MOTHER CAMP: FEMALE IMPERSONATORS IN AMERICA

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Preface to the Phoenix Edition

Scrutinizing one's past work is like meeting a former lover: evocative, disconcerting, perhaps saddening. This book was written in the late sixties, and our affair is over. I had no desire to revise it for this second edition, not only because it belongs to my past, but also because it strikes me still as an accurate analysis of its subject: drag queens as gay male culture "heroes" in the mid-sixties. Nor do I think that the contradictions that gave rise to female impersonation have changed in essentials, so that the analysis in Mother Camp is still valid. New fieldwork on the current state of the drag world would certainly be desirable, but I am not the one to do it, having been severed from that world by my own evolution and the brute passage of time. Those who would bring things up to date will find in Mother Camp a solid baseline for their own explorations.

Still, I follow female impersonators and the gay male world from afar, and seize the opportunity to offer some thoughts about the changes of the last ten years. These fall into two categories: various cracks appearing in the straight world's relentless wall of hostility, and the transformations wrought in the gay community by the gay-pride movement.¹

The gay-pride movement has challenged the traditional stance of the dominant culture; that homosexuals are a shameful group of pariahs to be erased, if possible, or passed over in silence, if not. In the mid-sixties, and as new historical research indicates, probably long before that, drag queens both defied and

¹ I denote here the whole spectrum of political activities whose minimum goal is the toleration of the gay community as a minority group. Within the gay-pride movement, a few groups have what would properly be called gay liberation as a goal: the end of state-enforced heterosexual hegemony, male domination, and a consequent disappearance of the gay/straight opposition as we know it. Besides, the word "liberation" implies a socialist coloration which at present is rather pale. If the distinction seems invidious, perhaps I must plead guilty. But if even the more limited goals of the gay-pride movement could be realized in my lifetime, it would make me proud of my native land.
upheld societal attitudes toward “queers.” The dominant culture, which has its own internal divisions—the constituency represented by Anita Bryant is not the same as that represented by the New York Times, for example—has not been able to prevent gays from becoming visible and clamoring for rights and toleration. But the structural underpinnings of heterosexual domination are still very much intact. What few legal gains have been made in the areas of decriminalization and discrimination are being vigorously attacked by the organized sexual reactionaries. Yet gay books and films appear at a rate undreamt of in the sixties; the business world, having discovered that gay people spend money, is taking advantage of the new openness to direct products toward the “gay market.”

Not only that, but recent movies point to a cooptation of drag symbols and camp sensibility by the mass media. In Outrageous a female impersonator of the type described in this book is portrayed sympathetically: indeed, he is seen as a kind of counterculture Everyman, who invites the admiration of both gay and straight. The surrealist figures in The Rocky Horror Show are not female impersonators per se, but the symbolic elements in this latter-day Frankenstein cum Dracula story will be familiar to readers of this book. Though Dr. Frank N. Furter’s drag is drawn more from pornography (black garter belt, tight corset) than from gay drag, and though he is represented as an androgynous bisexual, his creation of a witless muscle man as an ideal lover puts us back on familiar ground. The muscle man and the drag queen are true Gemini: the make-believe man and the make-believe woman. But if the symbolism of the film is familiar, the fact that it was made, and that apparently thousands of American adolescents flocked to see it at midnight showings is not.

At a further remove, the immensely popular film Star Wars is saturated with drag (“powers-of-darkness” drag, “princess” drag, “terrestrial alien” drag, “robot” drag, etc.) and camp sensibility. I’m sure the queens loved it, but then so did millions of other people. The gay sensibility, like that of other minorities before it, is finding, in watered down form, a larger audience. 2 I would guess that masses of people are finding themselves torn, as drag queens are, between traditional values and an acquired but profound cynicism. The campy way of expressing and playing with this tension, as described in chapter 5, is becoming presentable.

Yet just as gay sensibility and even real live drag queens are making their way into mass culture, the conditions that nourished them are changing. While camp humor was an assertion of gay existence, much of its content was self-hating, denigrating, and incompatible with the assertions of gay pride, whose aim is perhaps not the end of drag, but at least the transformation of the ethos described in chapters 5 and 6.

The gay-pride struggle revolves around the issue of coming out, which the conservatives have correctly seen would lead to the toleration of gays as a minority. Why this is the key issue will be clear to any reader of Mother Camp. The overwhelming concern of the pre-movement gay community was disclosure, and the resulting overt/covert distinction referred to throughout this book. In chapter 1 I refer to “baroque systems of personal and territorial avoidance” which had resulted from the fact that the stigma of homosexuality, unlike blackness or femaleness, could be hidden. If more and more gays come out, and get away with it, the most dramatic forms of shame and suffering imposed on drag queens, who previously were among the very few visible, aggressive homosexuals, would fade.

However, gay men are kidding themselves if they think the deeper stigma of homosexuality can be eliminated while the antagonistic and asymmetrical relations between men and women persist. It is true that legitimized male homosexuality and male domination have coexisted in some cultures (for instance, ancient Greece and tribal New Guinea), but never exclusive homosexuality, and besides, those men were not Judeo-Christians. So long as women are degraded, yet powerful enough to constitute a threat, gay men will always be traitors in the “battle of the sexes.” So long as current models of sexuality persist and predominate, gay men will always be “like” women.

In the last ten years there has been an enormous struggle within the gay male community to come to terms with the stigma of effeminacy. 3 The most striking result has been a shift from effeminate to masculine styles. Underline the word styles. Where ten years ago the streets of Greenwich Village abounded with limp wrists and eye makeup, now you see an interchangeable parade of young men with cropped hair, leather jackets, and well-trimmed mustaches. “Sissies” are out. Inevitably, and sadly, the desire to be manly, pursued uncritically—only a few souls in the wilderness cried out for a feminist analysis—has led to a proliferation of ersatz cowboys, phony lumberjacks, and (most sinister) imitation Hell’s Angels, police, and even storm troopers. The S & M crowd, once a small and marginal subgroup, are now trend setters; their style and, to a lesser degree, their sexuality have captured the gay male imagination. 4 This is playing with shadows, not substance. John Rechy, himself a “butch” gay, exposes “those who put down ‘queens’ and ‘sissies’ (and most leather gays do so, loudly) for hurting our image. (Ironically, it is a notorious truth that mass arrests of transvestites almost inevitably result in rough, heavy punching out of the cops, whereas a mass raid in a leather bar will result in meek surrender, by both ‘M’s and ‘S’s.)” 5

Rechy, whose admirably honest and thought-provoking book The Sexual
Outlaw confronts (and approves) promiscuity and male worship among gays, condemns the S & M trend as self-hating and destructive (his own model is Charles Atlas, which is surely more benign). But he stops short of saying that, without new models of manhood, its glorification can lead only to dead-end dramas of domination and submission.

I much preferred drag queens. What will happen to them amid the conflicting pressures of the gay-pride movement, the S & M trend, feminism, continued homophobia, and a limited mass acceptance of gay sensibility is difficult to predict. But even if female impersonation and all it stands for were to disappear tomorrow (which seems most unlikely), Mother Camp now has the virtue of being an invaluable historical document, at once photograph and X-ray of the male gay world on the edge of historic changes.

I would never do this work again, though having done it immeasurably enriched my twenties. The men whom I knew in Kansas City and Chicago were tough; they knew how to fight and suffer with comic grace. They had the simple dignity of those who have nothing else but their refusal to be crushed. I bid them farewell with a bittersweet regret, and leave it to others to carry on the work of illuminating their past and chronicling their future.

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I thought I might write a short article about drag queens. Instead, my interest deepened; the research grew from a thesis proposal to a doctoral dissertation, and finally to this book. The dissertation was completed in the spring of 1968. Its conclusions dealt with the necessity for anthropologists to study American culture, and with problems in sociological deviance theory. Two years later, I began to reorganize and rewrite the thesis. During those two years, the existence of American culture had been recognized by the American Anthropological Association and deviance theory had lost some of its usefulness.

In 1968 I wrote: "... this ethnography is a map of terra incognita as far as most middle class social scientists are concerned. The need for more descriptions of deviant groups is clear if any general theory of deviance is to be developed." That statement has generated the questions: "Who needs a theory of deviance? Why? What about a theory of ‘normalcy’?" Today these seem like obvious questions, but having the courage to ask them is another thing. If we really examine “normalcy” we may choke on what we bring up. Our own culture is hard to think about; we can’t get far enough away to look at it. I had wrestled with this problem for a long time before I studied it formally as anthropology.

So as I considered the problem of drawing new conclusions from my experience with drag queens it slowly dawned on me that in order to write about them I would have to alter the book so profoundly that it would become a whole new project. I decided instead to let the book stand substantially as I had written it, and delete the old conclusions. In the absence of new conclusions, I want to indicate the elements that would have shaped them. The relevant framework includes the Viet Nam war, the rise of Black, Feminist and Gay consciousness, and the collapse of legitimacy in American institutions (including universities). My own consciousness has responded to these events in a number of ways, one of which has been to question whether anthropologists are really outsiders to their own culture as has often been claimed.
Two years ago, I believed, without full awareness of my belief, that academics were objective truth-seekers and that the university was basically a free and independent haven of enlightenment — at any rate, a good alternative to business. I thought politics was a matter of opinion, that one made choices between unsatisfactory candidates. It never occurred to me that politics and anthropology had any connection.

Now I think that anthropology (and the other social sciences) are the ideological arms of sociopolitical arrangements. I use ideology here not in the narrow sense of propaganda, but in the sense of pervasive idea system making up a world view that both reflects and molds particular social arrangements. In general, scholarship reflects and molds the sociopolitical system called a university, and universities are not independent from our social order, but are paid and organized to perpetuate and legitimize it. Not all the ways in which we are implicated are obvious, though. Some are so subtly structural that trying to change them is like to crawl out of your own bones.

In graduate school I was trained to conceptualize culture as a static functional system. (How to account for change was a persistent but peripheral problem). We never asked whether a system might not be more “functional” for some people than for others. I did not see or look for connections between culture and power; now it seems obvious that elites attempt to manipulate knowledge and symbols to their own purposes. So-called minorities and deviants are the victims of these purposes. What I did not quite realize when I wrote my original thesis is that it is not so much a plea for the importance of American culture, or a theory of deviance, as it is a study in a particular kind of powerlessness.

My general views about homosexuality have not changed drastically over the last two years, mainly because I was more committed to academia than to the conventional family and sex role structure. Nevertheless, my idea of the possibilities has changed a good deal. The events of the last two years have included the rise of the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation movements. Women’s Liberation particularly has led me to experience the arbitrariness of our sex roles. I know now (rather than think) that the structure of sex roles is maintained by the acquiescence of all the participants who accept their fate as natural and legitimate. However, I doubt that the situation of female impersonators has substantially changed yet. I believe that much of what I wrote about them is still correct and even foresighted. In some places I rewrote the text if it struck me as dated. In others, I added footnotes to the original statements that show specifically how my thinking has changed.

As a liberal (who had never held a job) and as a woman who had never been trained to think that work was serious, I think I underestimated the importance of the economic exploitation of impersonators and street fairies when I first wrote about them. I have partially rectified this in the first and last chapters. And when I first recorded that impersonators believed the major and most fundamental di-
I wish to thank the female impersonators who shared their lives with me, especially Skip Arnold and Just Tempest. Without Skip there would be no book; it is our creation although, of course, he is not responsible for my conclusions. I hope that all the men who expected me to write a fair and sympathetic account of their lives will be pleased.

I also thank my teachers, Clifford Geertz, Julian Pitt-Rivers and, most of all, David M. Schneider, who was more helpful than he probably knows.

My fellow graduate students at the University of Chicago bolstered me through the initial shaky stages when the project was first conceived: Robert and Sherry Paul, Ben Apfelbaum, Harriet Whitehead, Cal Cottrell, and Charles Keil. More recently I have gotten editorial, emotional, and intellectual help on various parts of this book from Shirley Walton Fischler, Ed Hansen, Louise Fishman, Marty Babits, and Lee Kirby. Special thanks to my sisters in Upper West Side WITCH.

Mrs. Mollie Lamster, Mrs. Lubelfeld, and Mrs. Reisman, all of the Queens College Anthropology Department, typed the manuscript and took an interest.
Note to the Reader

It has been suggested that I explain the significance of the title *Mother Camp*. In the mid-sixties, “camp” was an in-group word which denoted specifically homosexual humor (see Chapter Five). The most highly esteemed female impersonators were all “camps,” virtuoso verbal clowns.

My use of the word “mother” is slightly more idiosyncratic. I intended it in a double sense. “Mother Camp” as an honorific implies something about the relationship of the female impersonator to his gay audience. A female impersonator will sometimes refer to himself as “mother,” as in “Your mother’s gonna explain all these dirty words to you.” I also meant “mother” as an adjective modifying “camp,” the latter word then referring to the whole system of humor. This reflects my belief that camp humor ultimately grows out of the incongruities and absurdities of the patriarchal nuclear family; for example, the incongruity between the sacred, idealized Mother, and the profane, obscene Woman. If camp humor takes such problems as its special subject, then the drag queen is its natural exponent. He himself is a magical dream figure: the fusion of mother and son. All this lies beyond the terrain covered in this book; the title simply points hopefully in that direction.
Chapter One

On the Job

Americans, for the most part, evaluate a man’s social status by his “occupation.” The question “What does he do?” means “What is his work?” (“Job,” “occupation,” “profession,” and “business” are synonyms with somewhat differing connotations.) In American theory, every man is equal in public, every man is king in his own home; but no one can or does pretend that all jobs are granted equal status.

Money and “Americanism” are also important criteria in judging a person’s social standing.¹ The amount of money one has or earns is always considered, and can be critical in the more cynical measurements of that overriding American goal, “success.” For instance, a criminal may be judged a “bigger success” than a prominent pediatrician if the criminal is richer. However, when Americans say “Money is all that counts in this country,” they are generally implying that some other state of affairs would be more desirable.

Americanism is a generic for a host of social identifiers, many of them ascribed. In America, one ought to be “free, white, male, and twenty-one.” A number of beliefs and behaviors are also “American,” such as “know-how,” cleanliness, patriotism, and ambition. Any contrast with the ideal image, whether in appearance or behavior, is un-American to some extent. For a century or more, immigrants have striven to adjust their lives and their physical appearance to the ideal, a process called assimilation. Gunnar Myrdal first pointed to the nightmare “dilemma” that has been created in this country by the “unassimilable” condition of black people. To belong to the contrasting ascribed categories “Negro,” “woman,” or “Jew,” or the achieved ones of

“hippie” or “Communist,” drastically affects one’s status, prestige, and honor, regardless of how rich or prestigious one’s occupation. As Gorer pointed out, to be lacking in, or to contrast with Americanism, is to be lacking in moral grace, since it is thought that Americanism can be achieved by an act of will. Those who are not “100 percent American” must be either ignorant or perverse.

Homosexuals are not accepted as 100 percent Americans, and they are certainly considered “perverse.” Homosexuality is a splinter on the American moral order; it violates the rooted assumption of “masculinity,” a complex of desirable qualities, is “natural” for (appropriate to) the male. Masculinity is based on one’s successful participation in the male spheres of business, the professions, production, money-making, and action-in-the-world. (Hence the importance of excluding women from these spheres.) Masculinity also depends crucially on differentiation from, and dominance over women. The problem is not, strictly speaking, just that homosexuals reject women as sexual objects. The moral transgression is in the choice of another man as a sexual (and/or romantic) object. Since male-female sexual relations are the only “natural” model of sexuality, at least one of the men of a homosexual pair must, then, be “acting” the woman: passive, powerless, and unmanly. The dichotomy appears in American culture as rooted in “nature.” One can just be a woman: it is a passive state. But one must achieve manhood. All a woman has to do is “open her legs” (a passive act), but a man has to “get it up” (that’s “action”).

These assumptions and values operate in the homosexual subculture too. When homosexuals talk about “the stereotype,” they refer to the stigma of effeminacy. Hooker and Hoffman both report that one “makes out” better in the “gay” (homosexual) sexual marketplace if one appears to be more “masculine.” A common homosexual assertion is that homosexuals are actually more masculine than heterosexuals because the latter are woman-controlled or contaminated and because it is more masculine to dominate another man than to dominate a woman. The “straight” (heterosexual) culture is vulnerable at this point. It cannot really explain why homosexuality is so rampant in especially masculine areas such as the contact sports, the Army, and prisons.

Given the obsessive cultural concern with “masculinity” which is reflected in the dominant interpretation of homosexual behavior and the denials and counter charges by homosexuals, it is not surprising that homosexuality is symbolized in American culture by transvestism. The homosexual term for a transvestite is “drag queen.” “Queer” is a generic noun for any homosexual man. “Drag” can be used as an adjective or a noun. As a noun it means the clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex (a suit and tie worn by a woman also constitute drag). The ability to “do drag” is widespread in the gay world, and many of the larger social events include or focus on drag (“drag balls,” “costume parties,” etc.). Drag queens symbolize homosexuality despite the truthful assertions of many homosexuals that they never go to see professional drag queens (called female impersonators for the benefit of the straight world) perform, never wear drag themselves, and prefer “masculine” men.

This book is about professional drag queens, or female impersonators. As Goffman pointed out, stigmatized groups and categories of persons may be represented by two opposing roles. On the one hand there is the “gentlemen deviant,” the person who is engaged in proving to himself and others that persons in the stigmatized category can be just as normal and competent as heterosexuals, “. . . nice people like ourselves, in spite of the reputation of their kind.” At this pole we find the “masculine,” “respectable” homosexuals, the leaders of most homophile organizations and so on. At the opposite pole there are the persons who most visibly and flagrantly embody the stigma, “drag queens,” men who dress and act “like women.”

Professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world. Not surprisingly, as professional homosexuals, drag queens find their occupation to be a source of dishonor, especially in relation to the straight world. Their situation in the gay world is more complex. The clever drag queen possesses skills that are widely distributed and prized in the gay world: verbal facility and wit, a sense of “camp” (homosexual humor and taste), and the ability to do both “glamorous” and comic drag. In exclusively gay settings such as bars and parties, drag queens may be almost lionized. But in public — that is, any domain belonging to the straight world — the situation is far different. Female impersonators say that in

2 The point about women may not be obvious to male readers. Is America thought to be “feminine,” “tender,” “passive”? It seems likely that as a parallel to sex roles in the family, America is symbolized as “masculine” in relation to other nations (outside the family), while it may be seen as “feminine” in internal matters.

3 Self-appointed 100 percent Americans who stand on the sidelines of peace demonstrations almost always yell “flag” along with other epithets. I doubt that this is only because of the long hair worn by some demonstrators. Peace = no “balls” = effeminate = “flag.”

4 A conversation with a another anthropologist provided me with a shocking moment of self-realization. I thought the logical insight about this. He was talking about sidewalk pornography in “his” culture and mentioned “cunt symbols.” I was really puzzled for a moment and asked, “How can you symbolize nothing?” Then, I heard what I had said.


6 Gorer’s analysis of the ubiquitous “homosexual panic” is particularly good (pp. 125–32). He points out the constant fear of homosexuality in male activities, noting for example the pressure on young men in the Army to pin up “cheese-cake” photographs by their bunks to encourage heterosexual fantasy.

7 “Drag” has come to have a broader referent: any clothing that signifies a social role, for instance a fireman’s suit or farmer’s overalls. The concept of drag is embodied in a complex homosexual attitude toward social roles.

public they never "recognize" a homosexual whom they know unless they are recognized first. One homosexual man put it to me succinctly when I asked him if he had ever done professional drag: "Hell no," he exclaimed, "it's bad enough just being a cocksucker, ain't it?" Because female impersonators...
This form of specialization is thought by everyone, including its practitioners (the impersonators), to be extreme, bizarre, and morally questionable. Nevertheless, female impersonators describe their performances as "work"; impersonation is described as at least a "job," at best a "profession." The identity is of very great importance to impersonators. It marks them off from "freaks," "hustlers," the insane, and many other anomalous social types whose activities can in no way be incorporated into the legitimate order of things. It forms a tenuous but vital association with the glamorous forms of professional entertainment. Female impersonation may be "a left field of show business," as one drag queen told me, but left field is still in the ball park.

All female impersonators are thought to be members of the homosexual subculture or gay world. This was explained to me very succinctly by one impersonator in response to my question, "Are there any straight impersonators?" He replied, "In practice there may be a few, but in theory there can’t be any. How could you do this work and not have something wrong with you?"

Empirically, all impersonators whom I met or heard of had "come out" (identified themselves as homosexual, begun participation in the gay world) before becoming impersonators; all participated actively in gay institutions and social networks, except for one very prominent man who was currently heterosexually married. (His public assertions of straight status annoyed and amused other impersonators.) But more than this, the work is defined as "queer" in itself. The assumption upon which both performers and audiences operate is that no one but a "queer" would want to perform as a woman. It is the nature of the performances rather than homosexuality per se that accounts for the extreme stigmatization of drag queens. Many actors, dancers, and artists are thought to be homosexual, yet they seem to be marginal and suspect rather than outcast. Female impersonators form an illegitimate junction of the homosexual and show business subcultures: they can be considered as performing homosexuals or homosexual performers. It is possible to get in drag "for a camp" (for fun, informally) and remain a respectable homosexual (to other homosexuals, that is). But to perform professionally (publicly) in women’s clothing stigmatizes impersonators within the gay world. At the same time, to perform professionally in women’s clothing stigmatizes them within the show business world.

Because of their special (stigmatized) relationship to the show business and homosexual subcultures, and of course because they all work together, female impersonators conceive of themselves as a group. Impersonators form loose social networks within and between American cities. News about jobs and the doings of friends in other cities is continually circulated by queens passing through or newly arrived. Although impersonators believe they share significant aspects of their life situation, particularly their homosexuality and the kind of work they do, antagonism and social distance indicate a split within the group. The split reflects fundamental issues in the status and direction of all American "minority groups." The same issues are crucial for the whole gay world, for the blacks, the "hip," women, and all those who are unrepresented politically and symbolically in America.

There are two different patterns of being a female impersonator. Each pattern consists of a characteristic presentation of self, life style, and attitudes toward basic life problems. I will distinguish the patterns by the terms "street" impersonators and "stage" impersonators. In terms of performances, street impersonators tend to do "record acts" and dancing, while stage impersonators tend to work "live." "Live" work is generally higher paid and is thought to demand more "talent," since it involved a verbal as well as visual impersonation. Record or pantomime artists mouth the words of a phonograph record as they perform. Sometimes an entire show will have only record artists, but often the same show will have both live and record, so that the two types of performers often work together. The dichotomy also correlates with age; most younger performers (under thirty) tend toward the street style, most older ones toward the stage style. During my field work, some performers in their late twenties were
attending to switch to stage styles, but with limited success. It is possible that the age differential represents an historical change in the profession, a kind of downward mobility for the profession as a whole, rather than a life-cycle progression. Most older performers believed the former to be true.\textsuperscript{15}

The two patterns may be seen as two orientations toward the problem of moral stigmatization. The street pattern is a fusion of the “street fairy” life with the profession of female impersonation. Street fairies are jobless young homosexual men who publicly epitomize the homosexual stereotype and are the underclass of the gay world. For street impersonators, the job is one element in a consistently alienated life style (which may be distinguished from the alienated attitudes of many Americans). Street impersonators are never off stage. As one stage impersonator told me, all they have to do to go to work is put on a wig. Their way of life is collective, illegal, and immediate (present oriented). Its central experiences are confrontation, prostitution, and drug “highs.”

The stage pattern, on the other hand, segregates the stigma from the personal life by limiting it to the stage context as much as possible. The work is viewed as a profession with goals and standards rather than as a job. Stage impersonators are “individualistic,” relatively “respectable,” and often alcoholic. They refer contemptuously to street performers as “tacky street fairies.” The latter retaliate with undercutting references to the common stigma: “Who does that phoney bitch think she is? She’s as queer as the rest of us!”

Nothing is more characteristic of the street impersonator than his public presentation of himself. Street fairies specialize in public, confrontational deviance. While respectable homosexuals and stage impersonators attempt to “pass” or at least draw a minimum of attention to themselves in public situations, street impersonators make themselves conspicuous. They tend to go places in groups, to use streets as gathering places rather than thoroughfares, and to flaunt an extremely “nellig” (effeminate) appearance and style of behavior:

It is early afternoon in Kansas City, very hot: Tiger and Billy showed up (at the hotel where I was staying) to take me out. Tiger was wearing cut-off blue jeans and a jersey top with narrow blue stripes.\textsuperscript{17} He is about six feet tall, very skinny. His arms and legs are covered with red hair and freckles. The clothes are skin tight. On one pinky he wears a gold band which has left a residue of green on the first joint. He has on ladies’ sandals, which are much used and falling apart. His face is pinched and thin, but mobile and expressive . . . an interesting face, much like the French mimics. Today he has done something which I have not seen him do before: he is wearing make-up. His eyes, which are smallish, green, and sad, are rimmed and smudged all around with a thick line of eye liner, and he has gobs of mascara on the lashes. He has carelessly drawn on eyebrows more or less over the place where his own are shaved off. All this is partially covered by large dark glasses which he nervously whips on and off when confronting a salesperson or a waitress, but they don’t hide the make-up which he has splotched on his face and neck; it has been sweated off in places. His long red hair is combed up all over his head in an upsheep of curls. When Tiger walks, he sways (the walk referred to as “swishing” by homosexuals). His arms never hang “naturally” at his sides, but are held out from his body at rigid angles, with long thin hands projecting like plumes. We walk into a cheap department store; somebody, whistles. Tiger turns, one hip hooked out, one arm extended, palm turned up, head thrown back at an angle. He declaims, in a loud stagey voice, “My, the peasants are restless today.” A moment later he leans over toward me with an ironic smirk, pats his hair in place: “Should I go home and put more make-up on, or do you think I look fantastic enough already?”

Where Tiger is fantastic and aggressive, Billy is apologetic. He is twenty-one or younger, a slender boy with bleached long hair and pretty legs. His features are pleasing but nondescript. I have never seen him overtly hostile or aggressive. There is always a placating expression on his face. His mouth is small and slightly pouting. He has a quiet voice to which no one listens. He is always interrupted. Tiger sweeps him along like a dinghy behind a motor launch. Billy’s arms and legs are shaved, but the bristle shows through already. He is pale and soft looking. He is wearing incredibly short shorts, cut-off white levis, very tight. “Really, Mary,” Tiger smirks, “don’t you think those shorts are a bit much?” We can’t think of a place to go and eat where we won’t risk being thrown out, much less stared at.

Finally I said to Tiger that I didn’t understand why he had to ask for trouble on the street (I admit my nerves were pretty frayed by this time). He said he wasn’t going to dress to please “those fools.” “What should I do,” he asked me sarcastically, “get a crew cut and buy a sweatshirt?”

Despite their appearance, street impersonators usually maintain social distance from the true street fairies as long as they hold a job. Since impersonators work at night, they do not “hang out” with the street fairies in the bustling bars or on the streets. When street fairies come to one of the clubs, impersonators (both stage and street) discourage them from coming backstage. In the restaurants in the club area where the impersonators often go after work, the working impersonators very rarely sit with street fairies or converse with them, even though they often know them by name:
I am sitting with a street impersonator, Tiger, in an all-night restaurant after work, about one-thirty or two o'clock in the morning. Sitting behind us were two groups: a foursome, one of whom was a drag butch, and another foursome, one of whom was a street fairy. This street fairy walked by us: "she" was wearing slacks I think, some kind of loose-flowing dark top, earrings, "her" own hair ratted up and back with spit curls over each ear, and painted-on eyebrows... about twenty years old. Tiger made a face as this street fairy walked by, saying to me, "Do you see that queen? My God, and to think I used to look like that. I used to wear my own hair a foot over my head in an upsweep, and I was always rinsing and dyeing it." As the street fairy walked by us again "she" said hello to Tiger calling him by name, but shyly and deferentially. Tiger said "Hi" back, but very curtly, and made a face to me; he said he couldn't remember the tacky queen's name.

The street fairies seemed to be quite in awe of the impersonators, and treated them deferentially. They often told me that they had worked at some previous time, and implied that they were just out of work, or waiting to get a break into the business. Indeed, all but one of the Kansas City street impersonators had been street fairies before becoming impersonators. If they lost their jobs or quit, they had no place to go but back to the street. When stage impersonators talked about quitting, they said they wanted to "go legit." But when I asked a street performer what drag queens do when they are out of work, he said, "They get their butts out on the street, my dear, and they sell their little twats for whatever they can get for them."

When I returned to Kansas City after an absence of four months, two boys who had been street impersonators had lost their jobs and were indistinguishable from street fairies. Both had grown their own hair shoulder length, were wearing make-up on the street, "passing" as girls in certain situations, "out of their minds on pills," and hustling full time. ("Hustling" means prostitution, also referred to as "turning tricks." This should be distinguished from "tricking," which means looking for a sex partner [not customer].) Both were socially integrated into street fairy groups. The stage impersonators, who had somewhat grudgingly accepted them as colleagues before, would no longer speak to them:

Taris barely speaks to Billy now. At the drag contest at the Red Sofa (a drag bar) on Halloween, he reportedly "cut Billy dead." When Billy protested, Tris said to him, "I don't even want to know you anymore; you're nothing but a tramp." Billy told me he was very hurt by this. When I mentioned it to Tris, he said he would say the same thing again. He said, "Billy never was a female impersonator and she's not even really a drag queen." She's just a gutter fairy." I asked if he said this because Billy hustled. He said certainly not, show him the drag queen who hadn't ever hustled or tried to hustle. It was simply because Billy had never gotten his own act. He had never improved beyond what he was when I was last here (four months ago), just a pallid imitation of Godiva, Ronnie, etc. That was his peak career and maybe it was a good thing he quit then.

Tris said of the street fairies that they are pitiful, but he doesn't run a charity service. He can't stand them, he says. Tris has shown resistance to my having anything to do with them, and especially with Billy, presumably because Billy is déclassé.

When I asked Tris about Godiva, who had also become a street fairy, he said, "Now Godiva is somebody with talent. Godiva is a good example of somebody who was beginning to really go the suicide route. She lost her job and, of course, the street fairies were extremely cruel to her."

"Why?" I asked.

He said, "Because she was a fallen idol; she had lost her job and she wasn't really a street fairy; she was a fallen female impersonator. And no one's as cruel as street fairies. Then after a while it became all right; they stopped being cruel to her because she turned into a decent street fairy. But now Godiva is smart, and I'm glad you came, because you had some effect on this. She saw you coming back into town, and you weren't going to interview her any more. She wasn't a professional. So now she's picked herself up, thank God, and is going to go off to Toledo and pull herself out of the mess that she was getting herself into with this street fairy thing."

As performers, the street impersonators tend to describe female impersonation as a "job" rather than as a "profession." They do not make statements about professional standards or pride, resist assuming responsibility, and view the work instrumentally, that is, as a way of making money to live. Their stated goal is usually to do as little "work" as possible for the greatest possible return. Only fools and "suckers" put out, try hard. It was this unwillingness to put out — not lack of talent, as the stage impersonators would have it — that was stated by some street impersonators as the reason that they so often do the less demanding record acts. As one boy put it to a stage impersonator who was criticizing the record acts, "Records are boring, Mary, but it's the easiest thing you can do."

On the stage, the street impersonators are sometimes openly contemptuous of the audience. They tend to perform as if the stage were a dramatic encapsulation of the street confrontations with the public. If they are not openly contemptuous (and this they manage to convey either verbally or by the exaggerated

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18I am intensely curious about the fate of this subcultural trait since the advent of long hair for heterosexual "hippies" and radicals. In 1965-1966, "growing your own hair" ("like a girl") was a sure sign of final defiance of society's opinion. But even at that time, the queens were beginning to complain that "you can't tell boys from girls anymore," or "can't tell who's gay anymore."

19The terms "female impersonator" and "drag queen" are sometimes distinguished to make invidious comparisons. Only professionals are called the former, while any homosexual in drag (including impersonators) can be called the latter.
indifference of their movements), they often seem wrapped in a trance-like state, never looking at the audience, and simply going through their routines. Street impersonators are oriented toward their friends backstage; they often speak to other performers during routines.

Off stage, the street pattern is to live in groups of three or more. Sometimes residential groups are made up entirely of impersonators, and sometimes they include one or two street fairies, female prostitutes, or male hustlers. The groups live in cheap hotels or in apartments in the immediate vicinity of the club. The apartments that I saw were sparsely and casually furnished. Street impersonators travel light. Conceptions of privacy and the nature of the boundary provided by the apartment contrast strongly with the notions of the middle classes. The apartments are not "homes." They are places to come in off the street, places to "hole up" during the day. "Husbands," "tricks," and numerous acquaintances from the street life come in and out constantly. (The word "trick" can be used to describe either a paying or nonpaying sex partner, as long as the relationship is brief and impersonal. Any friend who needs a place to rest, recover from a "high," or get a new one, can generally "fall by" and stay for a couple of hours or a couple of weeks.

Although the working queens are central to these social groups, the locations of the apartments and the personnel of the groups are anything but permanent. In Kansas City each of the street impersonators made about six moves in the course of one year:

December 1965: Tiger lives with Godiva and another queen, Lola, who is out of work and taking hormones — "becoming a woman," as they say. The apartment is a block from the club, large, but containing practically no furniture. They are supposed to move next week, and so far have done nothing about finding another place, which will be difficult in any case because Tiger says they won't move without Lola, who is not only Negro, but, as Tris said, "not the answer to racial equality." They have to move because they throw trash out on the back porch, have wild parties to which the police sometimes are uninvited guests, and Tiger called the landlord a cocksure or some such thing. When I arrive (about three p.m.) Lola and Godiva are sleeping on a rumpled-up mattress on the floor in one of the back rooms.

Tiger and I go out and when we get back to the apartment, Lola is entertaining three very rough-looking young men ... white. Lola is wearing a long black wig and a flowing nightgown. I retire to the back, as my presence is obviously making them uncomfortable. In the back, watching TV, is another rough-looking young man, who later turns out to be Tiger's boyfriend. Tiger tells me he doesn't know "those fools" with Lola. Later on a girl with long hair and a lot of make-up comes in with a bag of groceries. Tiger says she's a whore. As we leave, Tiger's boyfriend says he'll go down and shoot a little pool with the boys tonight.

July, 1966: Tiger has abruptly abandoned the "ordered" life. At some point he gave up his apartment and is living in a local cheap hotel with Bunny (another street impersonator) and others (including a "hooker" — female whore — and a male hustler) [Male hustlers and street fairies both "turn tricks" but the former are "masculine" in appearance and are said to be "masculine" in sexual acts. They will not perform fellatio or receive anal intercourse.] Tiger came this morning to see me, and he looks half dead ... lost a lot of weight, looks gray and sick. Also sustained a beating from a man in his hotel, who beat him up mainly because he hates queens (according to Tiger). Tiger was, as he said, "sick and sad," because he "never realized they [straights] hate us so much." It seems all the hotel personnel just stood around and watched the beating, and even acted like this man was some kind of hero. It seems doubtful that anything legal will be done, due to Tiger's state of disorganization, lack of position and money, and the club owner's satisfaction with nonoccurrence only (Tiger got the club owner to call up the hotel manager and complain). Because Tiger was afraid of the man at the hotel, he moved out with his group.

November, 1966: Tris says Tiger is worse than ever. Pills, the F.B.I., Vice squad, etc. are on his tail. This is confirmed by Jim, the bartender at the club, who says Tiger had been under suspicion of selling pills to others, especially to kids. (Tiger denied this, said he'd given them away, but never sold them). A while ago, Tris says, he was called in the middle of the night by the bonding agency to vouch for Tiger and another queen. There had been a bang-up fight at Tiger's place — the central issue was, had Queen X kicked in Tiger's TV, or had Tiger thrown the TV at Queen X? Tiger was evicted as a result, but the charges were dropped or something.

The effect of the residential groups, since they are usually made of two or more impersonators, is to fuse the work and home lives. Work and home are aspects of survival, of the maintenance of the collective deviant identity. Not only do the residential groups provide mutual moral and financial support in a world conceived to be universally hostile, but, as one stage impersonator who had gone through a street phase said, "Those [street] queens do not have a home face, but only a work face. By living together you surround yourself with your own image by surrounding yourself with other images."

While the group itself may be the major support of the deviant "image," another strong support is the drug "high." It appears that one of the major responsibilities of leaders in the street groups was the acquisition and distribution of pills. The pills, mainly seconal, benzedrine, and amphetamines, produce various emotional states favored by street groups. They say the pills keep you "stoned" or "out of it." The pills are consumed in huge quantities by many street impersonators, street fairies, and their allies in the street life; familiarity with their vernacular names and knowledge of their effects are standard subcultural knowledge.20

Use of the pills and other drugs is frowned on by stage impersonators, and also by club owners and managers. The latter want the impersonators to drink alcohol, and do not want trouble with narcotics agents. Impersonators say that some club managers will not hire a queen who is known to be habitually stoned on pills. Pills are also said to interfere with performance ability. These pressures tend to keep down consumption among street impersonators, at least around the club.

Inability to moderate the use of pills or resumption of a full-time high seem often to signal or accompany a "fall" back to street fairy status. In contrast, keeping off the pills altogether signals attempts to "reform," that is, give up the street life and move to the stage pattern:

As Tris (a stage impersonator) and Jim (a bartender) and I were leaving the club last night to go to the car, Jean (a street impersonator) came out with a very scrappy-looking women whom Tris says Jean used to pimp for. Jean swayed over and announced, "I'm drunk." To my consternation, Tris said, "Good for you," and by way of approval and award asked Jean to go shopping with him next week. When I questioned Tris later, he explained that he was proud of Jean for being drunk instead of high on pills and dope. It is clear that in Tris's mind, alcoholism is much preferable to drug addiction (he is alcoholic). Tris claims that alcohol interferes less with performance, but there seems more to it. Tris fears and dislikes the unconventionality of drugs and the society of drugs, which at this level is comprised of hustlers, whores, and thieves.

A few months later, Jean went on another reform kick. He cut his hair, gave up pills, and most important, planned to move a couple of miles from the club to a house owned and occupied by a call girl and her small son. As Jean proudly explained to me, this girl "didn't turn any street tricks at all." He was quite aware that he would have to "get away from those crazy queens" (his street group) in order to carry out his planned reform, which included leading a more respectable, less flamboyant life, and eventually getting out of drag for legit show business. However, I heard subsequently that he lost his job for being stoned and had fallen back to street fairy status.

Finally, among the street impersonator groups, anarchy and violence are part of the way of life. Appointments are routinely broken, not only with me but with friends as well. Plans are rarely made for more than a day in advance. Long-term goals and commitments of any kind are avoided. Physical violence is commonplace, both within the groups and with outsiders. Impersonators know how to take (and even give) beatings. Street impersonators literally live outside the law, in the use of assault, in the distribution and consumption of drugs, in the nature of their sexual activities including the sale of sex, and often in their very physical appearance. But they do live within the police system. The impersonators are in continuous interaction with the local police, especially the vice squad. In the process, stable and fairly dependable mutual expectations have developed. In Kansas City at least, the street impersonators and even the street fairies who have been in town long enough to "learn the ropes" are in a state of relative mutual cooperation with the police. It is the isolated vice and the new-in-town vice that are particularly vulnerable.21

The street life adds up to a group way of life dedicated to "staying out of it": out of the law, out of "normal" rational states of consciousness, and out of any "respectable" expectations, which the street groups attribute to "straights" and gay people who emulate straights, those "phony pink tea fairies." As a solution to the problems of interaction with the institutional order, the subculture represents collective withdrawal and alienation. Street groups make few distinctions between various respectable segments of society, for instance between working and middle class. From their perspective, all of respectable society seems square, distant, and hypocritical. From their "place" at the very bottom of the moral and status structure, they are in a strategic position to experience the numerous discrepancies between the ideals of American culture and the realities.

Stage impersonators contrast most strikingly with street impersonators in their public presentations of themselves (to employ Goffman's useful concept). How should a morally degraded person handle himself in public? As one very experienced stage impersonator said, "The smart whore does not run with other whores." In interviews, stage impersonators all insisted on two points: first, that off stage, they restrict their contacts with other impersonators, and second, that in public places they attempt to "pass" as "normal" or at least appear as inconspicuous as possible. Direct observations confirmed both assertions. While street impersonators are androgynous, dramatic, and highly "visible" off stage, stage impersonators tend to look like bland, colorless men. Compare the following description of a very high status impersonator with those of street impersonators and their apartments:

Dodie Turner lives in the East Seventies (New York City) in a one-bedroom apartment, apparently alone except for an old dog. The address and the place are not posh, but quite respectable, and on the fringes of a fashionable area. Even so, at the end of the interview he apologized for the place, saying he realized that perhaps it didn't seem grand enough for someone in his position, but it was really like a stopping place or a hotel, since he traveled so much. The place was very neat and in good taste. As Dodie later said, nothing about the place proclaims his profession. His taste is not "campy." He displays no pictures of himself, either in drag or out.

Dodie himself seems about forty, but is probably a little older. He looks extremely well-scrubbed and neat, and has a healthy tan. His hair is brown, of

21This may not be so true in other cities. Kansas City is said to be a "good town for queens" in this matter. In Chicago, understandings with the police broke down when a local Mafia "big shot" was assassinated.
medium length (not over the ears), and well cut. His features are sharp and his expression is shrewd. He has his eyebrows (many impersonators shave their eyebrows off). The day I saw him, he wore a freshly pressed sport shirt, black trousers, men’s house slippers. He had a medal of some kind around his neck, and a rather heavy watch or I.D. I noticed that his legs weren’t shaved. He is physically on the small side, perhaps five feet eight inches tall, slender, and well kept. Everything contributes to the impression of a well cared-for, rather orderly life, and a respectable presentation to public and maybe even friends. His gayness shows in his high pitched, rather stagey voice, the use of subdued but recognizable gay intonation, and slightly fluttery hand movements.

Here is a description of another high status impersonator as he seemed to me when I interviewed him:

The apartment is in Manhattan, but in the theatre district, nowhere near where the impersonator works. I was asked for dinner as well as an interview. I was ushered into the apartment by Bo Sutter, and I had to control my surprise at his appearance out of drag. This has happened with all the queens, but his was the most startling case. Bo out of drag is a rather ordinary looking person. He looks just completely different. He is short, maybe five feet six inches tall, and very fat, almost obese. He wears no make-up, although he has almost no eyebrows. However, he has the kind of face on which this looks fairly natural. He is white, probably in his forties. His nails are short. There is nothing about him that indicates his profession. His hair is short, brown, curly. He looks like a smallish bulldog, but the face is alert, the eyes blue and intelligent; throughout the evening I constantly had the impression of an extremely bright, quick person, of a mind that was scrutinizing me, at least as well as I could analyze it. He speaks well, has a rich voice, well articulated speech, and assumes various accents and intonations at will. This is what “gives him away”—a certain flamboyancy, a very conscious affectation.

A third impersonator had no national reputation but was often described, by gay people, as “the most popular [drag] queen in Chicago.” This man was particularly interesting because unlike most stage impersonators he worked to records and to a gay audience. In fact, the interview showed that he hardly knew any heterosexual people. He was a very distinctive and colorful performer, given to flamboyant impersonations of Mae West and Sophie Tucker. He was always introduced on stage as “Wanda, that dirty old lady!”

I first met Wanda off stage in one of the Chicago drag bars. He was sitting at the far end of the bar with several young and attractive men standing around him. He was very drunk. I was shocked at his appearance out of drag. In fact, I probably had seen him out of drag at the bar where he works (between sets) and not recognized him. Wanda out of drag seemed a non-entity. Completely colorless, pudgy, balding fast, wearing baggy pants and a mouse colored, ill-fitting shirt. He looked about forty-five years old.

Stage impersonators tend to live farther away from clubs than street impersonators, and they almost always live alone. In this, as in much else, stage impersonators act on basically middle-class conceptions of appropriate living arrangements. On the other hand, when Tiger, a street impersonator, lived alone briefly, he complained of loneliness and boredom.

Stage impersonators are quite concerned with “professionalism” and can be articulate about the history of impersonation (most know about drag in the old vaudeville days), goals and standards of performance, and subtleties of relating to various types of audiences. They sometimes display minute knowledge of the personal and special expertise of the show business world, particularly pertaining to the nightclub business and legitimate theatre. They stress whatever personal contact they have had with “stars.” At the same time, they express nothing but contempt for queens who refuse to segregate their activities into clearly defined work and private domains:22

Esther Newton: Why, by the way, don’t you like “drag queen”? You prefer the term “female impersonator”?

Informant: To me I think “drag queen” is sort of like a street fairy puttin’ a dress on. Tryin’ to impress-somebody, but “female impersonator” sounds more professional.

EN: What about... let’s start from scratch. What is a “street fairy”?
I: It’s a little painted queen that wants to run around with make-up on in the street and have long hair, and everything, to draw attention.

EN: These are...
I (interrupting): They would put a dress on at a minute’s notice and get up there and make a fool of theirself.

EN: I want you to make a distinction between street fairies and people who are professional. What’s the difference?
I: (long pause) Well, in the first place, when I put my make-up on, I am putting it on for a reason. I never wear make-up out on the street, because I don’t think anyone needs a neon sign telling what they are! These little street fairies evidently can’t get enough attention, so they use this make-up, pile their hair up, and all this, just to draw attention. (His tone is vehement, contemptuous.) I have my attention when I’m on stage; they have to have it by looking absolutely ridiculous.

EN: Could a street fairy become a professional?
I: Probably... there have been. Maybe some of the kids that are in the profession now were street fairies at one time. But I never did like make-up out on the street. To me it always stands out like a sore thumb; you can always tell... (hesitates) when a fellas got make-up on.

22Whenever interview material is quoted “EN” refers to myself and “I” refers to the informant.
Another stage man expressed the desire for respectability and social acceptance:

You get respect when you deserve respect. Look at these nelly queens going down the street with make-up and carrying on! How can you respect them? You can do anything in this life if you do it with discretion . . . I was good to the kids in [a large traveling drag show], but I never ran with the pack. I didn't go out to eat with them after the show, or run around in bars. I went to nice places, and I went out with girls. And I get respect. You have to live in society, whether you like it or not. And sometimes when you advertise your business, you're out of business pretty quick.

The extreme sensitivity of stage impersonators to public recognition and stigmatization leads to the development of baroque systems of personal and territorial avoidance:

I don't . . . there's a lot of types of queens that I don't dig, I don't like, I don't associate with. For instance, I wouldn't go out or be seen with Misty [a street impersonator]. Not because she's Negro, because that doesn't faze me at all. I'd be seen anywhere with Toni [also a Negro impersonator, but respectable. This statement was true, and not a cover for racial prejudice.] I would be seen anywhere with a lot of queens in the business. But there are some queens I wouldn't step outside with. Uh, out of the neighborhood, I mean [the area of the clubs, which was defined as gay, therefore somewhat safe from the public]. I might be seen in the Coffee Cup [a local restaurant which is gay at night] with them, but even then, in some cases I'm embarrassed. Because I don't act like a queen on the streets. Even though I work in drag. And I don't see any reason why anyone should. If I want to wear a sign, I'll wear it. Don't . . . you're not going to wear it for me. That how I feel about gay life. I think what you do in bed is your business; what you do on the street is everybody's business.

Not only does avoidance of nelly behavior and associates enable one to avoid public identification as a deviant; the segregation of symbols into work/home, public/private domains has profound implications. The essence of the stage impersonators' solution to the stigma involved in female impersonation is the limitation of drag — the symbol of feminine identification and homosexuality — to the stage context. For if drag is work or a profession, a man might take some pride in doing it well; if it is work, it is not home, it is not where a man "lives" in the deepest sense; if it is work, a man could always quit.

In contrast, the street impersonators' way of life defies the established institutions and "normal" people. The street life is by definition antistablishment; the street queen who becomes respectable will no longer be a street queen. I was not surprised to see that the first collective homosexual revolt in history, the "battle of the Stonewall" (named after a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York, where gay people fought the police for several nights after the police attempted to close the bar) was instigated by street fairies. During 1965-1966 I rarely heard talk of collective defiance of straight society, although in San Francisco, the Mattachine Society and S.I.R. (Society for Individual Rights) were pushing for "minority rights" and an alliance with Negroes and Mexican-Americans. In general, though, the potential for collective action to change society was latent. Most gay people attempted to accommodate in one way or another. One night I heard a drag queen say to a middle-class gay audience, "Let's all get naked in a big black car and go beat up some straight people!" There were laughter and wild cheering, but nobody moved. For the Stonewall story, see The New York Times, 27 June 1969, and subsequent issues.
One further thing to mention. Carter did no “mixing” (with the audience) at all, at least not while we were there. During the male singer’s spot, I could see Carter in drag, standing talking to one of the waiters in the passageway that leads backstage, but he was behind the waiter and unobtrusive. His appearance caused no comment, and he was there for only five minutes or so, looking over the crowd.

Female impersonators, particularly the stage impersonators (see Chapter One), identify strongly with professional performers. Their special, but not exclusive, idols are female entertainers. Street impersonators usually try to model themselves on movie stars rather than on stage actresses and nightclub performers. Stage impersonators are quite conversant with the language of the theatres and nightclubs, while the street impersonators are not. In Kansas City, the stage impersonators frequently talked with avid interest about stage and nightclub “personalities.” The street impersonators could not join in these discussions for lack of knowledge.

Stage impersonators very often told me that they considered themselves to be nightclub performers or to be in the nightclub business, “just like other [straight] performers.”

When impersonators criticized each other’s on- or off-stage conduct as “unprofessional,” this was a direct appeal to norms of show business. Certain show business phrases such as “break a leg” (for good luck) were used routinely, and I was admonished not to whistle backstage. The following response of a stage impersonator shows this emphasis in response to my question, “What’s the difference between professionals and street fairies?” This impersonator was a “headliner” (had top billing) at a club in New York:

Well (laughs), simply saying... well, I can leave that up to you. You have seen the show. You see the difference between me and some of these other people (his voice makes it sound as if this point is utterly self-evident) who are working in this left field of show business, and I’m quite sure that you see a
distinct difference. I am more conscious of being a performer, and I think generally speaking, most, or a lot, of other people who are appearing in the same show are just doing it, not as a lark — we won’t say that it’s a lark — but they’re doing it because it’s something they can drop in and out of. They have fun, they laugh, have drinks, and play around, and just have a good time. But to me, now, playing around and having a good time is [sic.] important to me also; but primarily my interest from the time I arrive at the club till the end of the evening — I am there as a performer, as an entertainer, and this to me is the most important thing. And I dare say that if needs be, I probably could do it, and be just as good an entertainer . . . I don’t know if I would be any more successful if I were working in men’s clothes than I am working as a woman. But comparing myself to some of the people that I would consider real professional entertainers — people who are genuinely interested in the show as a show, and not just as I say, a street fairy, who wants to put on a dress and a pair of high heels to be seen and show off in public.

The stage impersonators are interested in “billings” and publicity, in lighting and make-up and stage effects, in “timing” and “stage presence.” The quality by which they measure performers and performances is “talent.” Their models in these matters are established performers, both in their performances and in their off-stage lives, insofar as the impersonators are familiar with the latter. The practice of doing “impressions” is, of course, a very direct expression of this role modeling.

From this perspective, female impersonators are simply nightclub performers who happen to use impersonation as a medium. It will be recalled (Chapter One) that many stage impersonators are drab in appearance (and sometimes in manner) off stage. These men often say that drag is simply a medium or mask that allows them to perform. The mask is borrowed from female performers, the ethos of performance from show business norms in general.

The stated aspiration of almost all stage impersonators is to “go legit,” that is, to play in movies, television, and on stage or in respectable nightclubs, either in drag or (some say) in men’s clothes. Failing this, they would like to see the whole profession “upgraded,” made more legitimate and professional (and to this end they would like to see all street impersonators barred from working, for they claim that the street performers downgrade the profession). T. C. Jones is universally accorded highest status among impersonators because he has appeared on Broadway (New Faces of 1956) and on television (Alfred Hitchcock) and plays only high-status nightclubs.

THE DRAG QUEEN

Professionally, impersonators place themselves as a group at the bottom of the show business world. But socially, their self-image can be represented (without the moral implications; see Chapter Six) in its simplest form as three concentric circles. The impersonators, or drag queens, are the inner circle. Surrounding them are the queens, ordinary gay men. The straights are the outer circle. In this way, impersonators are “a society within a society within a society,” as one impersonator told me.

A few impersonators deny publicly that they are gay. These impersonators are married, and some have children. Of course, being married and having children constitute no barrier to participation in the homosexual subculture. But
whatever may be the actual case with these few, the impersonators I knew universally described such public statements as “cover.” One impersonator’s statement was particularly revealing. He said that “in practice” perhaps some impersonators were straight, but “in theory” they could not be. “How can a man perform in female attire and not have something wrong with him?” he asked.

The role of the female impersonator is directly related to both the drag queen and camp roles in the homosexual subculture. In gay life, the two roles are strongly associated. In homosexual terminology, a drag queen is a homosexual male who often, or habitually, dresses in female attire. (A drag butch is a lesbian who often, or habitually, dresses in male attire.) Drag and camp are the most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English-speaking world. This is true even though many homosexuals would never wear drag or go to a drag party and even though most homosexuals who do wear drag do so only in special contexts, such as private parties and Halloween balls. At the middle-class level, it is common to give “costume” parties at which those who want to wear drag do so, and the others can wear a costume appropriate to their gender.

The principle opposition around which the gay world revolves is masculinity-femininity. There are a number of ways of presenting this opposition through one’s own person, where it becomes also an opposition of “inside” = “outside” or “underneath” = “outside.” Ultimately, all drag symbolism opposes the “inner” or “real” self (subjective self) to the “outer” self (social self). For the great majority of homosexuals, the social self is often a calculated respectability and the subjective or real self is stigmatized. The “inner” = “outer” opposition is almost parallel to “back” = “front.” In fact, the social self is usually described as “front” and social relationships (especially with women) designed to support the veracity of the “front” are called “cover.” The “front” = “back” opposition also has a direct tie-in with the body: “front” = “face”; “back” = “ass.”

There are two different levels on which the oppositions can be played out. One is within the sartorial system itself; that is, wearing feminine clothing “underneath” and masculine clothing “outside.” (This method seems to be used more by heterosexual transvestites.) It symbolizes that the visible, social, masculine clothing is a costume, which in turn symbolizes that the entire sex-role behavior is a role—an act. Conversely, stage impersonators sometimes wear jockey shorts underneath full stage drag, symbolizing that the feminine clothing is a costume.

A second “internal” method is to mix sex-role referents within the visible sartorial system. This generally involves some “outside” item from the feminine sartorial system such as earrings, lipstick, high-heeled shoes, a necklace, etc., worn with masculine clothing. This kind of opposition is used very frequently in informal camping by homosexuals. The feminine item stands out so glaringly by incongruity that it “undermines” the masculine system and proclaims that the inner identification is feminine. When this method is used on stage, it is called “working with (feminine) pieces.” The performer generally works in a tuxedo or business suit and a woman’s large hat and earrings.

The second level poses an opposition between a one sex-role sartorial system and the “self,” whose identity has to be indicated in some other way. Thus when impersonators are performing, the oppositional play is between “appearance,” which is female, and “reality,” or “essence,” which is male. One way to do this is to show that the appearance is an illusion; for instance, a standard impersonation maneuver is to pull out one “breast” and show it to the audience. A more drastic step is taking off the wig. Strippers actually routinize the progression from “outside” to “inside” visually, by starting in a full stripping costume and ending by taking off the bra and showing the audience the flat chest. Another method is to demonstrate “maleness” verbally or vocally by suddenly dropping the voice level or by some direct reference. One impersonator routinely tells the audience: “Have a ball. I have two.” (But genitals must never be seen.) Another tells unruly members of the audience that he will “put on my men’s clothes and beat you up.”

Impersonators play on the opposition to varying extents, but most experienced stage impersonators have a characteristic method of doing it. Generally speaking, the desire and ability to break the illusion of femininity is the mark of an experienced impersonator who has freed himself from other impersonators as the immediate reference group and is working fully to the audience. Even so, some stage impersonators admitted that it is difficult to break the unity of the feminine sartorial system. For instance, they said that it is difficult, subjectively, to speak in a deep tone of voice while on stage and especially while wearing a wig. The “breasts” especially seem to symbolize the entire feminine sartorial system and role. This is shown not only by the very common device of removing them in order to break the illusion, but in the

1 In two Broadway plays (since made into movies) dealing with English homosexuals, "The Killing of Sister George" (lesbians) and "Staircase" (male homosexuals), drag played a prominent role. In "George," an entire scene shows George and her lover dressed in tuxedos and top hats on their way to a drag party. In "Staircase," the entire plot turns on the fact that one of the characters has been arrested for "going in drag" to the local pub. Throughout the second act, this character wears a black shawl over his shoulders. This item of clothing is symbolic of full drag. This same character is a camp and, in my opinion, George was a very rare bird, a lesbian camp. Both plays, at any rate, abound in camp humor. "The Boys in the Band," another recent play and movie, doesn't feature drag as prominently but has two camp roles and much camp humor.

2 This concept was developed and suggested to me by Julian Pitt-Rivers.

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Even one feminine item ruins the integrity of the masculine system; the male loses his carte honor. The superordinate role in a hierarchy is more fragile than the subordinate. Manhood must be achieved, and once achieved, guarded and protected.
command, "tits up!" meaning, "get into the role," or "get into feminine character."

The tension between the masculine-feminine and inside-outside oppositions pervade the homosexual subculture at all class and status levels. In a sense the different class and status levels consist of different ways of balancing these oppositions. Low-status homosexuals (both male and female) characteristically insist on very strong dichotomization between masculine-feminine so that people must play out one principle or the other exclusively. Low-status queens are expected to be very nelly, always, and low-status butch men are so "masculine" that they very often consider themselves straight. 4 (Although as mentioned in Chapter Four, the queens say in private that "today's butch is tomorrow's sister.") Nevertheless, in the most nelly queen the opposition is still implicitly there, since to participate in the male homosexual subculture as a peer, one must be male inside (physiologically).

Recently this principle has begun to be challenged by hormone use and by the sex-changing operation. The use of these techniques as a final resolution of the masculine-feminine opposition is hotly discussed in the homosexual subculture. A very significant proportion of the impersonators, and especially the street impersonators, who have used or are using hormone shots or plastic inserts to create artificial breasts and change the shape of their bodies. This development is strongly deplored by the stage impersonators who say that the whole point of female impersonation depends on maleness. They further say that these "hormone queens" are placing themselves out of the homosexual subculture, since, by definition, a homosexual man wants to sleep with other men (i.e., no gay man would want to sleep with these "hormone queens").

In carrying the transformation even farther, to "become a woman" is approved by the stage impersonators, with the proviso that the "sex changes" should get out of gay life altogether and go straight. The "sex changes" do not always comply, however. One quite successful impersonator in Chicago had the operation but continued to perform in a straight club with other impersonators. Some impersonators in Chicago told me that this person was now considered "out of gay life" by the homosexuals and could not perform in a gay club. I also heard a persistent rumor that "she" now liked to sleep with lesbians!

It should be readily apparent why drag is such an effective symbol of both the outside-inside and masculine-feminine oppositions. There are relatively few ascribed roles in American culture and sex role is one of them; sex role radiates a complex and ubiquitous system of typing achieved roles. Obvious examples are in the kinship system (wife, mother, etc.) but sex typing also extends far out

4 The middle-class idea tends to be that any man who has had sexual relations with men is queer. The lower classes strip down to "essentials," and the man who is "dominant" can be normal (masculine). Lower-class men give themselves a bit more leeway before they consider themselves to be gay.

into the occupational-role system (airline stewardess, waitress, policeman, etc.). The effect of the drag system is to wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex. Gay people know that sex-typed behavior can be achieved, contrary to what is popularly believed. They know that the possession of one type of genital equipment by no means guarantees the "naturally appropriate" behavior.

Thus drag in the homosexual subculture symbolizes two somewhat conflicting statements concerning the sex-role system. The first statement symbolized by drag is that the sex-role system really is natural: therefore homosexuals are unnatural (typical responses: "I am physically abnormal"); "I can't help it, I was born with the wrong hormone balance"; "I am really a woman who was born with the wrong equipment"); "I am psychologically sick").

The second symbolic statement of drag questions the "naturalness" of the sex-role system in toto; if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the "wrong" sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited, by the "right" sex. Anthropologists say that sex-role behavior is learned. The gay world, via drag, says that sex-role behavior is an appearance; it is "outside." It can be manipulated at will.

Drag symbolizes both these assertions in a very complex way. At the simplest level, drag signifies that the person wearing it is a homosexual, that he is a male who is behaving in a specifically inappropriate way, that he is a male who places himself as a woman in relation to other men. In this sense it signifies stigma. At the most complex, it is a double inversion that says "appearance is an illusion." Drag says, "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion: "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine."

In the context of the homosexual subculture, all professional female impersonators are "drag queens." Drag is always worn for performance in any case; the female impersonator has simply professionalized this subcultural role. Among themselves and in conversation with other homosexuals, female impersonators usually call themselves and are called drag queens. In the same way, their performances are referred to by themselves and others as drag shows.

But when the varied meanings of drag are taken into consideration, it should be obvious why the drag queen is an ambivalent figure in the gay world. The drag queen symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear the most in themselves, all that they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, the stigma. In this way, the term "drag queen" is comparable to "nigger." And like that word, it may be all right in an ingroup context but not in an outgroup one. Those who do not want to think of themselves or be identified as drag queens under any circumstances attempt to dissociate themselves from "drag" completely. These homosexuals deplore drag shows and profess total lack of
interest in them. Their attitude toward drag queens is one of condemnation combined with the expression of vast social distance between themselves and the drag queen.

Other homosexuals enjoy being queens among themselves, but do not want to be stigmatized by the heterosexual culture. These homosexuals admire drag and drag queens in homosexual contexts, but deplore female impersonators and street fairies for “giving us a bad name” or “projecting the wrong image” to the heterosexual culture. The drag queen is definitely a marked man in the subculture.

Homosexuality consists of sex-role deviation made up of two related but distinct parts: “wrong” sexual object choices and “wrong” sex-role presentation of self. The first deviation is shared by all homosexuals, but it can be hidden best. The second deviation logically (in this culture) corresponds with the first, which it symbolizes. But it cannot be hidden, and it actually compounds the stigma.

Thus, insofar as female impersonators are professional drag queens, they are evaluated positively by gay people to the extent that they have perfected a subcultural skill and to the extent that gay people are willing to oppose the heterosexual culture directly (in much the same way that Negroes now call themselves Blacks). On the other hand, they are despised because they symbolize and embody the stigma. At present, the balance is far on the negative side, although this varies by context and by the position of the observer (relative to the stigma). This explains the impersonators’ negative identification with the term drag queen when it is used by outsiders. (In the same way, they at first used masculine pronouns of address and reference toward each other in my presence, but reverted to feminine pronouns when I became more or less integrated into the system.)

THE CAMP

While all female impersonators are drag queens in the gay world, by no means are all of them “camps.” Both the drag queen and the camp are expressive performing roles, and both specialize in transformation. But the drag queen is

It becomes clear that the core of the stigma is in “wrong” sexual object choice when it is considered that there is little stigma in simply being effeminate, or even in wearing feminine apparel in some contexts, as long as the male is known to be heterosexual, that is, known to sleep with women or, rather, not to sleep with men. But when I say that sleeping with men is the core of the stigma, or that feminine behavior logically corresponds with this, I do not mean it in any causal sense. In fact, I have an impression that some homosexual men sleep with men because it strengthens their identification with the feminine role, rather than the other way around. This makes a lot of sense developmentally, if one assumes, as I do, that children learn sex-role identity before they learn any strictly sexual object choices. In other words, I think that children learn that they are boys or girls before they are made to understand that boys only love girls and vice versa.

concerned with masculine-feminine transformation, while the camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity. Certainly the two roles are intimately related, since to be a feminine man is by definition incongruous. But strictly speaking, the drag queen simply expresses the incongruity while the camp actually uses it to achieve a higher synthesis. To the extent that a drag queen does this, he is called “camp.” The drag queen role is emotionally charged and connotes low status for most homosexuals because it bears the visible stigma of homosexuality; camps, however, are found at all status levels in the homosexual subculture and are very often the center of primary group organization.

The camp is the central role figure in the subcultural ideology of camp. The camp ethos or style plays a role analogous to “soul” in the Negro subculture. Like soul, camp is a “strategy for a situation.” The special perspective of the female impersonators (see Chapter Six) is a case of a broader homosexual ethos. This is the perspective of moral deviance and, consequently, of a “spoiled identity,” in Goffman’s terms. Like the Negro problem, the homosexual problem centers on self-hatred and the lack of self-esteem. But if “the soul ideology ministers to the needs for identity,” the camp ideology ministers to the needs for dealing with an identity that is well defined but loaded with contempt. As one impersonator who was also a well-known camp told me, “No one is more miserable about homosexuality than the homosexual.”

Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality. In this sense, “camp taste,” for instance, is synonymous with homosexual taste. Informants stressed that even between individuals there is very little agreement on what is camp because camp is in the eye of the beholder, that is, different homosexuals like different things, and because of the spontaneity and individuality of camp, camp taste is always changing. This has the advantage, recognized by some informants, that a clear division can always be maintained between homosexual and “straight” taste:

The role of the “pretty boy” is also a very positive one, and in some ways the camp is an alternative for those who are not pretty. However, the pretty boy is subject to the depredations of aging, which in the subculture is thought to set in at thirty (at the latest). Because the camp depends on inventiveness and wit rather than on physical beauty, he is ageless.

Keil, Urban Blues, pp. 164-90.

This phrase is used by Kenneth Burke in reference to poetry and is used by Keil in a sociological sense.


I would say that the main problem today is heterosexuals, just as the main problem for Blacks is Whites.

Keil, Urban Blues, p. 165.
He said Susan Sontag was wrong about camp's being a cult, and the moment it becomes a public cult, you watch the queens stop it. Because if it becomes the squares, it doesn't belong to them any more. And what will be "camp art," no queen will own. It's like taking off the work clothes and putting on the home clothes. When the queen is coming home, she wants to come home to a campy apartment that's hers - it's very queer - because all day long she's been very straight. So when it all of a sudden becomes very straight - to come home to an apartment that any square could have - she's not going to have it any more.  

While camp is in the eye of the homosexual beholder, it is assumed that there is an underlying unity of perspective among homosexuals that gives any particular campy thing its special flavor. It is possible to discern strong themes in any particular campy thing or event. The three that seemed most recurrent and characteristic to me were incongruity, theatricality, and humor. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy.

Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of incongruous juxtapositions. Either way, the homosexual "creates" the camp, by pointing out the incongruity or by devising it. For instance, one informant said that the campiest thing he had seen recently was a Midwestern football player in high drag at a Halloween ball. He pointed out that the football player was seriously trying to be a lady, and so his intent was not camp, but that the effect to the observer was campy. (The informant went on to say that it would have been even campier if the football player had been picked up by the police and had his picture published in the paper the next day.) This is an example of unintentional camp, in that the campy person or thing does not perceive the incongruity.

Created camp also depends on transformations and juxtapositions, but here the effect is intentional. The most concrete examples can be seen in the apartments of campy queens, for instance, in the idea of growing plants in the toilet tank. One queen said that TV Guide had described a little Mexican horse statue as campy. He said there was nothing campy about this at all, but if you put a nude cut-out of Bette Davis on it, it would be campy. Masculine-feminine juxtapositions are, of course, the most characteristic kind of camp, but any very incongruous contrast can be campy. For instance, juxtapositions of high and low status, youth and old age, profane and sacred functions or symbols, cheap and expensive articles are frequently used for camp purposes. Objects or people are often said to be campy, but the camp inheres not in the person or thing itself but in the tension between that person or thing and the context or association. For instance, I was told by impersonators that a homosexual clothes designer made himself a beautiful Halloween ball gown. After the ball he sold it to a wealthy society lady. It was said that when he wore it, it was very campy, but when she wore it, it was just an expensive gown, unless she had run around her ball saying she was really not herself but her faggot dress designer.

The nexus of this perception by incongruity lies in the basic homosexual experience, that is, squarely on the moral deviancy. One informant said, "Camp is all based on homosexual thought. It is all based on the idea of two men or two women in bed. It's incongruous and it's funny." If moral deviation is the locus of the perception of incongruity, it is more specifically role deviation and role manipulation that are at the core of the second property of camp, theatricality.

Camp is theatrical in three interlocking ways. First, all, camp is style. Importance tends to shift from what a thing is to how it looks, from what is done to how it is done. It has been remarked that homosexuals excel in the decorative arts. The kind of incongruities that are campy are very often created by adornment or stylization of a well-defined thing or symbol. But the emphasis on style goes further than this in that camp is also exaggerated, consciously "staged," specifically theatrical. This is especially true of the camp, who is a performer.

The second aspect of theatricality in camp is its dramatic form. Camp, like drag, always involves a performer or performers and an audience. This is its structure. It is only stretching the point a little to say that even in unintentional camp, this interaction is maintained. In the case of the football player, his behavior was transformed by his audience into a performance. In many cases of unintentional camp, the camp performs to his audience by commenting on the behavior or appearance of "the scene," which is then described as "campy." In intentional camp, the structure of performer and audience is almost always clearly defined. This point will be elaborated below.

Third, camp is suffused with the perception of "being as playing a role" and "life as theatre." It is at this point that drag and camp merge and augment each other. I was led to an appreciation of this while reading Parker Tyler's

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12 Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" p. 529.
appraisal of Greta Garbo. Garbo is generally regarded in the homosexual community as “high camp.” Tyler stated that “‘Drag acts,’ I believe, are not confined to the declassed sexes. Garbo ‘got in drag’ whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a man’s arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck ... bear the weight of her thrown-back head.” He concludes, “How resplendent seems the art of acting! It is all impersonation, whether the sex underneath is true or not.”

We have to take the long way around to get at the real relationship between Garbo and camp. The homosexual is stigmatized, but his stigma can be hidden. In Goffman’s terminology, information about his stigma can be managed. Therefore, of crucial importance to homosexuals themselves and to non-homosexuals is whether the stigma is displayed so that one is immediately recognizable or is hidden so that he can pass to the world at large as a respectable citizen. The covert half (conceptually, not necessarily numerically) of the homosexual community is engaged in “impersonating” respectable citizenry, at least some of the time. What is being impersonated?

The stigma essentially lies in being less than a man and in doing something that is unnatural (wrong) for a man to do. Surrounding this essence is a halo effect: violation of culturally standardized canons of taste, behavior, speech, and so on, rigorously associated (prescribed) with the male role (e.g., fanciful or decorative clothing styles, “effeminate” speech and manner, expressed disinterest in women as sexual objects, expressed interest in men as sexual objects, unseemly concern with personal appearance, etc.). The covert homosexual must therefore do two things: first, he must conceal the fact that he sleeps with men. But concealing this fact is far less difficult than his second problem, which is controlling the halo effect or signals that would announce that he sleeps with men. The covert homosexual must in fact impersonate a man, that is, he must appear to the “straight” world to be fulfilling (or not violating) all the requisites of the male role as defined by the “straight” world.

The immediate relationship between Tyler’s point about Garbo and camp/drag is this: if Garbo playing women is drag, then homosexuals “passing” are playing men; they are in drag. This is the larger implication of drag/camp. In fact, gay people often use the word “drag” in this broader sense, even to include role playing which most people simply take for granted: role playing in school, at the office, at parties, and so on. In fact, all of life is role and theatre — appearance.

But granted that all acting is impersonation, what moved Tyler to designate Garbo’s acting specifically as “drag”? Drag means, first of all, role playing. The way in which it defines role playing contains its implicit attitude. The word “drag” attaches specifically to the outward, visible appurtenances of a role. In the type case, sex role, drag primarily refers to the wearing apparel and accessories that designate a human being as male or female, when it is worn by the opposite sex. By focusing on the outward appearance of role, drag implies that sex role and, by extension, role in general is something superficial, which can be manipulated, put on and off again at will. The drag concept implies distance between the actor and the role or “act.” But drag also means “costume.” This theatrical referent is the key to the attitude toward role playing embodied in drag as camp. Role playing is play; it is an act or show. The necessity to play at life, living role after superficial role, should not be the cause of bitterness or despair. Most of the sex role and other impersonations that male homosexuals do are done with ease, grace, and especially humor. The actor should throw himself into it; he should put on a good show; he should view the whole experience as fun, as a camp.

The double stance toward role, putting on a good show while indicating distance (showing that it is a show) is the heart of drag as camp. Garbo’s acting was thought to be “drag” because it was considered markedly androgynous, and because she played (even overplayed) the role of femme fatale with style. No man (in her movies) and few audiences (judging by her success) could resist her allure. And yet most of the men she seduced were her victims because she was only playing at love — only acting. This is made quite explicit in the film “Mata Hari,” in which Garbo the spy seduces men to get information from them.

The third quality of camp is its humor. Camp is for fun; the aim of camp is to make an audience laugh. In fact, it is a system of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms. I saw the reverse transformation — from laughter to pathos — often enough, and it is axiomatic among the impersonators that when the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity.

One of the most confounding aspects of my interaction with the impersonators was their tendency to laugh at situations that to me were horrifying or tragic. I was amazed, for instance, when one impersonator described to me as “very campy” the scene in “Whatever Happened to Baby Jane” in which Bette Davis served Joan Crawford a rat, or the scene in which Bette Davis makes her “comeback” in the parlor with the piano player.

Of course, not all impersonators and not all homosexuals are campy. The
camp is a homosexual wit and clown; his campy productions and performances are a continuous creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and, in the process, defining a positive homosexual identity. As one performer summed it up for me, "Homosexuality is a way of life that is against all ways of life, including nature's. And no one is more aware of it than the homosexual. The camp accepts his role as a homosexual and flaunts his homosexuality. He makes the other homosexuals laugh; he makes life a little brighter for them. And he builds a bridge to the straight people by getting them to laugh with him." The same man described the role of the camp more concretely in an interview:

Well, "to camp" actually means "to sit in front of a group of people... not on-stage, but you can camp on-stage... I think that I do that when I talk to the audience. I think I'm camping with 'em. But a "camp" herself is a queen who sits and starts entertaining a group of people at a bar around her. They all start listening to what she's got to say. And she says campy things. Oh, somebody smarts off at her and she gives 'em a very flip answer. A camp is a flip person who has declared emotional freedom. She is going to say to the world, "I'm queer." Although she may not do this all the time, but most of the time a camp queen will. She'll walk down the street and she'll see you and say, "Hi, Mary, how are you?" right in the busiest part of town... she'll actually camp, right there. And she'll swish down the street. And she may be in a business suit; she doesn't have to be dressed outlandishly. Even at work the people figure that she's a camp. They don't know what to call her, but they hire her 'cause she's a good kid, keeps the office laughing, doesn't bother anybody, and everyone'll say, "Oh, running around with George's more fun! He's just more fun!" The squares are saying this. And the other ones [homosexuals] are saying, "Oh, you've got to know George, she's a camp." Because the whole time she's light-hearted. Very seldom is camp sad. Camp has got to be flip. A camp queen's got to think faster than other queens. This makes her camp. She's got to have an answer to anything that's put to her."

Now homosexuality is not camp. But you take a camp, and she turns around and she makes homosexuality funny, but not ludicrous; funny but not ridiculous... this is a great, great art. This is a fine thing... Now when it suddenly became the word... became like... it's like the word "Mary." Everybody's "Mary," "Hi, Mary. How are you, Mary." And like "girl." You may be talking to one of the butchest queens in the world, but you still say, "Oh, girl." And sometimes they say, "Well, don't call me 'she' and don't call me 'girl.' I don't feel like a girl. I'm a man. I just like to go to bed with you girls. I don't want to go to bed with another man." And you say, "Oh, girl, get you. Now she's turned butch." And so you camp about it. It's sort of laughing at yourself instead of crying. And a good camp will make you laugh along with her, to

where you suddenly feel... you don't feel like she's made fun of you. She's sort of made light of a bad situation.

The camp queen makes no bones about it; to him the gay world is the "sisterhood." By accepting his homosexuality and flaunting it, the camp undercuts all homosexuals who won't accept the stigmatized identity. Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable.²¹ Not all references to the stigma are campy, however. Only if it is pointed out as a joke is it camp, although there is no requirement that the jokes be gentle or friendly. A lot of camping is extremely hostile; it is almost always sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well. Campy queens are very often said to be "bitches" just as camp humor is said to be "bitchy."²² The campy queen who can "read" (put down) all challengers and cut everyone down to size is admired. Humor is the campy queen's weapon. A camp queen in good form can come out on top (by group consensus) against all the competition.

Female impersonators who use drag in a comic way or are themselves comics are considered camps by gay people. (Serious glamour drag is considered campy by many homosexuals, but it is unintentional camp. Those who see glamour drag as a serious business do not consider it to be campy. Those who think it is) Since the camp role is a positive one, many impersonators take pride in being camps, at least on stage.²³ Since the camp role depends on such a large extent on verbal agility, it reinforces the superiority of the live performers over record performers, who, even if they are camp, most depend wholly on visual effects.

²¹ It's important to stress again that camp is a pre- or proto-political phenomenon. The anti-camp in this system is the person who wants to dissociate from the stigma to be like the oppressors. The camp says, "I am not like the oppressors." But in so doing he agrees with the oppressors' definition of who he is. The new radicals deny the stigma in a different way, by saying that the oppressors are illegitimate. This step is only foreshadowed in camp. It is also interesting that the lesbian wing of the radical homosexuals have come to women's meetings holding signs saying: "We are the women your parents warned you against."

²² The "bitch," as I see it, is a woman who accepts her inferior status, but refuses to do so gracefully or without fighting back. Women and homosexual men are oppressed by straight men, and it is no accident that both are beginning to move beyond bitches toward refusal of inferior status.

²³ Many impersonators told me that they got tired of being camps for their friends, lovers, and acquaintances. They often felt they were asked to play parties simply to entertain and camp it up, and said they did not feel like acting off stage, or didn't feel competent when out of drag. This broadens out into the social problem of all clowns and entertainers, or, even further, to anyone with a talent. He will often wonder if he is loved for himself.

²⁰ Speed and spontaneity are of the essence. For example, at a dinner party, someone said, "Oh, we forgot to say grace." One woman folded her hands without missing a beat and intoned, "Thank God everyone at this table is gay."