violence, disloyalty, and sexual promiscuity but because she also represented a threat to the heteropatriarchal family and thus was a social outcast” (*The Woman in the Zoot Suit* 53). Despite this viewpoint, the Mexican community generally didn’t perceive the pachuco/as as gang members, even though the media was quick to peg them as such. Instead, their peers and families understood that it was a matter of self-expression and “a look, period” (Ramirez quoting an interviewee, 48). And indeed it was: the pachucas made zoot suit style their own by combining exaggerated male and female clothing, adding exaggerated makeup and using an accessory called a “rat,” which went under the

hair, on top of the head, and allowed for a high, bouffant-like pompadour. The self-containment and autonomy of this new female self-styling, which was “common among young women from working-class barrios” (Ramirez 89) demonstrated a refusal to be subservient females, and “highlight[ed] how they differed from the rest of society rather than how they conformed” (89).

Another distinction was being made within the Mexican community between not just male and female pachuco/a or gang member and zoot suiter, but also between working-class and middle-class youth. The female pachucas, according to Alvarez, were “[s]treetwise women zoot suiters [who] further challenged long-standing familial and communal patriarchies . . . By challenging notions of feminine beauty, sexuality, and race that prescribed how they should behave, they discarded the submissive roles that parents, middle-class activists, and even their zoot boyfriends expected them to play” (*The Power of the Zoot* 108). Significantly, Ramirez notes that while the zoot suit was a sign of “affluence” in the 40s, especially for those who had grown up during the Depression and thought it superfluous back then to spend a lot of money on clothes, the pachucas did not imitate the style of the middle classes, but rather created their own, working-class version: “In doing so, they created a distinct style in which spectacle trumped verisimilitude” (*The Woman in the Zoot Suit* 59). Nevertheless, these accessories and additions cost money, and so the pachuca was still flaunting her prioritization of style over moderation in a post-Depression era.

As was the case for blacks in New York, the suit remained an emblem of urbanization, such that those who wore it were making the point that they were no longer



farmhand Mexican Americans but part of a new, metropolitan group who had the potential for earned income now that the war was on:

Via their expensive clothing, they demonstrated that Mexican Americans could and would climb the socioeconomic ladder. In fact, the Second World War saw increasing urbanization and proletarianization in the United States, especially among African Americans and Mexican Americans. To some working-class youths, especially recent transplants from rural areas to urban centers . . . , the zoot suit functioned as a status symbol, a “method of advertisement” in Veblen’s words, because its wearers were from the city, rather than *del rancho* (from the ranch). (Ramirez 61)

But this show was only effective in the eyes of the pachuco/a’s peers, since, to the older generations, the outfit remained an offensive statement of secession from the mores of their day. Furthermore, the upper-classes had the same disdain for the dandified costume that the monarchs had had in Beau Brummell’s time and the whites in George Walker’s: it announced that the pachuco/as would not “stay in their place” (61), and that the choice being made was an affront to class, racial, gender, and familial structures. It was impossible for a chicana to attain an admirable status in the racist and patriarchal white, middle-class world, and so these shows of self-care were often calumniated by society as representing “the antithesis of the practical and self-sacrificing mother: the whore” (68), and, in short, “tacky and cheap . . . morally suspect and sexually available” (71). Nevertheless, the pachucas and pachucos swarmed the public spaces, streets, clubs, theatres, and public transportation, and “made themselves visible in their *buenas garras* (“cool threats,” “glad rags”)” (61).

## THE INCIDENT AT SLEEPY LAGOON

It was two such girls, teenage pachucas, who found the body of José Díaz, an incident that would fuel the fires of anti-zoot suiters, inflame the racism already rampant from coast to coast, and set the stage for the strangest riots in American history: the Zoot Suit Riots. One August night in 1942, the murdered “body of José Díaz was found on a south-central city road. The proximity of the mortally wounded Díaz to a ranch where several Mexican-American adolescents had scuffled on the preceding night led to the mass arrest of suspected gang members. . . . [U]p to 600 were rounded up and questioned on suspicion of having murdered Díaz. The alleged crime had occurred near a swimming hole dubbed Sleepy Lagoon by Mexican-American youngsters who were prevented from using the segregated public pools” (Mazón 20). Even though there was no proof of the youngsters’ involvement in Díaz’ death, “seventeen Mexican-American youths were convicted of and imprisoned for murder” (21). The prosecution “clearly accentuated the criminality and marginality of Mexican youth” (21) by not letting them sit with their lawyers, get haircuts, or wear clean sets of clothes to the trial, so that they looked bizarre, foreign, animalistic, and dangerous. An October 28, 1942, *Los Angeles Times* article makes mention of a “delegation’s complaint” that the District Attorney should “protest against assertedly unfair prosecution tactics,” but neither the delegation is specified nor the unfair tactics. As Mazón sees it, these tactics were symbolic “stripping ceremonies in which the young pachuco/as were deprived of their identity, prestige, and self-reliance. The very status conferred by the zoot suit was transformed into a liability. The prosecution was uncompromising in its effort to heighten the primitive, archaic, and alien

characteristics evoked by the defendants. The tactic of exhibiting them was not far removed from carnival freak shows and the display of deformities, aberrations, and the paraphernalia of criminals” (28). Indeed, another article in the same paper dated August 11, 1942, before the trial had officially begun, informs us that “nearly 300 youthful gang suspects will be paraded before robbery, burglary, assault and purse-snatching victims” in the “largest ‘showup’ in the history of the department.” It was an easy and sensationalizing route for the lawmakers to take since Mexican-American youths had been the unwarranted cause of mass hysteria already and since the pachuco/as occupied a marginal space that was difficult to interpret, understand, or penetrate. Therefore, they became an easy target for any authority who needed a scapegoat.

The prosecution argued that the Mexican-American youths had crashed a party the night before and gotten into fisticuffs with some of the guests there; even though there was no proof that José Díaz had even attended that party, the lawyers pursued the idea that he had been involved that night and was eventually murdered by the whole “gang” of pachuca/os. Furthermore, because the youngsters had not been invited to the party, they were accused of first-degree murder, if indeed the court could allow party-crashing as a pre-meditated “conspiracy” to commit murder, which was outlandish as a rationalization. Nevertheless, “[a] court of law did, and on 12 January 1943 convictions of second-degree murder were handed down on nine of the defendants, first-degree murder on three, with five being convicted on lesser charges” (21). Pachucas made up part of the group that was accused and convicted, and their punishment was harsher than most:

Descriptions of the Sleepy Lagoon incident as a homosocial affair involving “homeboys” exclusively are inaccurate and eclipse the participation of girls and women. Court records show that they participated in the brawls at Sleepy Lagoon and Williams Ranch. . . . Ultimately, ten [girls] ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-one years were held as witnesses in the case. Several were forced to testify in court against their neighbors, friends, and boyfriends who found themselves defendants in *People v. Zammora*, and at least five were then sentenced to the Ventura School for Girls, a California Youth Authority correctional facility “infamous at the time for its draconian disciplinary measures.” (Ramirez 29-31)

Arguably, the girls were sent away in a hastier manner than the boys, considering the thoroughly entrenched sexism across cultures, generations, and cultures. Especially in a stringently patriarchal community, these young girls must have incurred a particularly shameful reaction to this outlandish accusation and prosecution.

As a whole, the group was defended by a team of human rights activists, that same unnamed delegation mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times* who complained of unfair trial tactics: namely, “the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. The committee was an outgrowth of the Citizen’s Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American youth” (Mazón 24). The groups yielded support from national rights and advocacy groups and were eventually able to secure the release of the youths in 1944 as well as the dismissal of the charges, according to Mazón. According to Ramírez, however, the girls who had been sent away to delinquency homes were not released, because the parents or family members felt that their involvement in the slanderous events had earned them expulsion from their families and communities. Though the impact was harsher for the girls in question, the adverse effect on views of zoot suiters had taken hold nationwide long before the charges were dismissed. While zoot suiters had been demonized in the press

for at least a year, “[t]he Sleepy Lagoon trial provided a substitute hate object for a home front where the real enemy was too distant and beginning to retreat” (Mazón 26). Indeed, while racism had already had a stronghold in the United States since its inception, the reins of nationhood had been particularly tightened with the advent of the war. Now that families were losing sons to the battlefield, mothers to the factories, and youths to the streets, common people were looking for an enemy within to help unify them in an otherwise dysfunctional nation-state.

#### THE ZOOT SUIT RIOTS

The young men who were drafted into the military were looking for an enemy at home, too, and a reason against which to unify that they could better understand. With the much-publicized malignancy of the zoot suiters in the national press, it was not a long search. As Mazón understands it, both the zoot suiters and the soldiers were youths, and both had felt an isolation from their communities, and so “[t]ension between servicemen and zoot suiters was understandably aggravated as much by their dissimilarities as their similarities. Geographic proximity made it impossible for one to avoid the other. The acting-out proclivities of adolescents, whether servicemen or zoot suiters, dictated much of the behavior between the two groups” (63). And since both groups were indeed so young, they were competitive. When put in such terms, it becomes clear why the servicemen took to the streets on June 3, 1943, to take out their frustrations on zoot suiters: not only were the zoot suiters already an affront to patriotic America in their self-aggrandizing attire and aloof, proud, and leisure-loving attitudes, but they had things that the G.I.’s desperately wanted--style, cars, music, clubs, and girls. And this, compounded

with a news headline the day before declaring that two married women were raped in downtown Los Angeles by a gang of zoot suiters, is what lent the final push to the frustrated attacks of servicemen on zoot suiters. For over a week in Southern California, between June 3rd and 13th, 1943, “the military lost control of several thousand servicemen” (Mazón 73), and the country seemed to burst at the seams, as thousands of civilians joined in the attacks against the youths.

Effectively, the “riots” were not so much riots as they were an attack, by the servicemen and civilians, on the zoot suiters. Just as the young, flamboyant groups of Mexican Americans had been called “gangs” owing to the threat of their insistence on making a street presence, the attacks by servicemen were termed “riots” to heighten fear of the zoot suiters; arguably, “riot” also suggests that the zoot suiters were equally responsible for the attacks, because they posed a threat in their display of superiority. The attacks were particularly instigated by the media who reported stories of “pachucos who preyed upon white women” (Ramirez 37), making women “sexual pawns in a conflict between white servicemen and Mexican American men” (36):

In the weeks and months prior to the riots, servicemen complained to their superiors that pachucos had harassed their girlfriends and female family members. Then, on June 2, 1943, one day before the riots broke, Los Angeles newspapers reported that a gang of pachucos abducted two young married women in downtown and raped them in a “zoot suit orgy” in nearby Elysian Park. This story was followed by reports that zoot-clad Mexican American men had “insulted,” “molested,” “attacked,” or “raped” white women--in particular, sailors’ wives and girlfriends--and thereby instigated the riots. (36)

With the media panic about the wayward anti-Americanness of zoot suiters, which was funneling more and more (apochryphal) stories of white women being attacked by zoot suiters, the servicemen took it upon themselves to rid the country of this menace.

Fortunately, though, the attacking rioters went about their vengeance in a more symbolic fashion and not in a violent one, making the Zoot Suit Riots an anomaly and “a remarkable event in that they defy simple classification” (Mazón 1), since they neither cost any lives nor even incurred much property damage: “They were not about zoot suiters rioting, and they were not, in any conventional sense of the word, ‘riots.’ No one was killed. No one sustained massive injuries. Property damage was slight. No major or minor judicial decisions stemmed from the riots. . . . The ritual, in the Zoot Suit Riots, was likewise more important than the reality” (Mazón 1). Civilians, as Mazón notes, joined the attacks too, so that at the riots’ height there were an incredible 5,000 people gathered in downtown Los Angeles seeking out zoot suiters (76). But the modus operandi of the rioters was unified and largely nonviolent: the goal was to “depants” the young Mexican Americans, humiliate them, and shave their heads or at least cut the ducktails from the back of their hairdos, such that “[t]he zoot suiters, attacked by servicemen and civilians in June 1943, were symbolically annihilated, castrated, transformed, and otherwise rendered the subjects of effigial rites” (1). Nevertheless, the humiliation and fear suffered by the zoot suiters at the hands of servicemen and civilians was continuously blamed on the youths’ “strangeness.”

Rather than appeasing mainstream America’s fear of this youth group and desire to humiliate them, the riots only caused more hysteria and media-frenzied xenophobia.

One June 10, 1943, article in the *Los Angeles Times* declares that the “Wearers of Strange Garb [are] Kids Bent on Devilment”; another, a “special to *The New York Times*” on June 19, asserts that “not antipathy to the zoot suits but a plot of the enemy to foment racial disunity in the United States was the real cause of the recent riots in Los Angeles,” and that this “warrant[s] the President’s personal attention.” The riots became an international issue, too, with a “request from Mexico” to the State Department to make sure that none of the attacked zoot suiters were Mexican citizens (*The New York Times*, June 17, 1943); a June 26 *New York Times* article reveals that “400 Young Mexicans Protest Against the United States: Students Menace Americans Over Zoot Suit Clashes.”

While Beau Brummell’s dandyism had surprised and delighted and while Walker’s dandyism shocked and subverted, the zoot suiters’ dandyism sparked international discord, and the media fueled the war against the daring performers, at one point printing a list of how to properly take down a zoot suiter: “‘Grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them. Trim the ‘Argentine ducktail’ that goes with the screwy costume’” (cited in Mazón 76). But as hard as the media tried to incite the mobs, seemingly little damage was done, such that a disappointed *Los Angeles Times* declared their confusion in print: “‘Despite huge numbers of participants in the rioting, injuries to the youths wearing the pancake hats and ankle-tight trousers were confined to black eyes, bloody noses and bruises’” (79). The whole process flipped legal and military parameters upside-down, because servicemen were actually deserting their posts and defying military orders and then, once free in the streets, they pretended to be military brigades. Furthermore, if a soldier had time off, he used it to riot under the guise



of furthering a military cause, rather than just enjoying the leisure he had earned. Arguably, the ability to turn the tables so easily shows just how political the zoot suit was: the performance could be done by anyone, but it would destabilize the whole societal structure. Even in such stressful conditions and media-frenzied patriotism, the performance resulted in no deaths, little damage, and essentially nothing more than a statement that proved the efficaciousness of the zoot suiters' performance. Nonetheless, the power of the zoot suit performance is further demonstrated by its ability to incite civilians and G.I.'s to mass demonstrations and protests that seem fueled by a sense of unfairness that they, too, are codified, limited by classification, and subservient. In other words, the performance of the zoot suiters was so revolutionary in its time that it incited even the privileged races and classes to envy the assertive and stylish pose, much like the reaction of London to Beau Brummell's assertion of self and of the media to George Walker's dandyism. All three dandyisms sprung from a desire to ascend imposed cultural limitations gracefully, through art and performance, and all three forever changed those limits for future generations.

## Conclusion

### In Search of the New Dandy

My objective in this research was to find a usable definition for dandyism, the very thing that its own biographer, Barbey, argues is “as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define.” Since it has been difficult for novelists and literary theorists to define dandyism, I looked to performance theory and to real-life performances of dandyism, even though some of those real-life performances are only documented in literature, as is the case for Beau Brummell. Nevertheless, between both literary productions of dandyism and historical research by such writers as Ellen Moers, Ian Kelly, and Barbara Webb, I was able to locate those aspects of the dandy’s performance that were the most remarked upon and, later, highlighted in the philosophies of dandies such as Baudelaire.

First, I looked at performance as that behavior of inheriting and re-enacting earlier performances, or “twice behaved” behavior, which transpires when societies experience structural shifts, as Joseph Roach has shown in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Performance takes place and is passed on in the liminal space, or that space in the margins that is neither here nor there, and which often results from social and political ruptures. This holds true for Beau Brummell, George Walker, and the zoot suiters’ cultural moments: late eighteenth-century England was shifting as the aristocracy fell, late nineteenth-century America shifted with the rise of a newly freed black population, and the mid-twentieth century saw great changes in the United States with the Second World War and the influx of migrant workers to the cities.

Still following Joseph Roach, who argues that these societal gaps are often taken up and surrogated by the most unlikely, or most marginalized, social players, I found that all of my subjects were indeed performing against oppression and even erasure in their societies, whether the oppression was set upon their class, race, or, in the case of the zoot suiters, age, family hierarchy, and ethnicity.

The trajectory of my study from Beau Brummell to George Walker and later to the zoot suiters followed naturally from common qualifications of, for example, George Walker having been called the “next Beau Brummell” and the zoot suiters’ comportment termed as “zoot suit dandyism”: my goal was to find out why they fell within and reigned under the “dandy” title that could not be defined. What I found was that each performance had in common a refusal to be marginalized that manifested as a shocking assertion of self, an alienation of that culture by putting themselves on a pedestal of self, and a fascination from their cultures that equaled entertainment in making audiences out of their oppressors.

Dandyism split after Beau Brummell from the earlier fop, “butterfly” aesthetic to the intellectual, Bohemian aesthetic outlined in Baudelaire’s “The Dandy” (“The Painter of Modern Life”). This shift was a natural one if we consider that French dandyism was picked up from Barbey’s biography of Brummell, which emphasized Brummell’s scorn for the prosaic, his pursuit of pleasure, and his myth-like originality. As Moers sees it, with Baudelaire “French dandyism achieved intellectual maturity, forgetting its origins as a horse-ridden, anglo-maniac fad of the ‘thirties. Barbey had proved that there could be a distinction between aristocratic dandies and literary dandies, and his distinction went into

the making of the poet Charles Baudelaire” (270). Just as Barbey predicted, Brummell’s pedigree died with the Regency, and Bohemian Paris gave rise to a new dandy, articulated most succinctly by Baudelaire, who argues that dandyism arises when social and political systems falter: “In the confusion of such periods, some few men who are out of their sphere, disgusted and unoccupied, but are all rich in natural force, may conceive the project of founding a new kind of aristocracy” (qtd. in Laver, 68). For this reason, the dandy is always a fresh, new construction, and one that can look forward bravely and emerge from the cocoon of the past in perfect elegance. To Baudelaire, the dandy is the cutting-edge of modernity, and beauty is found in the modern, as he explains in “The Painter of Modern Life”: “[H]owever much we may like general beauty, which is expressed by classical poets and artists, we are no less wrong to neglect particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance, and the description of manners” (391). In other words, beauty changes with each era, such that the flamboyant elegance of Brummell’s day would, later in Baudelaire’s time, no longer appear beautiful. As Ian Kelly sees it, “Baudelaire was the first writer to recognize the prescience of the dandy: holding the dying culture and a new one in congruence, not just enjoying the liminal but defining it” (8). Beauty, it might be argued, is that which stands out against its present moment.

This is not to say that what is past is no longer beautiful, but that it is recognized as such in its context and in its cultural moment. Baudelaire asserts, “The past is interesting, not only because of the beauty that the artists for whom it was the present were able to extract from it, but also as past, for its historical value. The same applies to the present. The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due, not only

to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present” (391). Baudelaire’s dandyism thus diverged into a quieter display of everyday elegance rather than a pompous demonstration of fashionable superiority, as Moers explains: “In the simplest sense Baudelaire’s definition of modernity implies nothing more than modern dress, and his plea for the modern in art is merely a demand that painters forget classic draperies and portray men and women of today as they are and as they dress. The costume of every period is in its way beautiful, says Baudelaire, even our poor modern clothes” (279). Throughout a century of various European dandy adaptations, it was not just the clothes that distilled the spin of power between the mask and the performer, it was every known aspect of the European man’s subjectivity that was brought into the performance of a beautified self: his masculinity, his health, and his emotional stability (and especially that ever-present boredom and despair which were simply referred to as “spleen” by Baudelaire) all became manifest components of the dandy’s costume and of the dandy himself. In his translation into French culture, the dandy became not just a work of art, but an artist.

For French poets and novelists such as Baudelaire, the dandy’s performance was seen as the creative work of a superlative artist and sensitive spirit, a triumphantly disciplined and self-designed original—“not, that is, the need to be original (with the naiveté of a romantic or the extravagance of a Bohemian) but the need *to make of oneself something original*—as the artist creates an original work out of his own being” (Moers 283). Indeed, Baudelaire writes that dandyism is, “above all, the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions” (“The

Painter of Modern Life” 420). In other words, in each instance the dandy has had to negotiate the performance to work within and against his cultural moment. With George Walker, the aesthetic adopted Brummell’s insistence on self-promotion in a new way, through sagacious professional action rather than mere wit and borrowing from people; with the zoot suiters, self-promotion was achieved through a street presence and an insistence on being seen by a society that tried to erase them. In each case, these dandies were staging a refusal to be marginalized and were asserting their place in a society that sought to limit them, and they did so artistically.

I have argued that the dandy, while creating an original, plays with and extends the social conventions of which Baudelaire writes. This play is central to dandyism as an act that is, as Baudelaire argues, “the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself” (420). Indeed, I have highlighted this tendency as one of three central tenets of the performance: to shock. To be surprising, the dandy has to push society’s limits, which makes the act of dandyism always a political one. For this reason, Baudelaire continues, dandies “all stem from the same origin, all share the same characteristic of opposition and revolt; all are representatives of what is best in human pride, of that need, which is too rare in the modern generation, to combat and destroy triviality” (421). The word choice “triviality” is particularly interesting and demonstrates Baudelaire’s own dandyism, because it suggests that oppression and marginalization, those things against which dandies are in revolt, are merely thought of as trifles and have little effect on the proud, stoic dandy. Moers explains, “Like so many men of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire organized the profound with the trivial by

means of a construct that was both ideal and pose. . . . No detail of Baudelaire's existence was too trivial to be scrutinized in the light of principle; no principle too profound to be expressed in habit and gesture. In this sense, for him as for his numerous followers among the 'aesthetes,' life and art were one" (274). The combination of life and art is a strong aspect of the dandyism of George Walker and the zoot suiters, who both had to assert that their lives, their existence in the liminal and in the margins of culture, were nevertheless works of art. While some of the sybaritic aspects of pleasure and melancholy in Baudelaire's dandyism passed away with the decadent age in which he lived, George Walker and the zoot suiters found new responses to their modern age. The self-reliant, creative beauty described by Baudelaire translates later into Walker's and the zoot suiters' dandyism as a posture and an attitude of defiance in a new vulgar age.

Because the societies over which the dandy lords his superiority are always suffering large structural ruptures, in Brummell's time the aristocracy was falling to democratic rule, Walker's America was struggling to define class and race amid the rise of the freed African American population, and the zoot suiters' country had displaced the traditional family structure in the face of world war, the dandy had to be alienated and above these shifts. Therefore, central to the performance is a circular self-reliance that, while placing oneself in the public eye, does not show any reliance on public approval; instead, the dandy publicly approves of himself. As Rhonda Garelick explains in *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin De Siècle*, this relationship of self-spectatorship is insulated: "He exists in a self-created space *ailleurs* where his only creative product is himself, transformed into a nonreproducible and precious object. The

dandy watches the stylized performance of this other self as a detached spectator. More precisely, the dandy is the incarnation of this spectator/performer relationship in one individual” (84). In this sense, he is both a “man of the crowd,” as Baudelaire saw him, and above the crowd.

Lacking from this explanation, though, is the idea that it is the outside world that threatens the dandy and that launches him into himself, and therefore he depends on that world for there to be something to rise above. As Garelick states, “In a world of universal equivalence, he is exchangeable with no one, remaining enclosed in a hermetic, autoseductive circle of narcissism . . . ”(5). In this way, the dandy seeks recognition but refuses it to anyone else, and indeed depends upon the recognition of the other for his own performance, without ever appearing to do so. Dandyism, in other words, performs a self intertwined with a fictional creation and thus demonstrates that there is no interior, and that the artificial self is more aesthetically pleasing. Dandies are, above all, social creatures and social constructions. While their goal is to rise above the masses, to step out of time and out of the possibility for their own mechanical reproduction, they depend entirely on society for their existence. Outside of society, they are nothing.

The dandy performance of self is improvisational and in the moment, which keeps it new, but it must not appear as such. Rather, it must come through as naturally as possible. It is a performance that is meant to be seamless in its construction so that there is no gap between what is believed to be the true self of the dandy and the outside, performed self or character. Garelick calls him a “solipsistic social icon. Both the early social dandyism of England and the later, more philosophical French incarnations of the



movement announced and glorified a self-created, carefully controlled man whose goal was to create an effect, bring about an event, or provoke a reaction in others through the suppression of the ‘natural’” (3). Just as George Walker argued that the performance of blackness onstage had to be perfectly natural, so does the performance of dandyism, which subverts artifice and nature and makes them the same thing. Another example is Barbey’s Brummell character, who was based on a real-life man. Barbey’s *Dandyism* performs the same textual inversion performed by the dandies: not only were they inverting fact and fiction by performing a self that was completely fabricated, but with Barbey’s re-creation of Brummell, biography and history were interwoven with fiction to create a more highly performed text as well as a more creatively portrayed dandy.

In this way, Barbey’s text helped inaugurate the mixing together of biographical and fictional selves so that the later, purely fictional dandies, such as Huysmans’ *des Esseintes* from *A Rebours* and Bulwer’s *Pelham*, gain an almost historical validity in the lineage of dandies. As Garelick sees it, “just as Brummell needs to vanish under his dense and careful persona, so, in a sense, does Barbey’s text yearn to escape the web of its own dense and encyclopedic citations. Barbey insists throughout that his subject defies writing, and hence defies both wordiness and referentiality. The text’s clear struggle, then, between description and nearly wordless effect replays Brummell’s social struggle to pose elaborately while appearing nearly bodiless” (26). In other words, Brummell was already a blend of reality and fiction when he was a living man, performing himself for himself and against society, but in Barbey’s text, the historical figure was further embedded with fiction, and in this instance he performs biography and history for the

spectator-readership of Barbey's society. For Barbey, the text seeks the same elevation above judgment as the dandy does, and the author is his own reader just as the dandy is his own spectator.

Furthermore, the dandies' performance always exceeds itself, causing a national and sometimes (as in the case of the zoot suiters) international effect and then passing, sparkingly, out of existence; later, it is adopted and reinterpreted by future marginalized subjects in new and surprising ways. For this reason, the dandy performance is often hard to locate in its present time, or else it would be more easily reproducible, which a dandy can never be. Rather, it is located after the myth has been made and the dandy as a work of art has passed, evanescently, out of view. Neither Beau Brummell, George Walker, or the zoot suiters were understood as dandies until they had exited the cultural stage, at which point their myths lived on and their performances were studied. Nevertheless, the different ways in which each of these dandies negotiated the performance of shock, alienation, and entertainment, coalesce to offer future theorists of dandyism some basic tenets of the performance.

Perhaps these three performative aspects help us to see when something is not dandyism, too. First, to characterize one (or especially oneself) as a dandy directly puts one into a limited space that the performance of dandyism must always exceed, and there is nothing surprising about such a self-determined qualification; rather, it is utterly banal. In addition, there is nothing surprising about a wealthy Parisian living elegantly--that is not dandyism; there is little elegance in trying to draw attention to oneself through

clothing--this does not a dandy make; nor does plain vanity, particularly when it is not working against oppression or marginalization, appear beautiful--we are not entertained.

To this end, today's television, film, and music celebrities are not, in my definition, dandies, as Garelick argues, because they do not stand in revolt and are not, generally, marginalized. They are often reproduced, whereas any performance that is reproducible and commodified cannot be termed dandyism because consumerist society and reproducibility are precisely what the dandy stands against and rises above. While George Walker was a vaudeville star, he was careful to always maintain control over his image and to make all the decisions concerning his public persona. In this way, no one was able to take ownership of it, to reproduce it, or to mass-market and thus degrade it.

If the dandy trajectories outlined in this dissertation might be realigned with the values of society today, I would suggest looking for dandies in those cultures that are suffering great epistemic cultural shifts, such as in the Middle East or in nations in Africa. Here at home, I would look no further than the streets, where homeless people stand as testaments to the failure of capitalism and that which its ruptures produce. I have seen a couple of fashionably dressed homeless men in San Diego who I am more inclined to call a dandy than the privileged pseudo-dandies writing fashion blogs in London. The first dresses in a blue suit and poses seemingly very intentionally against walls, looking much like Picasso's "The Old Guitarist"; the second has arranged his tattered rags into marvelous twisted knots composing an outfit much like those of Bedouin gypsies. Following Baudelaire who, according to Théophile Gautier, "likes to follow the pale, shriveled, contorted man, convulsed by passions, and actual modern ennui, through the

sinuositities of that great madrepora of Paris, to surprise him in his difficulties, agonies, miseries, prostrations, and excitements, his nervousness and despair” (*Baudelaire* 24-25), we might find today’s dandy, too, in the street. Without aestheticizing homelessness, the point I am making is that these men, if intentionally making of themselves works of art and imposing that art on prominent city centers, are the makings of modern dandies. We will never know what legend they may construct in our lifetime, or if they fulfill the imperatives set forth here to entertain, to alienate, and to rise above the rabble in a marvelous performance of self. And yet, these men stand in revolt against a culture that has marginalized them, they resist insult, they appear to live idly, and they are vain in their presentation. Thus far, they are a work of art, they are calm, they despair, and they show us what has come of society’s wholesale buyout by capitalism. Perhaps they are the setting sun.

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