OTHER CAMP: RETHINKING CAMP, THE 1990s, AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

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Other Camp pairs 1990s experimental media produced by lesbian, bi, and queer women with queer theory to rethink the boundaries of one of cinema's most beloved and despised genres, camp. I argue that camp is a creative and political practice that helps communities of women reckon with representational voids. This project shows how primarily-lesbian communities, whether black or white, working in the 1990s employed appropriation and practices of curation in their camp projects to represent their identities and communities, where camp is the effect of juxtaposition, incongruity, and the friction between an object's original and appropriated contexts.

Central to *Other Camp* are the curation-centered approaches to camp in the art of LGBTQ women in the 1990s. I argue that curation— producing art through an assembly of different objects, texts, or artifacts and letting the resonances and tensions between them foster camp effects—is a practice that not only has roots within experimental approaches camp but deep roots in camp scholarship. Relationality is vital to the work that curation does as an artistic practice. I link the relationality in the practice of camp curation to the relation-based approaches of queer theory, Black Studies, and Decolonial theory. My work cultivates the curational roots at the heart of camp and different theoretical approaches to relationality in order to foreground the emergence of curational camp methodologies and approaches to art as they manifest in the work of Sadie Benning, G.B Jones, Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis, Cheryl Dunye, and Vaginal Davis.

My first chapter rethinks Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love* (1992) and G.B Jones's *Tom Girls* drawings as works that question the relationship between butch, masculinity, and camp in order to show how butch and camp are not always oppositional. Both Benning and Jones playfully navigate

the fractional distances and proximities in their forms of camp, blurring lines between masculinity and maleness and past and present, respectively.

My second chapter demonstrates how Kaucylia Brooke and Jane Cottis use camp to illustrate the pitfalls of lesbian representation within classical Hollywood cinema throughout their news-documentary spoof, *Dry Kisses Only* (1990). I argue that Brooke and Cottis's film and the camp produced within it, are as messy (in the best and queerest sense of that word) as the lesbian representational bind. I read a strange scene near the film's end as staging the conundrum of lesbian representation, where some lesbian's resolute visibility shatters verisimilitude.

While my first two chapters focus on how white lesbian artists utilize an impulse to curate as they complicate and counteract the stereotypical images of their identities, my third and fourth chapters shift the focus to curators of color and their own efforts to highlight the lack of representations and archives of their communities and their histories. Chapter 3 examines Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1997) and the photographs of Zoe Leonard as one means of camping history through the interrogation of communities, intersectional histories, and archives. I chart Dunye's protagonist's failures to find information within traditional archives in order to demonstrate how Dunye literally and figurative hones "the outside" as a theoretical camp edge.

Chapter 4 rewrites the history of camp to center Vaginal Davis as a pivotal and under recognized figure in the historical trajectory of camp and queerness. I argue that throughout her 40-year career as curator and artist, Davis has used camp to call attention to the uneven ways humanity is ascribed to people of color. What starts out in her zines as a critique of racializing forces through her own objectification, develops into a representational strategy in *That Fertile Feeling* (1982). Davis's video zines mark a shift in medium and focus to the compromised notions of humanity that cohere around those living at the gender and sexual margins of society. Camp and marginality are harnessed by Davis to show the vitality at work amidst oppression.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father.

Mom, Your courage, support, and smarts are a constant inspiration to me. Thank you for your unflinching acceptance of my life and the way I am in the world. I couldn't do any of this without you.

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If nothing else comes of this project, I hope I've at least made you both proud.

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Introduction

Informed by queer theory's privileging of gaps, loose ends, and the theoretically untidy, along with the potential and promise that relationality holds—within and beyond the scope of queer theory— my dissertation, *Other Camp: Rethinking Camp, The 1990s, and the Politics of Visibility*, is an interdisciplinary study that opens out camp's boundaries to new practices, new aesthetics, and new communities. Accordingly, this dissertation defines and historicizes camp through its capacity to facilitate relation, while also showing how relation-making has been crucial to camp's history and scholarship since the 1960s. I conceptualize camp as a relation between things and define camp as the effect of juxtaposition, incongruity, and the friction between an object's original and appropriated contexts. My work intervenes in the study of camp as genre or aesthetic practice by pointing out the narrowness of our past discussions and arguing that the 1990s, in particular, were a time when lesbian, bi, and queer women used camp's strategies of appropriation, incongruity, and juxtaposition as a creative and political practice that helped them reckon with representational voids. The dissertation moves well beyond the established camp canon to examine 1990s women's experimental film and cultural artifacts like television, zines, and comics from the last decade of the twentieth century. Mine is not an encyclopedic survey of camp's artifacts and scholarship. Instead, my work examines projects by artists like Sadie Benning and Cheryl Dunye to show how different communities of women appropriate visual cultures within film and art. While their approaches are unique, these artists find common ground in their use of camp to counteract a lack of representation within and beyond popular culture through interrogating, blurring, and compromising the limits of representational forms themselves. And, crucially, I see the impulse to curate in these artists' camp projects, where the tensions and frictions between elements in a work of art produce camp effects.

Part of the work that this project undertakes is to trace this impulse to curate as it surfaces in early 1990s work and develops into more of a methodological practice used by artists-curators like

Cheryl Dunye and Vaginal "Crème" Davis. At a basic level, many of the camp works that I cover in this *Other Camp* could be said to be products of curation, where rather than more traditional or narrative-driven films/videos/texts, the artists use, compile, and assemble different strands, fragments, or segments of material. This includes material that they have created as well as material appropriated from different media forms and genres that circulate within popular culture. Yet this assembly of materials moves beyond simple comparison or juxtaposition that results in camp. Rather, seeing these methodologies as curational indexes how these artists under consideration are positioning their cultures as connected, somewhat related, but distinctive from what commonly circulated within 1990s media cultures. In this curational camp, the give-and-take between different elements under artistic appropriation and manipulation can foster connections and dialogues and also demarcate differences between this subcultural camp and the larger media environment of the 1990s.

In addition to charting a curational impulse and curatorial camp practice in the late-20th century work of lesbian, bi and queer women, this project is haunted, enchanted, and inspired by the 1990s. I evoke "haunted"—or, probably a better fit for much of the work I'll cover here, appropriate this—from Kadji Amin's epilogue, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," which takes a long-overdue look at both queer theory's history and the field's fraught handwringing over its continued and contested relevance. I agree with many of Amin's points about the work the field must do to not only to survive but to endeavor to address the histories and lived experiences it overlooked for much of its first two decades. But, to me, the most provocative and inspiring challenge that Amin makes is complicating the ever-present elsewhere that has served as both prerogative and imperative for queer theory and queer studies to be "always elsewhere than it was before" (181). Increasingly, and far from always being a detriment, this "elsewhere" leads forward where the future's possibility always offers promise of better or more, where the "now" is

always eclipsed by the hopes of greener pastures, where we've wrung all that's worth knowing from our histories. The other, some other point, some other place with its lack of familiarity always seems to hold more promise than the present or past we live/lived.

This does assume, however, that everyone was willing or able to experience our histories. While technically alive for the 1990s, I was too young to be "present" or involved in this formative time for queer theory and the separate but related culmination of lesbian culture that took place during that decade. That said, the rational part of myself also knows that to romanticize that decade is just as big a folly as thinking of it as old hat. After all, the 1990s was a decade during "sex wars' and 'culture wars' shared the stage with Gulf Wars, War on Crime, and War on Drugs.

In his work *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Henry Louis Gates Jr writes of the divisiveness of the time and how the U.S. populace was divided along several fronts:

> Ours is a late twentieth century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions—to forge, for once a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture. (xv)

Gates captures the antagonism that manifested itself in impassioned battles over a slew of different political issues from abortion rights, to political rights for gays and lesbians, to public funding for the arts and higher education,[1] to the place of religion in schools, to affirmative action policies. These battles between conservatives and liberals were often played out through the media and not only had implications for the highest level of governance within the United States but also affected communities and smaller institutions. In an article about the impact of the culture wars on library

[1] For the specific impact of the culture wars on academia see, Eugene Goodheart, "Reflections on the Culture Wars," *Daedalus*, 126.4 (1997). [Separate Footnote] For a charting of the NEAs political emergence and further explanation as to its pivotal role in the culture wars, see, Richard Jensen, "The Culture Wars, 1965-1995: A Historian's Map," *Journal of Historical Society*, 29.17 (1995).

acquisitions, for example, Edward Shreeves characterized the culture wars as reflecting "deep divisions in values" between America's political poles of conservatism and liberalism that reached a boiling point in the 1980s and 1990s. Shreeves explains that these ideological fault lines often centered on "how money should be spent to achieve a public good. And they are marked by an emotional take-no-prisoners rhetoric that tends to stifle dialogue rather than encourage it" (877).

One particular focus that commanded the ire of conservative leaders, pundits, and politicians was the matter of funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. This was a highly contentious issue in the culture wars because it represented a clash in ideologies and a shift in American politics. Andrew Hartman takes up the prominence of debates about art during the culture wars, and he links the volatility of these debates to different values the conservative and liberal political establishments attributed to art as well as to the rise to cultural and political prominence of the evangelical conservatives. When it came to art, Hartman explains that "in the fight for American culture, conservatives were explicit about what type of artistic representations they opposed. They were against hostile portrayals of religion and people of religious faith, just as they were against favorable portrayals of extramarital sex and homosexuality. Such cultural expressions violated the normative America that conservatives sought to affirm" (172). This conflict was brought to a forefront during the NEA budget approval process in 1990 during which Senator Jesse Helms "led the Congressional battle against blasphemous art" (192). Hartman writes:

> Helms sought to persuade an amendment to the NEA budget that would have imposed restrictions on the type of art the endowment could sponsor. The Helms amendment would have specifically prohibited the NEA from subsidizing works that depicted homoeroticism, sadomasochism, and sexual exploitation of children. It never got enough votes to pass. Instead, Congress reauthorized the NEA budget in 1990 with a vaguely worded decency clause that went as follows: 'Artistic excellence

> and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American people.' (196)

This collision in ideology—what did or did not count as art, what did or did not deserve funding from the NEA, should publicly funded art take efforts to represent the concerns of "general standards of decency" of the average American—would continue to be a quarrelsome issue between the two major parties in the American political system. NEA funding controversies would embroil artists and distributors throughout the 1990s. The feminist media nonprofit organization Women Make Movies, who produced *Dry Kisses Only* (Brooke and Cottis 1990) and *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye 1997) (the subject of my second and third chapters), often attracted the ire of conservative politicians by producing and distributing films that pushed the standards of acceptable representation due to the prevalence of feminist films and films that took up lesbian sexuality. A 1996 $31, 500 NEA grant that Women Make Movies awarded to Cheryl Dunye in order to facilitate the production of *The Watermelon Woman* was brought under public scrutiny by West Michigan Representative Pete Hoekstra, then chairman of the House of Representative's Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee (Trescott). In the course of investigating NEA funding, Hoekstra lambasted Women Make Movies, writing that the organization had "the appearance of a veritable taxpayer-funded peep show" (Trescott). Hoekstra also wrote that he was shocked by Dunye's film, explaining that he and his staff "reviewed this film and found that it portrays graphic sex images, is strewn with graphic and degrading sexual language, and portrays the use of illegal drugs as a normal recreational activity" (Trescott). While it is easy to dismiss Hoekstra and other conservative politicians battling to save the souls of Americans from the corruption and danger posed by a sex scene between women or the smoking of a blunt between friends, he was perfectly serious. It is all too easy now after *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, *Modern Family*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (on E! no less), and

the one in twenty commercials that might feature LBGTQ people to be cynical about the political potential of visibility and representation. Yet the efforts I chronicle in this project are from a time when visibility went hand in hand with radicality, where it was a matter of pride, politics, connection, and survival that was not without its own share of risk.

The culture wars comprised a complex tangle of politics that played out through media on national stages. Though I've primarily highlighted conservative responses to the issues of the day, they were not the only political forces to mobilize. In the wake of the religious right's rise and efforts by this political establishment to fire gay and lesbian teachers, call for the quarantining of those afflicted with HIV, and influence the highest levels of government to delay funding for that health crisis, the LGBTQ community mobilized its own lobbying efforts to influence government leaders and launched several political groups committed to consciousness raising, political protest, and activism. This political edge left its imprint on public policy and perception, but also within the public university system, where queer theory emerged within the cultural and political tensions of the culture wars. Amin writes:

> Insofar as early 1990s queer theory was, in part, a bid to bring some of the energy, in-your-face defiance, political urgency, and transgressiveness of on-the-ground queer activism into the academy, its early appeal was inseparable from its affective connection to a range of events outside the academy. If *queer* offered itself up, at this time, as name for a set of theoretical interventions around the relations between sexuality, normativity, and the political, it was because of the current and recent cultural contests it evoked: the genocidal Reagan administration's nonresponse to the AIDS crisis; the associated resurgence of violent homophobia; a newly performative, in-your-face, and media-savvy form of activism in groups like ACT-UP, the Lesbian Avengers, and Queer Nation; highly publicized battles over the state funding of

> queer artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowitz; and the ongoing legacy of the 'sex wars' that roiled feminists and birthed a vocal feminist sex-radicalism during the 1980s. (180)

Just as both the culture wars and early queer theory are reflective of the inseparable connections between politics, representation, and the theories that emerge from the convergence of issues within and outside the academy, *Other Camp* examines these intersections as they appear in the art of LGBTQ women. Though the days of seeing lesbian and gay culture as radical are gone, this project is premised on the idea that time not provides the historical distance for camp to accrue but also provides a chance to revisit and reevaluate artistic endeavors now that time's passing has weathered their relevance. Not to mention that the work I cover here indexes communities and relations that could use some remembering, if even they *only* "remember for" us the ways communities can be forged in the face of oppression.[2]

Crucially linked to flying "in the face" of oppression is the "in-your-face" style of activism and creation that was endemic to the 1990s, and the creators this project examines all explore different facets of visibility—its promise, its privileges and its travesties—and camp is elemental to their approaches where the potential for visibility can be extracted and challenged. That does not mean that these women approach the issue of visibility in the same manner, as each approach is informed by relationships to different communities, as well as their different positionalities. How Sadie Benning and G.B. Jones approach the issue of butch/butch femme visibility is going to differ from how Cheryl Dunye and Vaginal Davis critique and challenge either the problem of lack of black lesbian visibility through fictional pasts or the simultaneously pernicious and generative

[2] I evoke a line of voiceover dialogue delivered by June Walker (Cheryl Clarke) in Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* as Walker implores Cheryl to forgo chronicling Fae Richards's relationship with a white director, Martha Page. Though Cheryl rejects this notion that Richards's history, or any history, can be "remembered for" her, the sheer beauty of this language has stuck with me through the course of this project.

potential of racialized stereotypes, respectively. Camp's theoretical opacity, its negotiation and complication of distance and proximity, its ability to mobilize excess and incongruity, and its penchant for facilitating relation-making unites what might otherwise be seen as these artists' different political endeavors and agendas.

Genealogies: Camp, Queerness, and Curation

Central to *Other Camp* are the curation-centered approaches to camp in the art of LGBTQ women in the 1990s. I argue that curation—producing art through an assembly of different objects, texts, or artifacts and letting the resonances and tensions between them foster camp effects—is a practice that not only has roots within experimental approaches to camp like the work of Kenneth Anger but also has deep roots in camp scholarship starting with Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp." Relationality is vital to the work that curation does as an artistic practice, and I link what I see as camp's capacity to foster and mobilize relations through the relation-based approaches to queer theory, Black Studies, and Decolonial Theory. My work mobilizes the curational roots at the heart of camp and different theoretical approaches to relationality in order to foreground the emergence of curational camp methodologies and approaches to art as they manifest in the work of Sadie Benning, G.B Jones, Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis, Cheryl Dunye, and Vaginal Davis.

What follows are the theoretical genealogies that serve as the foundation for *Other Camp*.

Camp

Approaches to camp scholarship can be divided into a few different, well, camps. The first of these camps are the encyclopedic efforts undertaken to define the camp canon of objects, stars, and films. These texts are often pleasures to read due to the enthusiasm and passion for their general subject as well as the people, texts, and objects authors like Paul Roen, Mark Booth, and Philip Core

attribute to camp.[3] While the theoretical depth or complexity might be lacking in these camp encyclopedias, these works are a testament to the sacred place that camp holds for different generations of, primarily, gay men. These are fan efforts to chronicle and explain how certain objects and performances come to be deemed camp and be treasured by camp enthusiasts.

The second, and largest, of these camps is the body of scholarship that—while forgoing the efforts to account for all of the camp canon—seeks to center camp as a cultural practice for gay males.[4] Michael Bronski's *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* charts the roles of camp, gay sentiment, and gay sensibilities through the last half of the 19th century toward the tail end of the twentieth. Bronski is particularly interested in camp as a response to homophobia and gay liberation. Daniel Harris, in his book *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture,* examines how camp functions within the subcultural communities of pre-Stonewall, male homosexuals. Rather than situate camp as a specifically homosexual engagement with style or taste, Harris sees camp operating as a method "of achieving a collective subcultural identity" (17). The approaches to camp undertaken by Juan A. Suárez and Matthew Tinkcom connect the identities of gay male avant-garde filmmakers to camp as a method of artistic production.[5] While both Suárez and Tinkcom take up camp's complex relationship to high culture and low culture Suárez focuses on camp's more appropriative qualities. Tinkcom's work uses a Marxist lens to link camp production of gay males, both at the top and bottom of Hollywood's studio system and inside and outside of it, to camp as a means of expressing

[3] See, Paul Roen, *High Camp: A Gay Guide to Camp and Cult Films Vol. 1* (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1994); Paul Roen, *High Camp: A Gay Guide to Camp and Cult Films Vol. 2* (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1997); See also, Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth* (New York: Delilah Books, 1984); See also, Mark Booth, *Camp* (New York: Quartet Books, 1983).

[4] Though culture, cultural artifacts, and cultural practices are most often under-examined in scholarship about gay male camp, there have been several efforts to elucidate camp literature. See, Gary McMahon, *Camp in Literature* (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006) and also, Christian Lassen, *Camp Comforts: Reparative Gay Literature in Times of AIDS* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

[5] See, Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). See also, Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

sexual and gender difference. The most recent additions to this second group of camp scholarship are Moe Meyer's *An Archaeology of Posing* and David Halperin's *How To be Gay*. Of the two works, Meyer's theory of camp takes a much more hardline stance as a solely gay discourse and a specifically gay cultural critique. Halperin's does maintain that other methods and practices of camp are possible for those outside of gay communities although he locates the value of camp as a gay cultural practice based in irony—one that creates networks of recognition among gay men (155). Steven Cohan echoes a similar vein of thought to Halperin in regard to camp's importance as an index of nonnormativity. But while Halperin maintains his focus on aspects of gay sociality, Cohan defines camp as "the ensemble of strategies to enact queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality (1). What unites all of these efforts are the varying way and varying degrees that they link camp to gay male culture.

The third camp of camp scholarship are the camp anthologies that were published throughout the 1990s. I see value in many of these anthologies not only for how they bring iconic scholarship—which often comprises not just academic scholarship but also more journalistic pieces and essays about camp in popular culture—together in one document, but for how many of the 1990s anthologies seek to complicate and/or expand camp's traditional resonances to include works by women and lesbians. One of the better-known camp anthologies is *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman. Bergman's anthology collects pieces by camp scholars like Jack Babuscio, Esther Newton, Andrew Ross and Pamela Robertson and distills camp's definition down to a cultural style "that favors exaggeration, artiface, and extremity, … exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture," camp's importance for people "outside the cultural mainstream," and its affiliation with "homosexual culture" (Bergman 4-5). Published just a month prior to Bergman's anthology was Moe Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp.* Meyer's anthology is most notable for situating its approach at the convergence of an emergent queer theory

and how camp was being used in forms of LGBTQ activism during the early 1990s. As such, Meyer defines the form of camp that unites the collected essays in his anthology around three guiding statements: "Camp is political; Camp is solely a queer (and/or sometimes a gay and lesbian) discourse; and Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique" (1).[6] Though still evoking queerness in relationship to camp, Fabio Cleto's anthology, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, settles into the definitional pliability of both camp and queer in a manner that shows a general shift in queerness away from its more identity-centered conceptions that were popular in the years of its emergence. In attempting to define camp Cleto writes:

> My suggestion is that we rethink the manifold variety of kinds of camp as a variety of re/presentations and historical articulations of the camp discourse, grounded in the varying models of circulation of the elements (aristocratic, detachment, theatricality, ironical distance, parodical self-commitment, sexual deviance, etc.) which have been over the years ascribed to 'camp.' And the variety (with all of the implications of divergence such a word carries in itself) of criticism takes part in this epistemic condition or being, for its representations are inscribed in a cultural paradigm, and they significantly contribute to crystalize, or cut, one facet of camp. The definition of camp may thus well reside, I think, in its modes and reasons of resistance to definition, or in a metaphor of such indefinability as materially constituted. (5-6)

Cleto's theorizing of camp and how he particularly leans into the affinities that camp and queerness have in regard to their definitional opacity has been very important to the camp sensibility of this

[6] In addition to claiming camp for queer and queerness "(and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse," Meyer explains that "Additionally, because Camp is defined as a solely queer discourse, all un-queer activities that have been previously accepted as 'camp,' such as Pop culture expressions, have been redefined as examples of the appropriation of queer praxis. Because un-queer appropriations interpret Camp within the context of compulsory heterosexuality, they no longer are Camp as it is defined here. In other words, the un-queer do not have access to the discourse of Camp, only derivatives constructed through the act of appropriation." See Moe Meyer, "Introduction," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Moe Meyer ed. (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 1.

project. In his approach, Cleto bucks a decades-long, highly contested debate about what camp is, who or what has a right to it, and what is/is not camp. Rather than retread or contribute to the divisiveness of camp debates, Cleto crafts a definition of camp that is both open-ended and respectful of the multiplicity and "variety" that a term like camp evokes.

In recent years, there have been several endeavors to expand the camp canon to include cultures and artifacts outside of camp's traditional association with gay male culture. Elly-Jean Nielsen in her essay "Lesbian Camp: An Unearthing" looks to a photography and print media culture of the 1980s and 1990s where she locates three types of lesbian camp: the classic, the erotic, and the radical.[7] Barbara Jane Brickman undertakes to show lesbian camp can be found in 1950s exploitation films in her essay "A Strange Desire That Never Dies: Monstrous Lesbian Camp in the Age of Conformity." Brickman identifies the complicated ways that lesbian camp can both resonate with lesbians who watch these films and be reliant upon heteronormative and homophobic stereotypes. Most recently, Katrin Horn's *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess* examines camp in post-millennium film and pop culture contexts,[8] where camp marks connections between "critique and pleasure" and "distance and affect" that "allows for participation in and enthusiasm for mass culture at the same time that it stresses its shortcomings, dangers and limitations" (5, 9). My project foregrounds LGBTQ women's camp not only as a dimension of subversive reading practices but as an artistic and political practice undertaken by different communities of women working in and through various media forms in the 1990s. It also focuses on texts and camp creators that pre-

[7] Elly-Jean Nielsen, "Lesbian Camp: An Unearthing," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, (2016) 20:1, p.116-135. Nielsen views her work as a recovery project that encourages the broadening of lesbian camp types and forms beyond the scope of her work. I second her impulse and see the work of my essay as part of a larger process of discovery. I also echo Nielsen's insistence to a multiplicity of options and forms for lesbian camp.

[8] Post-2000 popular culture was also the driving force behind Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner's *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, where they have chapters devoted to the way that camp coalesces around characters like Xena and Karen Walker but also entertainers like Macy Gray and Gwen Stefani. For more, See, Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner, *Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2008).

date or are often excluded from the era of New Queer Cinema, a 1990s phenomenon which saw an increase in feature films addressing LGBTQ themes and narratives.[9] *Other Camp* demonstrates how lesbian, bi, and queer women used camp as a creative means to negotiate their identities, define their places within punk/queer subcultures, and constitute their communities. Through a consideration of experimental video, independent film, and other countercultural media, this work opens up the camp canon and its critical conversations which traditionally have been anchored within (white) gay male culture. Additionally, this project articulates a different facet of camp history, one that I argue is rooted in curational approaches to camp as an art form and strategies of writing about camp as cultural practice.

Curation and (inter)Relations, or Curation, Camp and Queerness Curation

Rather than offering a history of camp as an aesthetic movement or as a genre of film, and rather than conceiving of queer as an umbrella term for describing a multiplicity of sexualities and identities, my project considers both camp and queer as they function as a means of relation-making.

I define camp curation as a methodological practice of bringing incongruous objects/ideas/etc. into relation with one another to produce a camp effect through means like juxtaposition and excess. *Other Camp* is premised on examining works that exhibit curation made by several LGBTQ women creating in the 1990s. Yet informing this examination is the conceptual promise of curation as artistic and relational practice, a practice that I locate in two different efforts to produce and write about camp in the 1960s and early approaches to queer theory.

Part of what this project is premised on is how a curational impulse—the gathering together of objects for the purposes of relation-making—gives way to curational methodologies that facilitate

[9] See, B. Ruby Rich, "The New Queer Cinema: Director's Cut," *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

camp production. But, I'd also argue that this impulse to curate is not unfamiliar to camp. In fact, one might even say that has its roots in some of the most well-known camp scholarship and texts.

Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp" is one example of how camp scholarship, even the most famous piece of camp scholarship, relied upon a curational methodology. Rather than employ the more traditional scholarly form of the essay, Sontag chose to loosely string her notes and thoughts about camp together in the form of "jottings" that contain 58 numbered notes outlining various qualities of camp punctuated by examples upon examples of camp objects. The range of objects Sontag lists in "Notes on Camp" is quite extensive and includes Art Nouveau furniture, Greta Garbo, *Flash Gordon* comics and *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941). Sontag compiles these objects, in lieu of a more traditional definition, in order to highlight the camp sensibility that they share. This project wants to argue that the lists of objects that Sontag provides is not only important for the myriad of individual examples of camp it creates. More important for this project are the relations between the objects that help Sontag gesture toward what camp is (and also what it is not). And while Sontag is not performing curation in order to facilitate a camp effect, the *curational impulse* – the gathering together of objects for the purposes of relation-making – is vital to her conception of camp.

Released the same year as "Notes on Camp," Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964) is a keystone for how this project thinks about the notion of camp curation. Anger curates this collection of cultural objects, found/stolen footage, and political and religious imagery to eroticize and recontextualize the image of the biker, proving that this outlaw figure, frequently associated with the margins of culture, can be seen as a refraction of a slew of valued and maligned forms of masculinities. Anger brings together objects and images from popular culture like comics, bikers, and films like *The Wild One* (Benedek 1953) and juxtaposes these things with Nazi imagery, appropriated footage of Christ walking with the apostles from *The Last Journey to Jerusalem* (Dew

1952), and rock n' roll tunes from the 1960s. This project is interested in the ways that certain LGBTQ artists employ many of the same techniques that Anger uses—like appropriation and juxtaposition, for instance— to their own varied cultural and political aims.

The other facet of my project that is relevant for any discussion of my methodology is what I see as queer theory's own investments in curation or the curational impulse. I see this most explicitly in the work of Gayle Rubin, whose writing often creates conceptual space to show connections between different sexually marginalized communities. Rubin's "Of Catamites and Kings" is one examples of this. Rubin is especially deliberate in this essay subtitled "Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries" to formulate a conception of butch and butchness that is inclusive of a wide range of genders. The notion of categories is an important part of Rubin's methodological move throughout her essay because it is a term that she uses in order to anchor several figures with varying relationships to masculinity. But this stability is something that Rubin productively undermines soon after she establishes her categories in order to arrive at her larger goal of acknowledging a host of different gender possibilities that have equally different relationships to "butch." Categories, for Rubin, cannot be unyielding or uncompromising because they "invariably leak" (253). These delightful leakages are productive disruptions for Rubin, and while classifications, taxonomies, and categories might not contain these leaks, I view curation as a way to stage those interrelations. The relations between objects and categories and how they intermingle, influence, and impact each other is vital to both reading Rubin's work as curational and as part of the curational methodology guiding *Other Camp*.

Eve Sedgwick's work in *Tendencies* and *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* is also indicative of the type of queerness *Other Camp* is engaging in. Within *Tendencies,* Sedgwick expands the definition of queer, moving it beyond a catch-all phrase that denotes "same-sex object, sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of

definitional lines" to settle on a measured, exciting definition that latches on to the value of possibility that queerness offers beyond its work as a marker for certain sexual attractions and desires. Sedgwick situates her definition of queerness as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). Just as Sedgwick proposes a definition of queerness that is, above all, open to different forms of meaning and meaning-making, my work with both queerness and camp is centered on the relational qualities I see as inherent in each. The value that Sedgwick places in queer's allowance for plurality and multiplicity is especially relevant in light of the efforts the fields of contemporary queer theory and queer studies are taking to pursue more compassionate and intersectional forms of queerness. Given that my definition of camp is also focused around what I am seeing as camp's tendency also to be an effect caused by relations among objects and people, and a form of excess, Sedgwick's work with queer theory and its value in relation-making serves as the basis for letting me open out both "camp" and "queer" into new, undertheorized territory.

Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* is also a work within queer theory that is vitally important to the values and history I ascribe to curation. In a similarly multiplicitious vein as her definition of queerness in *Tendencies*, in *Touching Feeling* Sedgwick locates the value of "beside" as a preposition but also as a means of underscoring the ways in which "beside"— by its nature—allows for a more open, less restrictive means of thinking about relations and relation-making. Sedgwick writes:

> the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which, *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos … *Beside* is an interesting preposition also because there's nothing very dualistic about it … *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling,

> leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (8, emphasis in original)

Sedgwick's preference for "beside" demonstrates an approach to queer theory that resists duality and hierarchy where the emphasis is not on temporal relevance or primacy or origins. "Beside" allows for a multiplicity of different relations that coexist without totalizing. Though hardly a new concept or idea, the work of Rubin and Sedgwick indexes the best of relational approaches to queer theory where connections and relations are fostered with compassion.

The potential for curation as a specifically queer methodological practice was the center point of Gayatri Gopinath's *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetics of Queer Diaspora*. Departing from more traditional definitions of curation,[10] Gopinath uses curation as the guiding methodology for her work. I find great value and thought in Gopinath's work and the "care" that she brings to the art and aesthetic practices the book considers:

> I want to suggest that the "caring for" the past that is at the root of curation can take the form of carefully attending to the aesthetic practices through writing: the critical analysis of art objects/aesthetic practices by placing them in relation to one another can function as a mode of queer curation…My own project of queer curation in these pages is similarly engaged with valuing that which has been deemed without value, but, even more importantly, it deliberately stages 'collisions and encounters' between aesthetic practices that may seem discontinuous or unrelated. My queer

[10] For example, Michael Bhasker, in his study of curation's value in our current world filled with excess choice, defines curation as "the best word available for this ensemble of activities that goes beyond selecting and arranging to blend with refining and displaying, explaining and simplifying, categorizing and organizing." See, Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess* (London: Piatkus, 2016) p.6; David Balzer's *Curationism* provides more of a historical overview of the changing role of curation in the art world and outside of it. See, David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014.); Carolee Thea, in contrast, examines the developments that curation has undergone in contemporary museum practices. See, Carolee Thea, *On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2009); Paul O'Neil focuses on how curation emerged as a distinct form of discourse in the last 13 years of the twentieth century. See, Paul O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

> curational practice entails an obligation to "care for" and "care about" the connections between these texts and, crucially, to make apparent why these connections matter and what they tell us about or imbricated pasts and futures. As such, *Unruly Visions*, is an act of queer curation that seeks to reveal not coevalness or sameness but rather the co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies, temporalities, and colonial and postcolonial histories of displacement and dwelling. (4)

Gopinath's work, like my own, looks backward to queer creative practices and aesthetics of the past, where curation is a means to bring new and different attention and contexts to works from LGBTQ history. Gopinath's inquiry brings a queer postcolonial lens that connects what otherwise would be disparate artistic practices that speak through their connections to the ways that "the aesthetic practice of queer diaspora are archival practices that excavate and memorialize the minor histories (personal, familial, collective, regional) that stand outside of official nation-centered perspectives" (11).[11] Curation for Gopinath, as it is for myself, is not only a process of selection or assembly but a means to chart anticipated and unanticipated relations between objects. This is what makes curation such an important methodology to talk about in regard to contemporary queer theory. The curation is more than just the sum of its parts. Both Gopinath and I see the importance of conceptual and political relationality that curation helps bring into focus. Crucially—and queerly— however, curation does not work to homogenize or totalize the elements it brings together. Instead, curation fosters both relations and antagonisms between works, its "open mesh" barely containing the conceptual possibilities and frictions relation can encourage.

[11] Ibid., 11. Central to this is Gopinath's concept of a "queer regional imaginary" which suggests the possibility of tracing lines of connection and commonality, a kind of South-South relationality, between seemingly discrete regional spaces that in fact bypass the nation (5).

While Gopinath situates her organization of her project as a project of queer curation, I want to shift the focus of my work to artists and artist-curators who feature methodological practices of curation in their works of camp. This shifts the focus from the conceptual framing of a project or inquiry to account for how the process of assembling, combining, and arrangement of elements undergird and inspire the camp creators my project examines. Working with a variety of different experimental media, the atypical camp created by 1990s queer and lesbian women uses the creative and relational avenues opened up by both camp and curation to put forward different agendas that complicate our understanding, advocate for, and challenge the invisibility for marginalized communities. The relationality endemic to camp as an aesthetic form, queerness as a theoretical practice, and curation as a methodology dynamize these artistic efforts.

Chapter Summaries

I begin this project with my first chapter which focuses on Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love* (1992) and G.B. Jones's *Tom Girls* drawings to show these texts revise a long-standing oppositional relationship between butches, masculinity, and camp. Both Jones's and Benning's work demonstrate how camp can work differently when contextualized with butch gender performances and lesbian sexuality, Like the other creators this project covers, Benning and Jones demonstrate the impulse to curate in their film and zine projects. Benning combines exterior shots, appropriations from popular culture that include old Hollywood films and popular music, and drag performances of the film's young butch protagonist impersonating iconic masculine tropes like bikers and pool sharks. Benning's curation of masculine performances shows how all forms of masculinity are constructed performances ,and she contrasts this curation with a performance of masculinity I've labeled as "un-drag." Benning's inclusion of this "un-drag" performance in her curation of masculine performances shows how butch masculinity is also a performance, but one that mobilizes distances between masculinity and maleness in its presentation. Camp is crucial for this presentation and eroticism. The

play of distance is also important for the work of G.B. Jones in her *Tom Girls* series of drawings, which curates certain drawings by the iconic Tom of Finland and then replaces the sexual extravagance between well-muscled sailors, bikers, and lumberjacks with slightly more buttoned-up and politically charged scenes of eroticism between punk butches and femmes. Though the more traditional forms of curation as literal gathering together of works is crucial to Jones's project in the *Tom Girls* series, I argue that the compositonal intimacy between Tom of Finland's work and Jones's appropriation allows her curation to stage the interrelations and resonances between past and present.

My second chapter demonstrates how Kaucylia Brooke and Jane Cottis use camp to illustrate the pitfalls of lesbian representation within classical Hollywood cinema in their news-documentary spoof, *Dry Kisses Only* (1990). Brooke and Cottis draw on both heavy-handed and subtle forms of camp in their amalgam of a film that combines a fake television news magazine report by *L.E.S. News* concerning the unsatisfying representation of lesbians in classical Hollywood cinema with two comedy sketches, an experimental film interlude, "lesbian on the street interviews," and reimaginings of popular twentieth-century films that turn Sapphic subtext into lesbian representation. I examine Brook and Cottis's film for what I term its messiness, but also for the messiness of the representational problem they seek to address. The majority of the film is comprised of the directors' efforts to mitigate what they see as a representational void in regard to lesbians in film through a fake news broadcast that Brooke and Cottis routinely disrupt by subtly eschewing tenets of television news presentation that thrives off its efficiency, its polish, and its predictability. My conclusion to this chapter focuses on how certain lesbian bodies disrupt and complicate Brooke and Cottis's representational approach throughout *Dry Kisses Only* while also pointing toward how one of the distinctive figures of lesbian camp is its ability to tolerate disruptions to camp.

Where my first two chapters chart an emergent impulse to curate in the works of Benning, Jones, and Brooke and Cottis, my last two chapters focus on the artistic efforts of Cheryl Dunye and Vaginal Davis as curation develops from impulse into a full-fledged, intersectional camp methodology. Chapter 3 looks to Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1997) as one example of how camp can be used to confront missing histories and archives as they impact Black communities specifically, and Black LGBTQ communities in particular. I chart Dunye's protagonist's failures to find information within traditional archives to demonstrate how Dunye literally and figuratively hones "the outside" as a theoretical camp edge that both humorously and reverently challenges what counts as history. I argue that the way that the film creatively rethinks or outthinks notions or archives, history, fiction and reality is not only a result of Dunye's creation but also her *curation*. In its potent blurring of real places, historical periods, and created histories, Dunye's approach relies on circumventing normative archives and institutions—where exterior shots of Philadelphia scaffold her fictions and facilitates her efforts to create through curation.

My final chapter rewrites the history of camp to center Vaginal Davis as a pivotal and under recognized figure in the historical trajectory of camp and queerness. This chapter asserts that throughout Davis's career, her work has routinely called attention to how her positionality as a Black queer woman maintains a different relationship to camp. I use the work of Alexander G. Weheliye, Sylvia Wynter, and Cathy Cohen to think through the ways that Davis's approach to camp frequently critiques the uneven ways in which humanity is ascribed to people of color and queer sex radicals. I track the emergence of Davis's work with compromised notions of humanity and critique of different media forms in an early zine project called *Evil Taco: An Unauthorized Biography,* through her development of her Fertile La Toyah Jackson character in *That Fertile Feeling* (1982) and the video versions of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*, to a culmination in her work as a co-curator of Platinum Oasis in the year 2000. By looking at Davis's forty-year career, one that stubbornly bucks

the ephemerality of the media she works through, we can see the practice of assembly that comprised Davis's work in her prolific career as a zinestress take on different but related significance as the scale of her curational endeavors shifts from appropriative assembly that facilitates her play with media genre and form to bringing together a range of artists and performers to recenter the crucial importance of the sexual and gender margins to an ever-more-assimilated queerness.

Conclusion

If Rubin served as an original catalyst for this project, the work of Sylvia Wynter and how her ideas have been taken up by scholars by Black, African American, and Decolonial Studies has been a fitting theoretical and conceptual bookend to Rubin. Wynter's ideas and writing are rooted in her approach to humanity as praxis. Katherine McKittrick writes that Wynter's research on social systems, the biological sciences, and human activities demonstrates

> her understanding that our present analytic categories—race, class, gender, sexuality, margins and centers, insides and outsides—tell a partial story, wherein humanness continues to be understood in hierarchical terms. The realization of the living, then, is a *relational* act and practice that identifies the contemporary underclass as colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless peoples who are not simply *marked* by social categories but are instead identifiably condemned due to their dysselected human status…the realization of the living must be imagined as inviting being human as praxis to our purview, which envisions the human as verb, as alterable, as relational, and necessarily dislodges the naturalization of dysselection. (7-8)

While the work of this introduction has cast relationality as inherent in the work of camp, curation, and queer theory, relationality has been a practice used within the disciplines of Black Studies and Ethnic Studies as a means of thinking through the different forces that structure and uphold

inequalities and hierarchies. At the beginning of this project, I was enchanted with the openness of relationality as I saw it gestured toward in 1990s queer theory. And I still feel that way. However, as this project developed, I began to see that the stakes of relationality are different as it appears in the work of Edouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, and Alexander G. Weheliye; this is a difference that reveals that relationality is still a powerful force and theoretical tool, but that it serves different theoretical means—means that are reflective of our privileges and positionalities.

There is no way to compare the camp political projects of Cheryl Dunye and Vaginal Davis, just is there is no way to compare Dunye's and Davis's political projects to Saddie Benning's, G.B. Jones's, or Brooke and Cottis's; their different privileges and positionalities make that impossible. However, all six women use camp, specifically its curational impulses and methodologies, as one tool and conceptual method to explain something about their and their community's relationship to the world and the structures of oppression working within it. Curation facilitates the incorporation, appropriation, and use of facets of inequality or discrimination. All of the women under consideration in this project use camp as the basis of their varied critiques. Their efforts afford insights into an overlooked valence of camp's history, more expansive notions of camp, and a better appreciation of the richness and political impact of camp cultures.

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Chapter 1

Camp, Un-drag, and Conceptual Intimacies in Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love* (1992) and G.B. Jones's *Tom Girls*

Can we talk about butches anymore? Should we? This chapter is premised on an affirmative answer to this question and is seeking to present a "backward" approach to 27-year-old and 25-year-old objects, in an effort to consider how we might be able to talk about the butch again—decades following the 1990s when her broad shoulders bore the weight as one of queer theory's privileged examples of gender performativity. After a decade and a half of queer theory's and queer studies movement away from the sexual and gender identities that comprised its foundation, we've seen the pendulum swing back to the new, emergent, and popular gender and sexual identities of the present—with non-binary and trans being two examples of this delightful variety that have impacted the ever-shifting trajectory of queerness. Though butch as an identity or gender expression might have some proverbial cobwebs to shake off, our contemporary moment, when identity is invogue again, might be the best place to begin this process. Or, if you'll allow me an oversimplified Butler-ian riff/sacrilege: *If we can* talk about identities, then it should not solely be the identities of the present that capture our attention. This is especially pertinent given the ways that certain aesthetic movements or artistic practices benefit from the accrual of historical, cultural, and scholastic irrelevance. It is also worth noting that the figure of the butch, even in the 1990s resurgence, was already a send-up to the butch/femme bar culture of the 1950s—where the actual and legendary intransigence of those butches still found a way of haunting even four decades later. Camp is the cure for the butch's stubborn untimeliness. I argue that camp is one of the avenues for tackling the thorny issue of identity in ways that guard against essentialism and hierarchies. Through a reconsideration of Sadie Benning's short video *It Wasn't Love* (1992) and G.B. Jones's *Tom Girls* drawings as works about young butches and works of butch camp, I argue that Benning's video and Jones's drawings help orient camp's relationship to masculinity as one less oppositional than decades

of camp scholarship might have us believe. Camp helps stage these affinities across different ways of being masculine. It is not about what makes a good butch or a bad one or about hierarchizing or privileging one way of being masculine over the many gender possibilities that exist in our contemporary moment. Rather, the video and drawings distinctly and unflinchingly use butch depictions to mobilize different ways of being masculine—where distinctions serve to both complicate and destabilize rigid systems of gender through the camp of what I term butch play.

The proud backwardness of this inquiry is evoked to echo the call of Heather Love's work in *Feeling Backward*, a text whose objects insists on lingering in their own late 19th and early 20th century moments and attributes camp to the backwardness linked to queer cultures.[12] Though my work does not attend to affect, I rejoin Love in tending to texts that seem at odds with contemporary approaches to queer theory and queer studies. While not wanting to strictly compare the irrelevance of Love's texts with my own, her situating her project and the turn-of-the-century literature it examines against the narratives of historical and linear progress are comparable to the tensions that exist between my own approach and the emphasis of the field (3). The post-Stonewall cohesion and celebration of identity stands in contrast to the ambivalence that Love locates in some of the authors and literature she elucidates. Yet, in the *twelve years* between Love's writing and our current moment, identity has continued to pose a problem for queer studies and queer theory. This is in large part due to the ways that the theoretical promise of queerness has almost always been gleaned from its pliability, its openness, and its lack of referent or definite object of study. However, this is an openness that is somewhat deceptive, although not disingenuously so.[13] The problem of identity

[12] Love writes in her introduction, "Accounts of queer life as backward are ideological; however, backwardness has the status of a lived reality in gay and lesbian life. Not only do many queers, as I suggest, feel backward, but backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture. Camp, for instance, with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art."

[13] Kadji Amin outlines this aversion in his astute and much-needed engagement with queer theory's history. "Given its central anti-identitarian claim, that is, the much-reiterated definition of queer as, paradoxically, undefined, but as emphatically non-synonymous with same-sex sexuality, Queer Studies is perhaps unique in having been founded on the 'durational strategy' and 'aspirational horizon' of being always elsewhere than it was before." Amin's work in this essay,

within both queer studies and queer theory is only compounded by conservative and divisive turns toward marriage equality, the uptick in LGBTQ commercialization, and the radicality of identity dulling with the passage of time to reflect its, now, groan-inspiring, neoliberal, progeny: identity politics. It is no surprise then that, as Kadji Amin says in his essay "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," queerness became more invested in broadening its horizon toward greener and more politically urgent pastures, clinging to its indefinition while "emphatically" demarcating same-sex identity and sexuality as part of its history that some might rather forget, or at the very least, move past (181).

In asking if we should talk about identity within the scope of queer theory and queer studies, I do not want to downplay the literal and figurative violence that identity politics can wreak—the ways this form of politics has been weaponized. In her article "Universalism and Partition: A Queer Theory," Madhavi Menon demonstrates the dangers of identity in considering Rabasinkar Bal's *Dozakhnama* and the way the text reflects on the divisions of India and Pakistan. Menon explains that when particularities become partitions, through a fusing of identity and ontology, violence is the result. Menon writes:

> Geopolitical partitions work on the same principle as sexual, gendered, racial, and ethnic partitions: the very idea of a partition insists on an opposition between two wholes that are presented as holistic despite having just been butchered in two.[14] (118)

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and in what I've quoted, makes explicit something we all already understand: that same-sex identities had and maintained a certain amount of privilege and cache in the years of queer theory's emergence that is both uncomfortable and problematic. For more see Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories."

[14] Menon goes on to chronicle how the partition of India and Pakistan assumed the separation of poetic desires, sexual longings, quotidian cooking, and diverse religions that had extended across both sides of the border. Even more, it assumed that these newly separated particulars justified the formation of new states. Suddenly, and in strange twists, the two strands of a double helix were forced apart with great violence, and each strand proclaimed itself an *identity* that was oppositionally supreme over the other."

Menon is steadfast in her promotion of a queer theory galvanized by universalism rather than "a regime of difference that ignores the universality of particulars that do not cohere into identity" (134). Rather than an oppositionality where essentialism and violence are often by-products, "A theory that would undermine this opposition by dwelling incessantly on the idea of noncohering particulars would be both queer and universal: queer because universal" (134). Menon's advocating for a queer universalism does not seek to overlook or not acknowledge that there are particulars. In her view, it is when particulars cohere into identity and when identities become ontologies that is violent and often begets violence.

Camp, I argue, is a means to mobilize the specifics of identity to critique rigid and essentialist models of gender. While the impulse might be to leave the butch in the 1990s with our stirrup pants, I and other scholars argue that camp is perhaps the perfect means with which to take up the untimely and outmoded. Philip Core, for example, speaks of camp's re-emergence as a promise of the "future; that is why the present needs it so badly" (15). Perhaps, for the butch, the future is now, where the decades intervening between her cultural relevance and our current moment turn her from stubbornly outdated toward her potential as—after Pamela Robertson—a "productive anachronism" (142). This is a point echoed in the work of Andrew Ross when he writes that camp is a celebration of "the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very process by which it locates hitherto unexpected value in a popular or obscure text" (62). This may not be an altogether comfortable place for contemporary queer scholarship to linger, but for camp the uncomfortableness is by design (62). Camp's knack for the outmoded also does parallel queer theory's own sporadic interest in the untimely and critique of strict, linear notions of progress. This chapter aims to challenge an immensely literal and cynical view of the butch's outdatedness, to reconsider the weight of her history and what might be seen as the way she bogs down contemporary queer theory's continually urgent scrutiny of its own relevance. In exchanging literal

drag for the value accorded through the butch's temporal drag, this essay will demonstrate that far from being some holdover or liability, the butch still has some tricks up her sleeve that can speak to the specificities of identities, without the violence of essentialism or ontology.

Rethinking The Opposition Between Masculinity and Camp

"Parody is an erotic turn off, and all gay men know this. Much campy talk is parodistic, and while that may be fun at a dinner party, if you're out to make someone, you turn off the camp."

- Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

"Why is it that, in order for a party of gay men to be truly successful, there has to be at least one of each two different species of gay man present: the beauty and the camp? What makes each essential?"

- David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay*

Consider the epigraphs above. Though the aims of the essay and chapter in which they come from differ[15], an undercurrent running through both of these quite different projects is camp and the role it plays within gay male culture, namely the ways in which it is clearly able to mobilize and make gay male sociality possible, but also the ways that it is antithetical to eroticism and un-effeminate forms of masculinity. "The camp," both Bersani and Halperin say, can be fun or the key to party. Yet both men are also pretty clear that "the camp" must be "turned off" or counterbalanced by a more normative figure of masculinity in order to be conducive to eroticism.

Masculinity provides the context and the friction for both Bersani's and Halperin's discussions of camp. Both men discuss camp as a foil for what Bersani calls "gay macho" and Halperin calls "clone" masculinity, how these masculinities are often taken up by progressive politics and/or queer theory as subversive, and how they both disagree with these efforts, which—they both state—run contrary to the aims of the gay men who worked these styles in the 1970s and 1980s. Halperin

[15] Bersani's seminal essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" dissects a series of "important (if politically unpleasant truths about male homosexual desires" before proposing "an arduous representational discipline" that refuses a redemption of gay sex as romanticized, subversive, or vital to community and argues instead for gay sex as "our primary hygenic practice of nonviolence." In contrast, Halperin's *How to Be Gay* offers both history and theory of cultural, stylistic and spectatorship practices for gay males. For more see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," p. 208 and David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay*, p 365.

echoes the Bersanian sentiments I've quoted above and cautions against what he sees as some of queer theory's impulses to mobilize camp as part of a rubric of performativity, along with certain erotic styles like "1970s clone style" and "butch-femme role-playing among lesbians" (54). Halperin sees this impulse to view clone culture as "a knowing parody of gender roles" and/or as "a send-up of normative sexual conventions" as not reflective of the actual attitudes that clones held or their concerns to distinguish themselves from pre-Stonewall masculinity, which is often associated with the swishy figure of the camp.

Before and after Stonewall, as well as in the fifty-plus years of camp scholarship, camp—in spite of the persistently slippery definitional opacity—has been part of the domain of gay male culture, even as its role within that culture is a complicated one. Halperin's example, while providing insight into an often-overlooked cultural subtlety within gay male culture, is also symptomatic of a wide variety of camp scholarship, which briefly gestures to or draws on butch-femme practices as a point of comparison that ultimately diverges from the concerns of camp (and, all jokes aside, style).[16] However, I assert that butch and camp can be commensurate and that butch deserves a bit more than a cursory mention within camp scholarship.[17]

Yet, I want to acknowledge that my linking butches to camp can be seen as controversial. There has been a hesitancy or outright refusal to put butches into relation with camp. Part of this hesitancy stems from the way that the historical figure/gender/role of the butch was perceived and

[16] One example of this is Alisa Solomon's work connecting performances of butch gender to Brecht's idea of epic acting. Though the epilogue titled "Not Just a Passing Fancy: Notes on Butch" might dangle the promise of a felicitous co-mingling of butch and camp, Solomon ultimately suggests Brecht's imperative that the epic actor "put her character in quotations," is not the same as Susan Sontag's tenth note which claims, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks." For more see Alisa Solomon, "Not Just a Passing Fancy: Notes on Butch," p. 170-171. and Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,' p. 280.

[17] In the introduction to Guilty Pleasures Pamela Robertson writes about the assumption of one-sided exchange, where gay men appropriate a feminine aesthetic but women—straight or lesbian—do not appropriate from male culture. This is an assumption that has predominated camp scholarship, even during its heyday at the end of the 1990s. Robertson writes that "this suggests that women are camp but do not knowingly reproduce themselves as camp and, furthermore, do not even have access to a camp sensibility. Women, by this logic are the objects of camp and subject to it, but are not camp subjects." For more see Pamela Robertson, "Introduction,", p. 5.

valued within 1950s lesbian bar culture — and the ways in which that value both accrued and changed in the decades that followed. In their ethnographic account of 1950s lesbian bar culture centered mainly in Buffalo, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis remark on the somewhat bewildering *lack* of camp traditionally associated with butches:

> A striking but little-discussed difference between gay-male and lesbian communities was the high development of camp in the former and its almost complete absence in the latter…If we assume that camp humor is based on juxtaposing incongruous extremes, certainly it should flourish in the lesbian community as well as in the male-homosexual community. In gay-male culture the queen constructs her identity around being male yet being feminine. The butch identity is also based on gender artifice, that of being female but masculine. But anyone who talks to these old-time butches is not struck by their campy sense of humor, as one is when listening to or reading about old-time queens. (183)

What is telling about Kennedy and Davis's formulation is how they do see butch as a gender expression, one that relies upon concepts and effects like juxtaposition, incongruity, artifice — concepts that they, camp scholars like Esther Newton, and myself link to camp effects and camp humor. But despite the manner in which these concepts orbit the figure of the butch and her gender presentation in the 1950s, camp does not coalesce around this figure in the same manner that it comes to settle hospitably within a larger gay (male) culture and its drag subculture.[18] Kennedy and Davis go on to theorize this lack of camp in regard to the butch as a reflection of the very different

[18] There has been a wealth of scholarship generated on subcultures. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson define subculture within their book, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* as "sub-sets — smaller, more localized and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks," (13). Equally pertinent is Dick Hebdige's link of subculture to style. He writes in *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* that "it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its 'secret' identity and communicates its forbidding meanings. It is the way in which commodities are used in subculture which marks the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" 125.

roles drag queens would play in the community when compared to the role of butches in the nascent bar culture that developed in the decades prior to the shift in politics and notions of community, which began after the Stonewall Riots in 1969.[19]

Though Kennedy and Davis are chronicling a specific historical moment, the impulse to view camp as separate from butches carries over into the following decades of scholarship. In *Female Masculinity*, J. Jack Halberstam charts the history of the "masculine woman" and other forms and complications of female masculinity. Halberstam's seventh chapter centers on drag king culture in the 1990s, and though it is quite removed from many of the historical barriers that Kennedy and Davis cite as inhibiting the development of camp around butches, Halberstam is still reticent about linking the terms. Halberstam draws distinctions between "drag butches" and "drag kings," where the former is a woman who wears male attire in order to express her gender, while the latter is a performance artist who performs and parodies masculinity in her act—which traditionally takes place in a bar entertainment environment (232). Halberstam then asserts that there is further need to distinguish between "kinging" and "drag" on the basis that the masculinity associated with "kinging" should not be linked to camp because of the histories that camp and drag have with gay male communities. But Halberstam feels the need to cordon off camp and the performances of drag queens from drag king performances and butches. These "performances of masculinity," then, "seem to demand a different genre of humor and performance. It is difficult to make masculinity the target of camp precisely because …

[19] Kennedy and Davis link the prominence of camp within gay culture to the ability and value the community placed on "wit, verbal agility, and a sense of theater" as a means of resistance against the rampant discrimination and homophobia present during that time. Kennedy and Davis conclude that these "tools" of the gay community "were not on their own adequate to meet that challenges lesbians faced," specifically, they write, because of the ways in which butches had to rely on their physical presence to defend themselves, their lovers, and their friends from harm. For more see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, pg. 383.

masculinity tends to manifest as non-performative" (238).[20] Just because masculinity might *manifest* as non-performative does not mean that it is not performative, or that it cannot be parodied, or shown to be unnatural, exaggerated, or otherwise constructed.[21] Nonetheless, Halberstam continues to insist on the separation and need for the term "kinging" to insulate a certain performance of masculinity from camp:

> Although I do not think that camp is unavailable to lesbian performers, I do think that because camp is predicated on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender, it tends to be a genre for an outrageous performance of femininity (by men or women) rather than outrageous performances of masculinity….perhaps it is more accurate to say that only lesbian performances of femininity can be inflected with camp because camp is always about femininity…femme may well be a location for camp, but butch is not. For drag butches and drag kings who perform masculinity from a butch or masculine subject position, camp is not necessarily the dominant aesthetic. (238)

Though Halberstam insists on the performative parity of some gender and artistic performances of masculinity, Halberstam is also reticent or hesitant to see certain performances of masculinity as camp fodder. I, along with fans of peplum, bodybuilding, and professional wrestling, would also take issue with Halberstam's claim that "camp is always about femininity." More to the point, however, there is an impulse to preserve/privilege a notion of masculinity (which includes butches) from the contagion

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[20] Ibid., 238. When it comes to the work of Halberstam, I can see the need to draw lines of distinction between drag king and queen performers and cross-dressers or "drag butches," as he calls them. Halberstam has argued for the need to see the figure of the butch as not necessarily striving for a gender expression that is equitable to that of a drag queen or king, given that — while gender, as queer theory contemplates it, is performative — the butch gender expression is not a performance. For Alisa Solomon's meditation on butch's elucidation of gender as performance-like and also a discussion on the limits of the theatrical metaphor with regard to the figure of the butch see Alisa Solomon, "Not Just a Passing Fancy: Notes on Butch" p.166.

[21] Judith Butler writes that "Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express." For more see "Gender Trouble or "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Fuss' *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.*

of both camp and the outrageous femininity that Halberstam ascribes to camp. As if a certain masculinity *should* be out of the reach of camp's clutches.

Part of this chapter's goal is to show, after Gayle S. Rubin, the "varieties of gender expression" that exist for butches, beyond the ways that they have been represented and archived in the last 70 years. Rather than insulate butches from camp in their works, Benning and Jones use camp — and camp curation — to express a playful aspect to butch masculinity. Specifically, Benning curates different performances of masculinity, and Jones curates long and distinguished camp archive so that it can be utilized and (re)activated for a space of punk butch fantasy. Curation allows Benning and Jones a creative space to work within archives of masculinity where varieties of butch masculinity can be related to more traditional icons of masculinity in ways that do not demean, invalidate, or trivialize the figure of the butch. Camp, for these artists, moves beyond the insular, historical, gay-male centric parameters that Halberstam alludes to in order to think about the ways that this form of queer relation-making can help flesh out the more ludic side of butchness.

***"It Wasn't Love*, But It Was …" Camp?: Reading Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love* As A Work of Butch Camp**

My effort to re-examine the camp potential of butches is not the first. In her essay "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" Sue-Ellen Case argues for butch-femme inclusion into the project of feminism through a consideration of their seduction, where "the camp space of irony and wit," eschew imitation for play (73):

> Within this schema, the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together—'you can't have one without the other,' as the song says. The two roles never appear as…discrete…These are not split subjects, suffering the torments of dominant

> ideology. They are coupled ones that do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference or metaphysical values, but constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy into the light fondle of artifice, replacing the Lacanian slash with a bar. (56-57)

Though the work of this essay, like Case's, is using camp to help us think about the butch differently, this project considers the butch as separate from her lovely, iconic, and traditional associations as the femme's other half. I see this as an expansion for the potentiality and possibility of the butch, while also wanting to revise a tendency to always offer femininity and the femme as the automatic gender and sexual complement to the butch—which Benning's film, as I discuss later, is apt to do given its method of complicating the circulation of gazes between butch and spectator. In order to do this, there is a need to account for the camp and the erotics for the butch outside history's and Case's bars.

Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love* revolves around a narrative arc where the film's butch protagonist narrates her brief encounter with another woman (never depicted, only talked about in the film).[22] The film was lauded when it made the rounds at queer film festivals in the 1990s and was even deemed by B. Ruby Rich as part of the New Queer Cinema movement–a decade where films created by and depicting LGBTQ characters gained mainstream recognition and acclaim (23). *It Wasn't Love* compiles shots of Micro Machines toy cars, homemade film transitions, appropriated footage from a 1950s women's film and a film about the St. Valentine's Day Massacre to narrate a tale of lust between two young women. The film renders the young butch through the juxtapositional tensions amongst Benning's appropriated footage, the affective resonances of the film's soundtrack, a suite of drag performances of masculine figures, and detached shots of objects and nearly deserted streets. Or, to put it another way, we are meant to see the young butch both in

[22] Butchness is something that is not usually associated with *It Wasn't Love*, besides that fact that a young butch is at the center of the story. Instead the focus is more often placed on the youth of the protagonist or the fact that Benning plays the protagonist.

relation to and as a product of the film's work with montage.

Part of *It Wasn't Love's* campiness, and part of its charm, comes from Benning's use of a Fisher Price Pixelvision toy camera to craft her film. The video is steadfast in its work to make the most of its limited means. Benning's work is one exemplar of what Patricia White deems lesbian minor cinema, where limited resources—the kind that produce short films with minimal narrative and sets— become a part of a filmmaker's aesthetic practice and are used in "a politicized way" (413-414).[23] I would also argue that Benning flaunts her DIY style and that camp is produced as an effect of this choice. Benning makes creative use of the restrictive budget to emphasize the "low" scale of the film to create a form of artistic excess that is integral to the film's campiness and humor.[24] An example of the camp ramifications that follow Benning's bare-bones aesthetic occurs nearly three minutes into the twenty-minute film, after the narrating voiceover proclaims "Yesterday I drove to Hollywood with this chick." A series of five shots follows a Micro Machine toy car being pushed through the frame. The use of the toy car humorously plays with the scale, using angled close-ups of the toy car to simulate high-angle shots, which are used within most films to look down through space at a figure or object. By setting up her shots to imitate a high-angle shot, Benning plays with expectations of scale. The tension between the scale of the toy car and the simulated scale of the high-angled shot creates a campy excess.

Another aspect of Benning's film that links it to a tradition of camp films is her

[23] In her article, White begins by highlighting the structural and political inequalities that keep lesbian film a "minor" part of cinema. But White also locates both potential and possibilities of the term "minor" in the work of Sadie Benning and Chantal Ackerman, who use their reduced resources to move lesbian minor cinema "beyond the thematics of girlhood to stylistic features and material issues—limitations in the means of production intensify the effects of formal choices" (419).

[24] Lex Morgan Lancaster briefly considers the campiness of Benning's handmade "wipe" transitions before tracing the evolution of Benning's work with wipe and abstraction to her paintings. The article explains "the wipe also defines a queering artistic practice where in-between spaces open out onto alternatives, where a transition performatively enacts the change it signifies. That is, Benning's work prompts my reconsideration of a central tenet of avant-garde aesthetics: that form performs and does so historically and politically. Rather than a linear path to resolution, or a historical account organized as a narrative chain of events, the transitional wipe yields alternative approaches to abstraction." For more see Lex Morgan Lancaster, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction" p.152.

appropriation of other films within *It Wasn't Love*, namely the women's film *The Bad Seed* (1956) and a scene from *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967). Benning uses a total of 11 shots from *The Bad Seed*, over a minute and half of total footage. When Benning cut in the first four shots she appropriates from *The Bad Seed*, she made the decision to keep the synchronous sound of the original film—a thriller that shows the murderous lengths to which 8-year-old Rhoda is willing to go to get anything she wants. After inserting the title shot from *The Bad Seed*, Benning uses a medium shot of Rhoda confessing that she beat a classmate to death with her shoe after he refused to hand over his penmanship medal to her. This shot is followed by another medium shot of a man, clearly from another part of the film, who smiles and says "Now that's a little ray of sunshine." By using a shot of a man beaming about Rhoda from before her murderous spree and juxtaposing this happy shot against the force of Rhoda's confession of killing a boy in her class, Benning underscores the melodramatic excess of *The Bad Seed*. But Benning's work manipulating and creating excess is not finished. After a medium shot from *The Bad Seed*, where Rhoda's mother Christine calls the child to her, Benning replaces the film's original soundtrack with Prince's "I Wanna Be Your Lover." The addition of the new soundtrack reworks the shots that follow of the mother and daughter consoling each other to a more sexually connoted mother-daughter intimacy, only enhanced by the song's lyrics in which the singer claims to "want to be your brother/ I want to be your mother and your sister, too/ There ain't no other/ That can do the things that I'll do to you." Benning's work with appropriation is part of a long tradition of the practice within camp film. Like Kenneth Anger and other producers of camp before her, Benning is taking cultural objects with specific, often traditional/heteronormative resonances and using alternative soundtracks to make a place for (sexual) love between women in the artifacts of mainstream culture.

And yet, it is my contention that Benning has more in common with Anger than just the

than the ways that camp effects are dispersed through their films through the aid of recontextualized popular music soundtracks. At the heart of both Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and *It Wasn't Love* is an impulse to compile or curate images of masculinity. The images Anger uses of bikers partying, dressing, and working on their bikes accentuate the mosaic of hedonism, violence, and artifice that Anger crafts. But while Anger's classic film uses this practice of curation to reinscribe homosexual erotics and contexts onto the figure of the biker, Benning's video situates butch performances as doing something different altogether.

Key to Benning's curation in *It Wasn't Love* is a series of drag performances interspersed throughout the video. While these drag performances are often chalked up to the young butch's fantasies when they are taken up in scholarship, I will situate these drag performances as vital to Benning's work with camp and curation, while also positioning this group of performances as a foil for what I contend is the film's un-drag centerpiece in the next section. For now, however, I will attend to drag and its relationship to camp. This relationship is a complicated one, due in no small part to the ways that camp and drag have been equated. As Newton explains in *Mother Camp*, this conflating is understandable because both camp and drag are "widely used symbols of homosexuality" with deep resonances within gay male culture (100).[25] Despite the links that both camp and drag have to gay male culture, Newton does not see them as synonyms. Rather, Newton uses camp to refer to "the whole system of humor" rooted in gay culture's marking the "incongruities and absurdities of the patriarchal nuclear family" (Note to the Reader). And while I argue that camp's parameters can/should be expanded beyond the scope of gay male culture, I agree with the Newton that camp refers broadly to relationships brought about by incongruities, juxtapositions, etc., and that drag is one potential form of camp. In an effort to codify the difference between camp and drag, Newton writes:

[25] It should also be noted that when Newton refers to homosexuality it is referencing gay males, exclusively.

> 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 of 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 key to the attitude toward role playing embodied in drag as camp. (109)

The five drag performances[26] that Benning incorporates throughout *It Wasn't Love* hit many of these marks. Benning's renditions of two different bikers, a goon, a pool shark, and a young delinquent all involve the trappings of costumes complete with leather jackets, ribbed tanks, drab sport coats over black tees, bowler hats, denim vests, and black sleeveless cut-off tees. Benning also experiments with different combinations of facial hair and sideburns and employs props like cigars, cigarettes, canes, and pool cues.

There are, however, ways that Benning's drag performances do throw some productive wrinkles into drag performances as we commonly think of them. First, the two biker drag performances are characterized by the ways that body is fragmented. Benning manipulates the handheld camera, alternating between sweeping swaths across her body in biker drag and close-ups of dimples, smiles, or tattoos. This technique is abandoned in the last three drag performances for a static camera and mostly medium-shots. But what visual clarity that might be gained by the new set-up is eroded by performances that often veer erratically or present a flawed or failed performance of masculinity. The goon's erratic performance, for example, might be best crystalized through the

[26] These drag performances take place throughout Benning's film. The first biker performance occurs from 2:41-2:54, the second biker performance occurs from 4:12-4:20. The goon sequence occurs from 13:25-14:15. The pool shark sequence begins from 14:23-14:40. The young delinquent sequence begins from 14:42-15:33.

wealth of ways he interacts with his prop, his cane. At the beginning of the sequence he walks in time to the synchronous sound of the track, tapping the end of the cane on his palm before swinging it violently at something out of frame. Subsequent shots have the goon hold the cane to his body with one end over his shoulder while smoking a cigar in despondency before rocking out with his cane out, so to speak, dancing to the music while sliding his hand enthusiastically up and down the cane's shaft. The move among extremes and the degree of variance are compounded by the relative brevity of this sequence, which,—like the other shots and sequences of drag performances—have no tangible link to the story the young butch is telling. They are meant to orbit and inflect this narrative, settling within the points in between the young butch's narration. These drag performances are distinct from the narrated events the film's protagonist speaks of. Their aim is *not* to impel her narrative forward. They do *not* reflect or depict any of the events or scenes the young butch narrates. Rather these drag performances mark the place where the non-sequitur and daydreams meet, fueling the camp effects that constantly arise throughout *It Wasn't Love*'s intrigue with fantasies, manipulation, scale, exaggeration, and the ways contexts can rub up against each other.

Though certainly not as erratic as the goon performance, the pool shark performance depicts multiple shots of a man show-boating, posing, and otherwise hamming it up at the pool table. He gestures, exhales the smoke from his cigar at the cue ball, takes practice strikes. But ultimately, despite the confidence he exudes, the pool shark misses his shot. This resonates not as a failure of the drag performer, but rather as the performer's means of calling attention to the ways that masculinity fails. The coolness, the poses, the shallowness that are dissected in the first two performances render the role as role, the cliché as cliché. Something we've seen before. The second group of drag performances show the fragility and unsustainability of fringe masculinities. Or to put it another way, we can see the first group as crystalizing the stylization, showing the artifice for what it is while the second

group of drag performances literalizes this sham by showing the chinks in the armor—the unsustainable and failed performances. The pool shark who shanks his shot; the delinquent who is caught (but still poses cool-ly for his mug shot).

Perhaps more importantly, Benning's drag performances as a young butch enacting these different riffs on masculinity do seem to measure up to Newton's generalization about drag's expected—though presumed—sexual difference between the performer and the performed role. (i.e. a man performs as a woman). However, it is also worth pointing out that, as a young butch, Benning is not bringing such a distinct gender difference to the performances.[27] This works to complicate Newton's formulation of distance as it applies to both drag and camp and demonstrates how Benning is leaning into the presumption of distance among gender roles and performances as a space of play. Though many of the drag performances are conveyed as elements of the protagonist's masculine fantasies, the distant coolness, strength, charm, sensitivity, and swagger are ultimately unsustainable in the performances. These performances exist as possibilities that are at once the fruit of fantasy and also hackneyed, clichéd, and flawed. I want to characterize this move as also constitutive of butch play — or how I see Benning demonstrating the way that butch masculinity does not just "copy" traditional forms of masculinity. By drawing on a drag tradition that highlights the excesses of gender norms to comment on the constructed nature of all gender identities, Benning not only denaturalizes these iconic masculine figures, but shows that there is a place for butch masculinity to reside in the masculinities she curates in the film. Benning's play with incongruity and how she appropriates music and imagery from popular culture show her investment in camp as a

[27] It's also worth pointing out the difference in class that is operating within the film's suite of drag performances. Just as I am asserting that Benning's play with gender difference is part of the camp of these drag performances, she's portraying masculine icons that are known and valued for their style rather than their wealth. While I hesitate to call the bikers, goon, and poolshark part of "working-class masculinity," I would like to mark the differences in class that exists between Benning and these figures.

means to mark the excesses inherent in all performances of masculinity before capitalizing on film's own gendered dichotomies through more stripped-down means.

The Butch's New Clothes: Butch Play and Un-drag

Benning's curation of masculinity coalesces around what I am calling the film's un-drag performance,[28] an overlooked aspect of *It Wasn't Love*, and an element that seems unrelated to the concerns of the film. Coming nearly 12 minutes into the 18-minute film, and serving as a transition between the film's figurative and narrative center, this sequence is comprised of just over a minute of shots of Benning topless in low-key lighting, describing the dynamic between her and her chick, but also the pairs' plans.[29] In a video that seeks to complicate our notions of masculinity by showing its excesses, the un-drag sequence is an insistent and provocative meditation on the stripped down, the understated, and the bare.

I've settled on the term un-drag to describe this peculiar sequence in Benning's *It Wasn't Love* for a few reasons. Un-drag first appeared like apt way to describe the "bare" nature of Benning's performance or the fact this sequence centers around the presentation of her topless torso. But things are more complicated. On one hand, there are performers who stage or transform their nearly nude or very naked bodies.[30] But more importantly, at least for the scope of this article, the term un-drag is relevant because it hinges on distinctions between what takes place in Benning's sequence and what we've seen in the drag performances of masculinity curated in her video. What I mean by this is that a traditional idea of drag is a performance that mimics, represents, parodies and/or exploits the stereotypical characteristics of different genders, as wells

[28] I have settled on the term "un-drag" here because the protagonist is performing butch as a drag performance among other masculine drag performances (like the biker, the goon, the poolshark, etc.) I don't wish to imply that butch as a category of gender expression is drag.
[29] Unlike the rest of the film, in the un-drag sequence's seven shots, there is a much, much higher concentration of narration/dialogue, with six sentences uttered by the young butch.
[30] I'm thinking of the work of MilDred Gerestant including a performance recorded in Gabrielle Baur's *Venus Boyz* (2002). See Gabrielle Baur, *Venus Boyz* (New York, First Run Features), 2002.

as structural inequalities endemic within normative societies, to comment on and navigate excess for the purposes of entertainment. This excess that I am locating within the scope of more traditional conceptions of drag can certainly register at the level of make-up and costumes, but also, crucially, in the performance itself, where the signifying contours of a gendered body become readable as "more than" or "different from" the offstage gendered body.

I want to suggest that, unlike the drag performances of the bikers, the goon, the pool shark and the young delinquent, Benning's un-drag is a performance that does trade on excess but also insists on the body and the way that it is framed in order to critique gender dichotomies. Un-drag renders this supposed or perceptible difference hard, if not impossible, to quantify. Where drag operates within an economy of excess and how this excess can either, as Butler tells us, function to denaturalize or renaturalize "hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms," un-drag trades in the bare body (85). And it's in this un-drag sequence that Benning playfully propositions us, as she stages, frames, and lights her body to tease out the limits of perceived gender difference on video.

The un-drag sequence shows that in some cases the difference between butch and drag is a matter of framing and optics. To put it another way, rather than using drag performances of common masculine tropes as she does at other points of the video to parse the farcical, exaggerated nature of masculinity and its icons, Benning uses this playful presentation of un-drag to demonstrate how butch and butchness are a manipulation of codes of gender in order to offer a different take on masculinity—a take that is less invested in cordoning off butches as figures in historical or cultural vacuums and more invested in thinking about the productive tensions and relations that arise when the butch is considered one figure among many in Benning's curation of masculine performances. Yet this is also a take that is camp.

Benning's un-drag drag sequence signals a shift in her short video. It is one of the few times within *It Wasn't Love* where the protagonist can be seen speaking/narrating about the adventure she

has over the course of a night with a woman never portrayed in the video. Until this point in the video, with one exception, voiceover has been used to narrate the protagonist's tale of the events that did/did not take place "yesterday night." So, this un-drag sequence is of note for that reason. But additionally, this sequence marks a departure in the way that Benning has portrayed her protagonist, who up until this point has been shown in largely fragmented and partial ways through framing and camera movement.[31] This sequence, the longest in the video and comprised of seven shots, begins with a partial medium close-up of the protagonist shirtless, smoking a cigarette.

The protagonist is sitting, resting her chin on her palm, her head cocked slightly to the right of the frame, while a cigarette burns in her fingers. The top of the frame just includes the protagonist's right eye; her forehead and the top of her head are out of frame. Though shirtless, only the tops of the protagonist's shoulders and her upper-chest are visible. The placement of her hand obscures her neck. Without a doubt, the framing of this shot—which is maintained throughout the duration of the un-drag sequence—and the low-key lighting are crucial to the way that Benning demonstrates her butch play. Though low-key lighting has an established history with film and other media (and certainly gels with the noir-ish narrational tones that inflect parts of this sequence), Benning is using it as a means to highlight the illusionary power of the lighting and framing, which obstructs the protagonist's breasts. This not only is indicative of the practice of partial and fragmented framing that comprises an element of Benning's style within this video, but also shows the liminality of butch masculinity. Benning's lighting here is not a phobic or insecure relation to the protagonist's breasts but a wink and a nod that epitomizes the relationship between traditional expectations of masculinity and butch play. The obscuring of the breasts—and we might say the framing of the sequence in general—does not seek to disassociate the protagonist from her body,

[31] Benning's camera work has been taken up by a bevy of film scholars. It is, without a doubt, the most frequently studied element of her films.

but instead renders this moment of butch masculinity as evocative of its own distinct riffs on gender expectations and performances.

As this sequence continues, Benning mixes shots of the protagonist narrating the plot with shots of the protagonist careening back and forth across the frame, in and out of shadow. The next two shots in the sequence mark a shift in intensity. No dialogue or details of the plot are delivered verbally in these two shots. Benning has the butch protagonist seemingly break character/the fourth wall and move back and forth across the frame. After starting with the same partial framing and low-key lighting as the shots that preceded it—with the protagonist's smiling face taking up the majority of the left side of the frame (Figure 1)—the protagonist moves her head and torso 90 degrees, making her body slide out of frame to the right (Figure 2)

Figure 1: Benning begins the shot with the young protagonist on the left side of the frame.

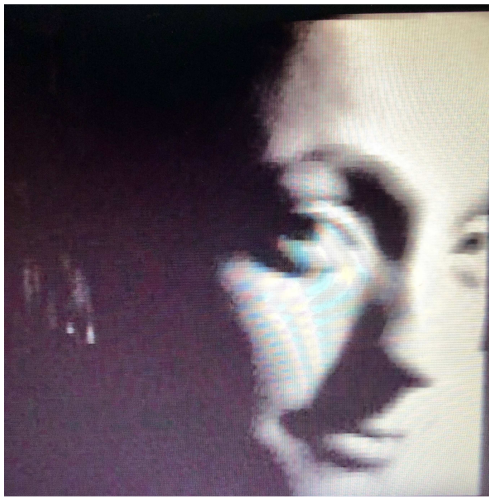

Figure 2: As Benning's shot progresses, the butch protagonist moves to the right side of the frame.

The next shot mirrors the one that came before it. After starting in close-up, with her face taking up the majority of the right side of the frame (Figure 3), the protagonist makes the same body movement so that her face and body move toward the other side of the frame (Figure 4). In both of these shots, even as the protagonist moves her body through the frame, she sustains eye-contact with the camera and smiles.

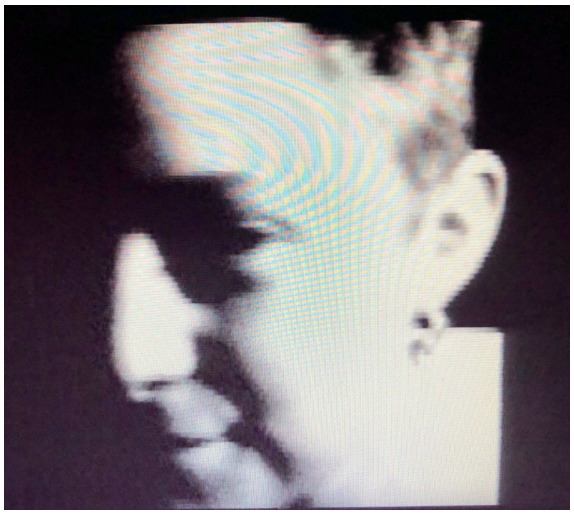

Figure 3: Benning's protagonist begins to move from the right of the frame.

Figure 4: The young butch completes her movement back across the frame.

Benning abandons the partial close-ups filled with noir pipe dreams and cigarette smoke for stationary shots that have the young butch smiling, holding eye contact with the camera. And it's at this point, just prior to the young butch outlining the "master plan" of the chick she has been riding around with, that it's clear Benning's had her own plan all along. The excessive artifice and costuming that accompanied the video's drag performances is exchanged for an artifice, the pretense of shyness, that inflects the otherwise beyond-its-years assurance of the young butch. This assurance is wrapped up in an acknowledgment of what she is, what she is not, and how her body is desired for the ways it conveys its proximity to a masculinity that is not male. Benning revels in the incongruous in this sequence, taking full advantage of the eroticism bound up in this barely-but-definitely-there distance between masculinity and male.

This play with distance was alluded to by having the young butch perform as male in the video's drag performances. The drag performances codify the young butch's sexual difference but point to the ways that her gender difference is uncounted for. The un-drag sequence, however, uses this erotic negotiation of infinitesimal but infinite distance to account for both the sexual and gender differences of the young butch.

Benning's butch play is no bait and switch, where butch masculinity takes the place of, is derived from, or copies traditional notions of masculinity. Rather, I like to think about butch play as a process of calling attention to the constructed nature of all masculine performances and, crucially, the situating of butch masculinity within these other culturally viable masculine performances. This is not so much about distinction as it is about relation. Benning uses camp and her drag performances of the bikers, goon, young delinquent, and pool shark to demonstrate the constructed nature of those masculinities. But where the camp in the drag performances trades in the excesses, the instability, and the failures of these masculine types, the camp in Benning's un-drag sequence is fueled by the incongruous butch body that is masculine without being male; the tension between excess and lack in the drag performances is reworked to a different register in the un-drag performance. Benning negotiates the erotics of presence, absence, and proximity in the un-drag sequence. The body of the young butch insists on its masculinity and does so by presenting solely the body. Far from offering an oppositional comparison, where butch masculinity is positioned against Benning's excessive drag performances, the un-drag sequence creatively leverages play with absences.

Though *It Wasn't Love* has received more than its fair share of attention in the years since its release and success on the film festival circuit, approaches to Benning's film forgo examinations of its work with butch masculinity. The minute-long sequence I've labeled un-drag, as well as the film's drag performances, is often only noted for the ways it might let us talk

about Benning's adolescent psyche or her exploration of gender and life as a young lesbian. Butch rarely figures into these conversations. Mia Carter, for example, writes that "Benning uses her video camera to transform the marginal position imposed on her, as a lesbian and an adolescent, into a productive one; her camera describes a place from which she can invent and examine a series of selves who would not be tolerated in this world" (748). While this approach works in certain contexts, I'd like to underscore how Benning's work with drag anchors it in performance rather than autobiography. Both the drag and un-drag performances articulate the specific approach to butch masculinity that Benning depicts in *It Wasn't Love*. Rather than self-exploration, the drag performances are meant to challenge the excesses and incongruities found in more normative masculinities and iconic masculine figures. The un-drag sequence continues to mobilize the body of the protagonist to not only flaunt different contours of masculinity, but more importantly, eroticize the butch body. This is an eroticism emphasized by the haptic quality that Laura Marks attributes to video and Pixelvision, the latter of which she deems the ideal haptic medium (10). And while I want to insist—as I think we can see Benning insisting—that the eroticism in the un-drag sequence is related to or even further enhanced by the haptic qualities of Pixelvision video, ultimately I'd like to lean into the bodily integrity of this eroticism.

While I find Marks's work, through Vivian Sobchack, a much-needed interrogation of the haptic sensuousness of video and other media, there are a few qualities of the haptic image that do not fit Benning's approach in the un-drag sequence, even though they suit her medium perfectly.[32] What I mean by this is that Marks locates several qualities of haptic images that I see Benning as very consciously undermining. For instance, Marks writes that haptic images invite the viewer into a subjectivity-dissolving contact with the viewer and "the oscillation between the

[32] Marks even begins her chapter by recalling a shot from Benning's *It Wasn't Love*, where the protagonist is shown sucking her thumb. See Marks, p 1.

two creates an erotic relationship, a shifting between distance and closeness. But haptic images have a particular erotic quality, one involving giving up visual control. The viewer is called on to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves (13). Though I take no issue with how Marks theorizes the dissolving and emerging subjectivities in film viewership, I do find that Benning does not "give up visual control" of her image in the un-drag sequence. She maintains the strict framing and lighting of the shots and ensures that the young butch protagonist's movement across the frame maintains its distance—imposing limits while, among other things, playfully posing. Certainly, other parts of Benning's video are in line with Marks's work—namely an indicated image that is never represented fully or pulling the viewer in toward an abstracted closeness. Yet, the un-drag sequence seems to stubbornly flirt with Mark's form of eroticism, while insisting on its own brand. Marks's emphasis is on the image never fully revealing itself, where "haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction (16)." Within the un-drag sequence, however, Benning reveals as she obscures, never hinting that the body of her butch protagonist is anything other than what it is. The sequence engages viewers, pointedly, but also playfully, calling attention to how the young butch body and its performance are intelligible, while also calling attention to the ways that the distance between masculinity and male is completely unintelligible. The object is *not* put into question, but the viewer is implicated in Benning's playful mocking of gender limits and boundaries.

As the film's protagonist makes eyes at and postures intently for her date and the camera, it is clear to see how this sequence not only articulates the seduction taking place as the film's narrative level between the butch and her date but also Benning's own awareness for the way she is directorially flipping the script on traditional relations between spectator and the filmed object. And both Benning and the film's protagonist are intent to harness all of the suggestive potential

from their play with display, proximity, gazes, presence and absence.

Camp is the means of this seduction. Yet, until now, I've focused on a young butch's mode of seduction without attention to who is being seduced. Some of us may have more enthusiastic, reticent, or aversive responses to this solicitation. I'd like to propose that the answer to this question is bound up in Benning's reflexive attention to how notions of absence can be employed erotically. Through methods that are aligned but ultimately different from the juxtaposition and incongruity that comprise most of the video's camp, in the un-drag sequence Benning capitalizes on the ramifications and camp potential of absence. The absence that looms most obviously over the film in total is the absence of the young butch's date, the young woman she is riding around with "yesterday night." As I've explained, the un-drag sequence is one brief slice of that encounter, one of the only sequences in the film that is representing what took place between the two young women that night. But this is a one-sided view. The protagonist's body and eroticism are on display for the narratively absent "chick," as she calls her, but also, crucially, on display for the camera—where the gaze of the camera is aligned with the gaze of the butch's absent paramour.

The absence of the "chick" adds a provocative puzzle to the question of audience in Benning's un-drag sequence. Benning's chooses to 1) leave the date unrepresented in the film and 2) direct her young butch's focus to the camera, implicating spectators of her film who are used to more traditional relations between screen and the gaze of the camera. In *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Judith Mayne writes, "The screen is both surface and passageway, mirror and obstacle. Cinematic spectacle is, certainly, the fixing of the image of woman, with the accompanying narrative movement penetrating the father's room. But spectacle is also a relation to a screen, fixed as unattainable on the other side of the door, embedded in a narrative movement that is thwarted, stopped at the threshold" (31). Benning's attention to

framing in the un-drag sequence shows a reflexive awareness for cinema's work with illusion how presence and absence are crucial to the work it does. While Mayne is critical of approaches to feminist film criticism that define the screen nearly exclusively as a "relation between a male subject and female object," we might see Benning's work as moving even Mayne's conception of spectacle, screen, and relations between the two forward. This is because Benning uses the power of the screen to make a spectacle *through* the incongruous butch body and the failings of our language and the film apparatus to account for masculinities that exceed male-ness. The un-drag sequence allows Benning to frame her protagonist's butch body in order to call attention to the screen's duality—both its presence and absence. At this nexus where the screen meets a butch woman's unambivalent body, we see Benning utilizing lighting and framing to call attention to the limits and to the ways that her body is both more than and less than what the screen may show us—and she double-dog dares us to quantify easy gendered distinctions while her body elides these possibilities.

Benning's work complicates Mayne's relation between screen and spectator by staging the young butch's un-drag performance to the gaze of the absent woman, for which the camera proxies. What complicates this dynamic further is the long-standing tradition of the film spectator's identification with the camera's gaze and the power of its voyeurism. By meeting the camera's gaze, and by extension countering the look of the spectator with a look of her own, Benning at the very least mitigates scopophilic pleasure, which is often predicated on the object's inability to look back.[33] But, perhaps more generously, through her staging of the "un-drag" sequence, Benning also splits the gaze of the spectator who is at once implicated as the intended audience for the young butch's erotic

[33] Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was premised on pointing out how cinema spectatorship is often predicated on scopophilia, what she defines as "pleasure in looking." There are times when looking is a source of pleasure, and cinema spectatorship is no exception. Yet, at its extreme, this pleasure of looking, Mulvey—citing Freud's work— warns, "can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other." While the cinema may sound remote or removed from these concerns, "mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy." For more see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," p. 16-17.

posturing and also impelled by the film's narrative pull and the representational absence of the butch's date to wonder if the young butch is successful or sincere in her seduction. Might this performance be foreplay, or the flaunting of what is unattainable?

Just as Benning can be seen as withholding the teen butch's choice object by choosing to forgo representations of her date, the young butch also dynamizes her stillness, her posture, and the distance she maintains from the camera/object/gaze of the unpictured woman so that they feed into tension bound up in her seduction. While arresting the patchy narrative drive of the film, this butch body as it is displayed in the un-drag sequence briefly teases an erotic/narrative possibility germane to the video, but also quite literally puts the moves on spectators given the relations Benning scrambles between object, camera, spectator and screen. This endows the distance that Benning cultivates between the young butch and the camera with an erotic dimension or significance as well as calls attention the unattainability of this displayed body to spectators. Or to put it another way, for as much erotic potential the butch's withholding has for the film's narrative (will they, won't they?), Benning leverages this erotic possibility to underscore how this body is always already withheld from the spectator standing at Mayne's threshold—even as they are implicated in the protagonist's erotic posturing. Through the half-lit display of her protagonist's butch body, the way this display directs the reception of the performance to a missing object of desire—for whom the camera's gaze stands in—and the ways that butch masculine performance itself is dialed in to the erotic potential of a body that dangles the promise of masculinity without maleness, the camp that Benning crafts during this sequence manages to withhold while engaging in play with absence.

Benning's serving butch realness rewrites the script between masculinity and camp, showing how just "at home" the butch can be as a camp figure. I've argued that Benning's work in *It Wasn't Love* not only allows for the expansion of camp's boundaries to include gender and sexual identities outside of gay culture but also demonstrates that camp, masculinity, and the

erotic are not always at odds. The un-drag sequence in particular shows how the specifics of a gender identity—posture, stylization, erotics—can offer a critique of society's signifying structures without gesturing toward essentialism, hierarchies, or the exemplary nature of butch as object. Butch masculinity is just one hospitable site for changing the relations between masculinity and camp. Benning's un-drag performance eroticizes camp through the display of a body that teases the edges of masculinity-sans-maleness, while also complicating the circulation of gazes between the spectator, the camera, and the object who returns those gazes. Whether making eyes, making out, or just making someone, *It Wasn't Love* demonstrates that there are times when butches can leave the camp on.

G.B. Jones's *Tom Girls*

Much like Benning's impulse to curate different masculinities demonstrated the productive potential and conceptual play that camp can bring to butchness, G.B. Jones's *Tom Girls* series of drawings curates to legitimize butch-femme sexuality and cull conceptual traces of a camp master to recontextualize the Sapphic duo as they, too, leave history behind for the queer and punk contexts of the late 1980s and early 1990s. While Benning's curation of different masculine figures pulls from popular tropes of masculinity, Jones's curation takes as its inspiration some of the most iconic and potent images in gay culture. It is the specificity of Jones's curation, its close conceptual relationship to famous subcultural art, that often leads to an underestimation of her efforts.

For example, a quick Google search for "The Female Tom of Finland"[34] leads to discussion of Jones's drawings and their relationship to the drawings Tom of Finland.[35] This is primarily because the *Tom Girls* series appropriates the style of Finland, an artist who spent over 50 years

[34] See, "Meet 'Tom Boys,' Female Counterpart to 'Tom of Finland and Paul P. "Tom Girls: How the Hyper-masculine, homoerotic world of artist Tom of Finland became an unlikely inspiration for G.B. Jones's subversive queer aesthetics."
[35] Tom of Finland was the alias of Touko Laaksonen (1920-1991), a prolific and famous artist known for his hand-drawn pornography that was featured in magazines like *Physique Pictorial*.

drawing explicit scenes between men.[36] Rather than the lumberjacks, sailors, and bikers that were often the subject of Tom of Finland's drawings,[37] Jones combines biker iconography with the shaved heads, tattoos, and piercings that were a large part of the punk aesthetic[38] taken up by many in the queercore subculture. Jones—a queer artist, filmmaker,[39] and musician—was both a founder and integral part of the queercore movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.[40] Jones's *Tom Girls* series was created as part of her zine *J.D.'s*, which was co-created with fellow Canadian punk Bruce LaBruce.[41] Her *Tom Girls* drawings fuse the desires and aims of the queercore movement with a well-known style from a different era. Jones, along with other queercore artists like Vaginal "Créme"

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[36] In "Tom of Finland Comes Home, keeps on coming," Susanna Paasonen writes of how Laaksonen's art has been embraced as part of the larger Finnish culture, with his images adorning not only calendars but coffee. Passonsen writes "The scale at which Tom of Finland has been embraced as a posthumous national brand ambassador nevertheless speaks of recuperation where the pornographic, subcultural and indeed transgressive tones of his work become co-opted as edgy fun, and as sources of national pride. This recuperation draws attention to the pleasure-seeking men in his drawings, as well as to the figure of the artist himself as a means of celebrating Finnish culture while simultaneously turning attention away from the culture's homophobic patterns, both historical or contemporary. The celebration of hedonistic gay sexual promiscuity gives way to the valorization of individual creativity, success and style as a means of communicating progressive politics on personal and national scales." For more see, Susanna Passonen, "Tom of Finland Comes Home, keeps on coming."

[37] Martti Lahti explains that Tom of Finland's stylizations "created and disseminated" what came to be known as "the gay macho" look. Lahti writes, "Tom's drawings repeatedly display the images of men in leather and uniforms--bikers, policemen, cowboys, soldiers, sailors, and lumberjacks--all of which have become icons of gay male subcultures. These images have for their part provided gay men with a style to follow, and a model for building their bodies and adapting their body languages and wardrobes. The imagery familiar from Tom of Fin- land's pictures has also become part of our visual culture in the West through such cultural products as the Rainer Werner Fassbinder movie *Querelleand*, Robert Mapplethorpe's photos or through such prominent pop cultural icons as Freddie Mercury." Lahti uses Foucault to examine the disciplinary and resistant forms that Tom of Finland portrays and examines the colonial and fascist elements in the artists work. For more see, Martti Lahti "Dressing Up in Power."

[38] Prinz proposes three core ideals that comprise punk aesthetics which include, irreverence and the challenging of social norms through resistance and anarchy, a nihilism that could include "decay, despair, suicide and societal collapse," and amateurism. The latter is evident in the distaste for "slick production values," a lack of formal training, and disharmony. For more see, Jesse Prinz,"The Aesthetics of Punk Rock."

[39] Among Jones's film and video works are: *The Yo-Yo Gang* (1992) and *The Lollipop Generation* (2008). She was also the co-founder of the experimental punk band *Fifth Column*.

[40] In their essay "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture," Michael Du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman focus on the multi-media facet of queercore and the ways that its messages were transmitted through fanzines, records, music, and videos. They stress that the political functions of queercore — as a movement — were to "deny legitimacy to the public sphere, to stress the internal coherence around its own proper differences, and to turn to the networks created by queerzines, clubs, music and other subcultural practices so that a counter-public can be created." Though Du Plessis and Chapman evoke Michael Warner's conception of a counter-public, they stress that the queercore movement saw itself as outside of mainstream LGBTQ theory and politics.

[41] Jones's J.D.'s was a by-product of the DIY aesthetic that had its roots not only in punk music, but also the DIY culture that produced punk zines. Teal Triggs traces the emergence of early punk and DIY culture in her article "Scissors and Glue." For more see, Teal Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic."

Davis and LaBruce, aggressively positioned herself against the larger conservative political climate of the 1980s, as well as the gay and lesbian rights movements that were active during this time.[42] Given both the antagonism and discontent that defined the movement, Jones's look backward toward Tom of Finland's hand-drawn pornography recontextualizes the sexual extravagance, smoldering violence, and disregard for both law and order and civility that comprised the original drawings. This thematic and conceptual basis provided an important inspiration for Jones's creative alchemy.

What I cast as transformative, however, is often portrayed as more of the same—where Jones's *Tom Girls* drawings simply copy, continue, or replicate the drawings of Tom of Finland. For example, February 2013 saw the opening of the *Rare and Raw: Queer History Then and Now* exhibit at the Leslie-Loman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City. As part of the exhibit, curators Kelly McCray and Steph Rogerson featured art from LGBTQ artists of the past, as well more contemporary LGBTQ artists who engaged with or drew on this older art in their own artistic practice. Tom of Finland and G.B. Jones were just one example of the dynamic between past and present that the organizers were striving to establish.[43] Writing for *The Archive*, the Leslie-Loman Museum publication, Ken Moffatt specifically notes the Finland/Jones pairing, writing that "G.B. Jones refers to the historical images of Tom of Finland by both honoring him in her recreations yet disrupting the masculinity (11)." While I agree with Moffatt that Jones is undoubtedly paying homage to Tom of Finland in her own drawings, I think the notion that she is seeking to do so by "disrupting the masculinity" of the original drawings is not only short-sighted (at best) but also indicative of problems within archives of masculinity. Implied in Moffat's description is the idea that

[42] Kevin Schwandt explains that the "distrust of ostensibly stable identity formation characterized the music and subcultural production of the queercore movement. Like their hardcore predecessors, queercore musicians and fans in the 1990s focused on self-sufficiency and independence from standard music industry marketing apparatuses but conflated these priorities with their profound sense of difference from both heterosexual and "normative" gay and lesbian cultures," For more see, Kevin Schwandt, "The Erotics of an Oil Drum: Queercore, Gay Macho, and the Defiant Sexuality of Extra Fancy's Sinnerman."

[43] I first learned of the *Rare and Raw* exhibit and the featuring of Jones's and Tom of Finland's work on the exhibit's title wall in T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault's "Trading Credit for Debt: Queer History Making and Debt Culture."

Jones disrupts the masculinity of the original art simply by depicting women emulating the cruising and erotic behavior that is often portrayed in Tom of Finland's illustrations. Or, to put it another way, Jones's punk butches and femmes, because they are women, are incapable of asserting masculinity; they can only disrupt it. Besides this very narrow view of masculinity, Moffat's focus on binary gender difference oversimplifies Jones's methodology, which I will insist is a curational methodology.

The *Rare and Raw* exhibit curated by McCray and Rogerson provides an opportunity to highlight the difference between curation as a museum practice and curation as an artistic practice. Curation as a museum exhibition practice has evolved since it emerged in the 1800s. Paul O'Neil chronicles the changes that curation has undergone in his book *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*. O'Neil explains that curating, as it exists as a contemporary museum exhibition practice, "has seen a paradigmatic shift away from the application of the noun 'curator,' with its links to a traditional museum function, toward the use of the verb 'curating,' which implies a practice of constructing narratives through correspondences between artworks" (32). Additionally, O'Neil explains that curation encourages "certain ideas to come to the fore in an emergent communicative process" and that this allows the meaning of an exhibition to be "derived from the relationship between artistic positions as presented by the curator" (89, 99). What O'Neil is describing is how contemporary curation—as a practice tied to museum exhibitions—is now focused on assembling texts that speak to each other, where a core idea or narrative emerges due to the way the exhibition has been selected, displayed, and organized. When it comes to the idea of a curational methodology —as a artistic practice—that I have developed through this chapter and others, the focus shifts from the communication of common narratives derived through comparison. If we take the case of Tom of Finland and G.B. Jones, for example, a narrative that emerges as a result of their curation by museum curators might be "the pairing of G.B. Jones with Tom of Finland makes a comment on

desire constrained and power possessed…Both artists suggest a certain freedom of desire as sexuality is freed from dyads—voyeurs and exhibitionists enjoy each other in threesomes and groups, and the most constraining environment contributes to a hotbed of sexuality" (11-12). In contrast, by looking at Jones's *Tom Girls* as an example of curation as methodology, we can see her willingness to not only establish connections and throughlines between Tom of Finland's art and her appropriations of his drawings, but to mobilize and transform forces within the original art (like Finland's penchant for violence and transgression of societal norms) in order to open up these ideas to new implications and potentialities when mutated to fit the style and whims of the punk butches and femmes in her drawings. This moves beyond translation or substitution. Jones is selective about what aspects of Finland's original drawings she curates, transforms, and re-renders through her play.

Just as we saw Benning use camp as a means to stage the inscrutable distance between masculinity and maleness that is so crucial to butch eroticism, Jones uses camp to facilitate the conceptual intimacies between her *Tom Girls* drawings and Tom of Finland's oeuvre. My labeling of these conceptual intimacies is inspired by the the notion of touch as it appears in Anne Cvetkovich's chapter "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities." In a chapter that takes its own inspiration from Carolyn Dinshaw's assertion that histories can touch one another, Cvetkovich contextualizes penetration within lesbian and butch-femme sex within theories of touch—where touch as "breach of boundaries" "creates a continuum between the physical and the psychic, between the sexual and emotional," allowing touch to be conducive to working through trauma (51, 56). Cvetkovich's emphasis on how touch can resonate while questioning/complicating notions of what does and does not count as touch/penetration can prove crucial to understanding the queerness in Jones's transformational butch-femme renderings of Tom of Finland's art. However, in Jones's drawings, this is not a breach of bodies, but a conceptual intimacy that assumes bodily arrangement and comportment in clear relation to Finland's originals but also simultaneously shifts the terms of that

engagement and the sexual and political aims. To me, the curation that Jones undertakes fosters what Cvetkovich writes of elsewhere as "queer intimacies" facilitated by LGBTQ culture and its use of practices like camp (5). It's Jones's conceptual intimacy with Tom of Finland's drawings, where butch and femme bodies take up the compositional space that buttressed Finland's gaggles of gay men as they posed, cruised, and fucked, that Jones's camp flaunts even as it does pivot from the pornographic potential of these conceptual origins. Ultimately relegating the *Tom Girls* series to simple appropriation or substitution shortchanges both Jones's art and its camp—that latter of which smirks with satisfaction that punky dykes could be the progeny of Tom of Finland's gay smut.

It might not be so unexpected then to find that Jones's *Tom Girls* do not sport the comically large erections that were nearly synonymous with Tom of Finland's drawings. What might be more surprising, given the conceptual intimacies between Jones's and Tom of Finland's art, is that she recontexutalizes the composition and cultural context of the original drawings while also making the fruits of her appropriation un-pornographic. While the punky butches in the *Tom Girls* series certainly check each other out, the particular drawings that are part of Jones's curation are not drawings that depict sex between women, in stark contrast to the undeniably extravagant way that Tom of Finland's drawings are, almost without exception, about cruising and sex between men. Rather, Jones is quite content that her artistic dalliance with Tom of Finland be conceptual and aesthetic as she employs an iconic style of drawing clearly associated with drawn pornography for means that are not pornographic.

Jones's illustrations feature her punk women primarily engaged in cruising, getting tattoos, and skateboarding although she does populate some of her drawings with acts of sexual humiliation and vengeance aimed at institutional figures of authority—like cops and security guards. Jones harnessed the look of Tom of Finland's drawings, his style of drawing, the smoothness of the figures within them, along with several key themes in his subject matter. Comparing *Tattoo Girls #2* (Figure 6) with

the 1977 drawing of Tom of Finland's (Figure 5) demonstrates Jones's adherence to the original drawing's composition even as she inflects the tensions in the original drawing for more subtle and Sapphic intentions. The 1977 drawing features an army sergeant

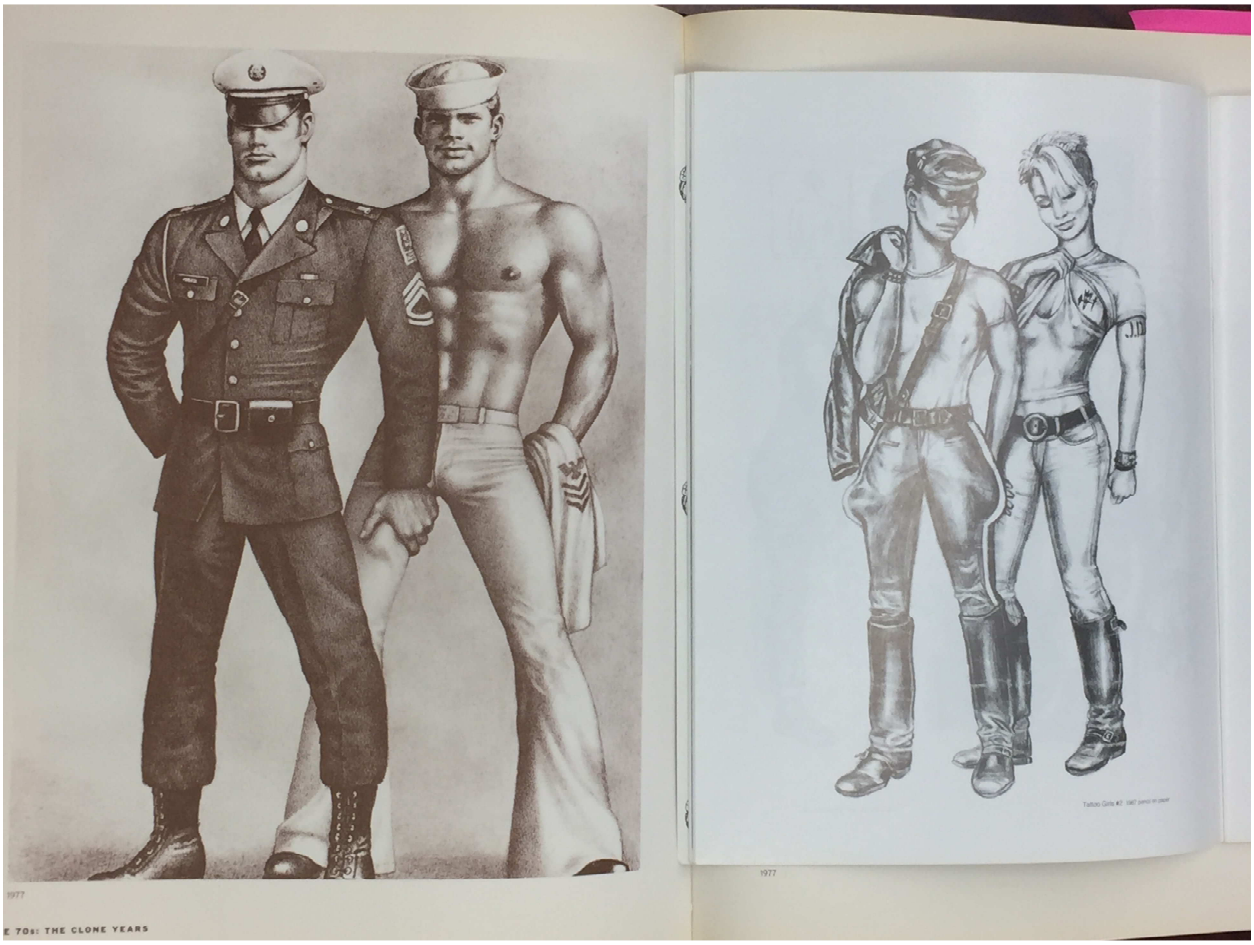

Figure 5: 1977 Untitled Drawing by Tom of Finland featuring soldiers "at attention."

Figure 6: *Tattoo Girls #2.*

in his Class A greens grabbing the bulge of the first-class navy petty officer standing just behind him. In Jones's *Tattoo Girls #2*, Jones depicts her punk women with nearly identical positionality. This formal similarity works in tension with Jones's mutation of aesthetics where Finland's military motif is morphed into a punk look that is pervasive throughout the *Tom Girls* series. Despite the exchange of order and undiscipline for punk's own brand of stylized fashion anarchy, Jones makes

several nods to Finland's 1977 drawing. Both the army sergeant and the leather-jacket-sporting punk butch have their hats pushed forward over their eyes. They also both wear Sam Browne belts. Additionally, the navy petty officer's hat is morphed into the tattooed punk women's undercut hairstyle.

Tattoo Girls #2 derives much of its effect through juxtaposition just like Tom of Finland's original drawing. But while the tension in the original drawing is predicated on how the notions of discipline and duty take on new valences in the eroticism of the two men's bodies, the tension in Jones's drawing is derived from the ways that Finland's drawing has been modified. To put it another way, the erotic force of the original drawing is the result of several transgressions: the grope itself (which crosses those "order and discipline" ideals of a phobic military establishment), having the higher-ranking officer grope a less-senior officer (who is more "dressed down" than his higher-ranking counterpart), and even the interaction of the different branches of the military (soldier and sailor). In Jones's *Tattoo Girls #2* the play with transgression is subtler, more reliant upon her mutations of the tensions in the 1977 drawing. Jones's move from men to women demonstrates the ways that she wants to both tap into the eroticism of Tom of Finland's original drawings and also articulate it in more subtle ways. So while Jones's tattoo girls don't sport bulges or other more obvious signs of arousal that appear in Tom of Finland's drawings, she does make some alterations that allow for the women to exude eroticism toward each other without nudity or power play. For example, part of the appeal of the 1977 drawing is the breaching of boundaries by the two men while they still appear, in many respects, "at attention." This goes beyond euphemisms for their states of sexual arousal and can also be evidenced in their postures—facing forward, backs straight—and their straight-forward gazes. In *Tattoo Girls #2*, the rigid, austere nature of the original drawing has been muted. Jones's women flaunt their lack of attention to presentation and discipline by the way they are dressed in deliberately

torn/modified clothing and their looks toward each other. One facet of the eroticism in the original drawing is how the viewer's looks collide with the looks of the solider and sailor amidst their sexual transgression. Since the women in *Tattoo Girls #2* are turning into each other there is a way in which one woman's revealing of the tattoo is not as exhibitionary as such an act might read in Finland's drawings. This is also the case with Jones's treatment of the grope. The grope that serves as the literal and figurative center of the original drawing is very nearly hidden in Jones's drawing. Just the tips of the foregrounded woman's fingertips are visible as they rest on the backgrounded woman's thigh. This move shows the intimacy and eroticism between the two women without an outright act of exposure. It is a move that serves to indicate rather than titillate.

Though an artist can certainly appropriate without deeming it appropriation or without necessarily desiring to call attention to the fact that they have appropriated another artist's work or ideas, Jones's appropriation of Tom of Finland's drawings is meant to be meaningful and blatant. And this is vital to how Jones's conceptual curation differs from the more traditional sense of curation. While certainly, in the most traditional and basic sense of curation, she has had to pick and choose drawings from an extensive oeuvre, what this chapter insists on is that Jones is also using a curation-based methodology that does not just seek to replicate other art, but to create something new out of the interrelations between entities. If we think about *Tattoo Girls #2* as an example of this, Jones moves beyond appropriation, constructing a drawing that is compositionally relational. But the transformative slant of her drawing is brought about best in relation to the original; it is easy to see her play with subtly and the different economy of eroticism she engages with. So much of the force and power of the *Tom Girls* series comes from the way that Tom of Finland's scenes are reconstructed and evoked in new ways for a very different subculture. The camp extravagance of the original 1977 drawing is refashioned into a

wry, scrappy figuration of the butch and femme punks. The result is a butch and femme punk who are into and interested solely in each other. Jones tempers and transmutes Tom of Finland's sexual excess and doubles down on the insularity of much of the original corpus that she draws from. What existed as fodder for the fantasy lives of a countless number of men, nearly twenty-five years later becomes a way for the queercore subculture to fantasize new ways of engaging with and promoting anti-establishment values.[44]

For the queercore movement in particular, which had fundamental clashes with larger government and societal institutions as well as with more mainstream manifestations of LGBT rights organizations and their agendas, there was a need to defiantly and resolutely state their frustration with the political climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s.[45] Another facet of the intimacy between Jones's and Tom of Finland's art is how direct or implied violence is drawn upon in their respective representations of same-sex desire. Violence nearly always lurks beneath the surface in Tom of Finland's art. Especially in some of the cruising scenes, there is a possibility that the bikers and the sexually dominant men will get what they want by any means necessary (even if the potential participants are less-than-willing). While, again, Jones is not interested in the potential for sexual violence in the same way that Tom of Finland is, she taps into a volatile undercurrent within his drawings and molds it into something she can use for her own political purposes.

[44] In her chapter "Do Doc Martins Have a Special Smell?: Homocore, Skinhead Eroticism, and Queer Agency," Ashley Dawson tracks how hypermasculine themes and images were often appropriated by women punks working in the queercore movement in their efforts to destabilize and complicate identity. For more See, Ashley Dawson, "Do Doc Martins Have a Special Smell?: Homocore, Skinhead Eroticism, and Queer Agency."
[45] For more see, Rob Fatal, "Lezbophobia and Blame the Victim: Deciphering the Narratives of Lesbian Punk Rock."

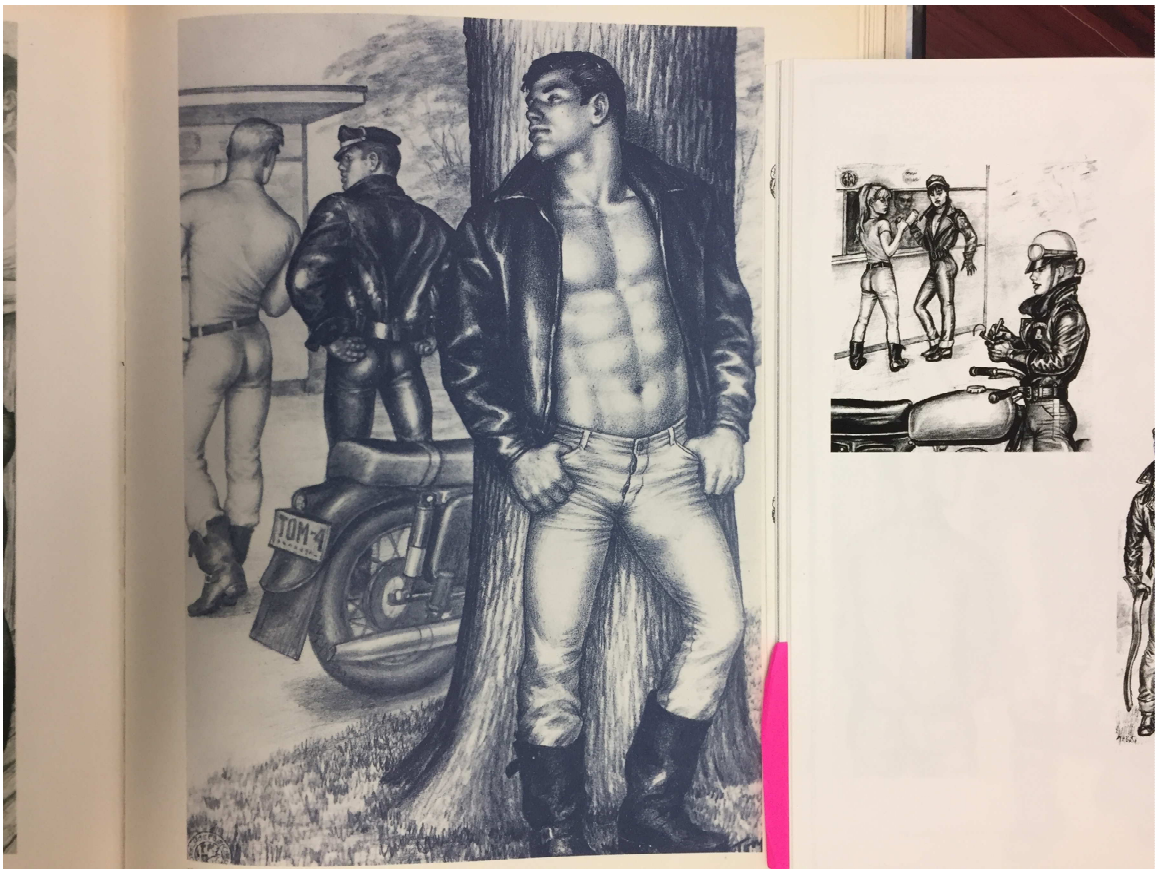

Figure 7: 1964 Untitled drawing by Tom of Finland of thief waiting to steal hog.

Figure 8: *I'm A Fascist Pig #1.*

One example of this is in the *I'm A Fascist Pig* 1-3 (see figures 8, 10, 12) series of drawings which mostly recreates—figure-for-figure—a 1964 series by Tom of Finland (see figures 7, 9,-11). Both series of drawings depict vengeance taken by a same-sex pair (whether they are lovers, strangers or acquaintances is never explained) for a slight against them. In Tom of Finland's original drawing, two men overpower, strip, and publically humiliate a thief after he attempts to steal their motorcycle. In Jones's drawing, however, two women overpower, strip, and publically humiliate a policewoman after she issues a citation for their parked bike.

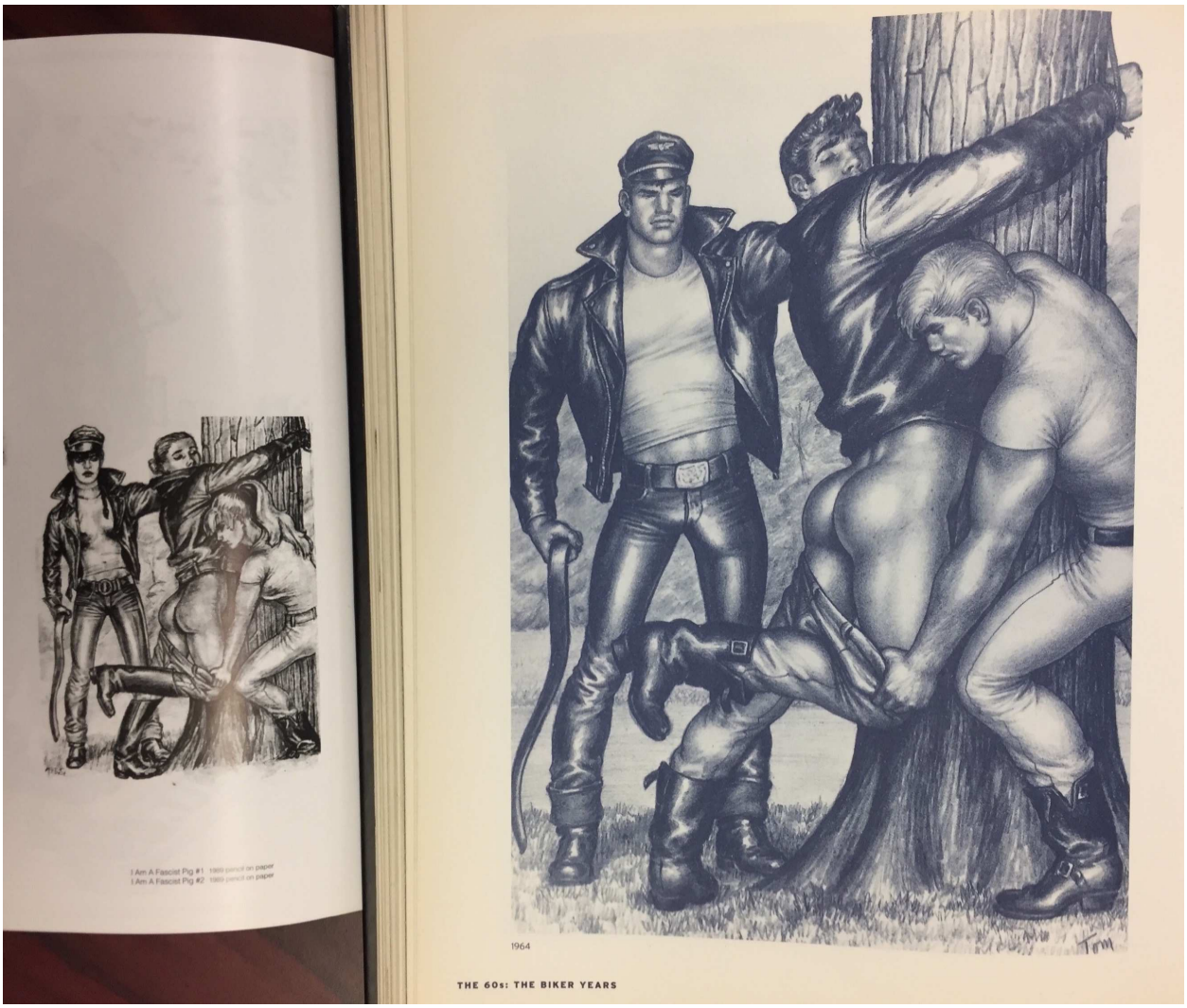

Figure 9: ***I'm a Fascist Pig #2.***

Figure 10: 1964 Untitled drawing by Tom of Finland depicting the moments before the thief's lashing.

By exchanging the thief in the original drawing for the cop, Jones is endowing her drawings with inverse power relations. Transgression of boundaries/space is the catalyst for eroticism in many of Tom of Finland's scenes, and these drawings are no exception. The thief transgresses in his attempt to steal the bike in the original drawing~~,~~ and ~~this~~ provokes a response/consequence of exponentially greater transgressions by the two men who overpower, strip, and leave him publically exposed and labeled a thief. And yet, the move by Jones to substitute a cop for the thief complicates notions of both power and transgression. The thief in the original drawing provokes the wrath by

attempting to take what is not his. However, the cop in Jones's drawing issues citations in response to transgressions of the law. Whether or not the women parked their bike illegally or not is not clear, nor does it really seem to matter. Part of what Jones's series accomplishes is shifting the focus from the bike to the figure of the cop, and the women in Jones's drawing are hostile toward the cop because she is a figure of institutional control and authority. Their responses to the citation are the acts of exposure, public humiliation, and labeling—just like the original drawing. But calling a thief a thief is not the same as calling a cop a fascist pig.

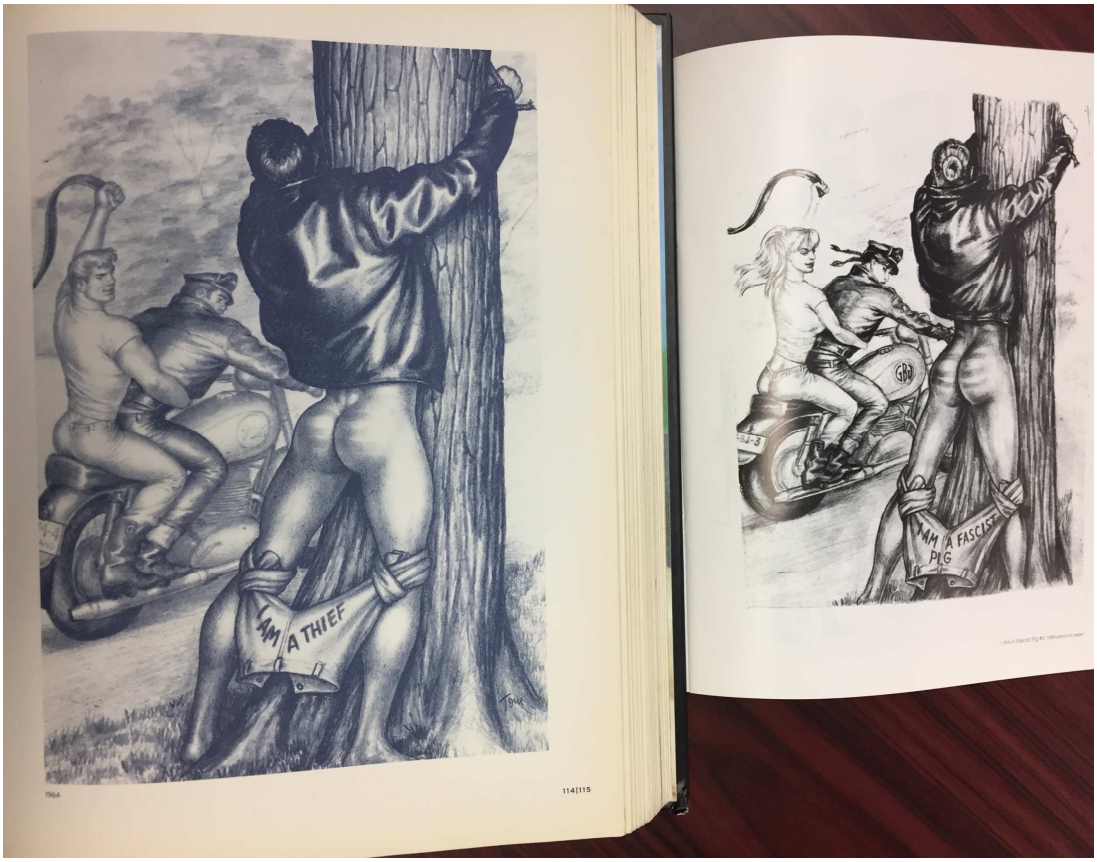

Figure 11: 1964 Untitled Drawing by Tom of Finland depicting a humiliated thief.

Figure 12: *I'm A Fascist Pig #3.*

By labeling the cop as a fascist pig, the women are underscoring their repugnance toward the cop by directly evoking an oppressive, authoritarian political regime and a derogatory term for police.

It is clear to see that *I'm A Fascist Pig #2* and *I'm a Fascist Pig #3* match the postures, positions, and actions of the Tom of Finland drawings that Jones appropriated (Figures 6,7,8). But *I'm a Fascist Pig #1* shows how Jones specifically, and the queercore movement generally, viewed authority figures with suspicion and hostility. And they were not afraid to meet any perceived slight. Jones is using the compositional relation among figures—the distance and proximities between elements—to cultivate her own fantasies. What is telling about the *I'm a Fascist Pig* drawings is that it does go against Jones's tendency for much of the *Tom Girls* series to *not* depict nude female bodies. While Tom of Finland's drawings nearly always feature nudity, by and large Jones's drawings do not.[46] This exposure of the cop and her public humiliation in the *I'm a Fascist Pig* series speaks to exactly what kind of recompense is justified when the purview of figures linked to and construed as institutional clashes with or is perceived to encroach upon the freedom of the punks depicted in Jones's drawings.

Both Jones' s and Tom of Finland's figures seek what the artwork conveys as appropriate justice for the slights made against them—and both the cop and the thief are humiliated accordingly. Yet, the most telling difference between each artists' ending is the words written on the pants of the thief and the cop. While Tom of Finland's original drawing shows the thief's pants turned into a banner that proclaims his status as a thief, Jones opts for the word "fascist" to affix to the cop's pants. Jones's substitution links this fictional moment of vigilante justice and violence (the cop, after all, is sporting the same belt marks on her ass as the thief in Tom of Finland's drawing) to contemporary and past times of oppression. "Fascist" functions in a few distinct ways in *I'm A Fascist Pig #3*. On one level, it is a colloquial as an insult against oppressive

[46] One of the exceptions to this is would be Jones's *Prison Breakout* series. In this series of drawings, Jones's revisits a 1976 series of drawings by Tom of Finland. In the original drawing a naked and distressed prisoner grips the bars of the cell, appealing for help from the guard. The second drawing in the series shows that, as the guard enters the cell, the prisoner seems destined to be similarly abused by both his fellow prisoner and the guard. Jones alters this narrative by having the femme fain distress that results in the prison guard entering the cell. The guard is then overwhelmed by the femme and her butch cellmate. In a manner highly reminiscent of the *I'm A Fascist Pig* series, the butch and femme strip and restrain the guard before escaping.

forces and institutions who seldom view themselves or their institutions in relation to the more historically resonant political movements associated with Fascism. Jones's art activates this double-move of exposure in the same manner that Tom of Finland's original drawing did, albeit via a different political climate. The cop is literally exposed, stripped of her pants, and left tied to a tree on the side of the road. But the pants of her uniform also become a site of another exposure, where Jones's bikers use one institution's uniform in order to publically mark it and the cop as participants in and enforcers of systems of oppression.

Thus far I've discussed Jones's drawings that have predominantly relied upon a tight compositional intimacy with Tom of Finland's drawings. It is clear to see that Jones's drawings rely upon her negotiating ever-circulating economies of pleasure and gazes at the heart of Tom of Finland's original drawings, but also— crucially —are highly selective about the tensions she culls to suit the needs and parameters of her own art. We see this in *Tattoo Girls #2* in her reworking of the trappings of military style for the punk aesthetic but also how in Jones manipulates the work of gazes in Finland's 1977 drawing. The result, though undeniably compositionally relatable to the original, mobilizes the original tensions with different contexts and resonances to show a scene between a butch dyke and her companion. Within the *I'm a Fascist Pig* series, Jones changes the premise of the original drawing, adding her own politically-inflected shading and tone to Finland's composition. By labeling the offender in her rendition a fascist, Jones does convey a political slant to her take on Finland's original drawing—however contrived. Despite having their social interaction interrupted by the cop issuing a citation, Jones's biker butch and her femme companion seem to relish the opportunity to engage together in this act of sexual humiliation of the cop. While we can't be certain of whether the biker butch and the femme depicted in Jones's drawing had any kind of attachment prior to their depiction sipping drinks as the cop issues a citation, they do ride off together at the end of the series of drawings. Their proximity and eroticism in the final drawing,

though characteristically subtle, is the foil of the sexually vulnerable and humiliated cop. And it's this tension that sets Jones's scenes apart from Tom of Finland's even as she works within his compositional framework. Thinking about curation beyond its traditional associations with selection and arrangement (which are still certainly pertinent to a discussion of Jones's drawings here) and focusing instead on the indispensability of relation-making from Tom of Finland's original drawings to Jones's re-creations lets us see her art as more than derivative.

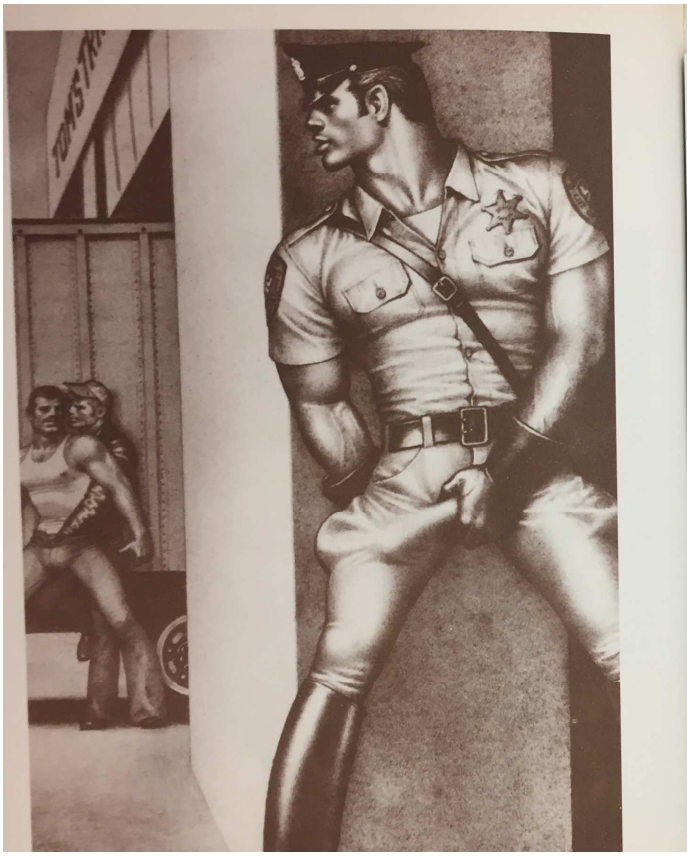

Figure 13: 1979 Untitled Drawing of cop watching "action" at a truckstop.

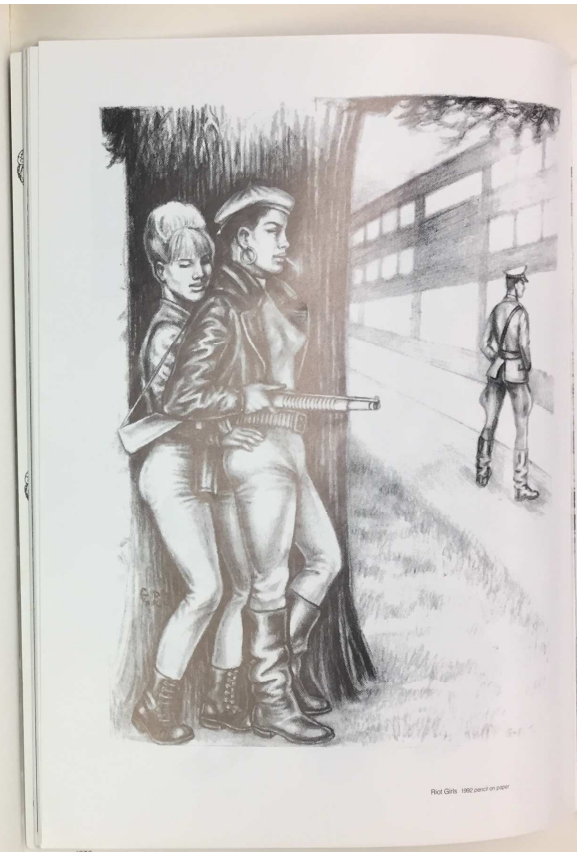

Figure 14: *Riot Girls.*

In a departure from both *Tattoo Girls #2* and the *I'm a Fascist Pig* series of drawings, Jones's *Riot Girls* (Figure 14) could be said to cultivate the most compositional distance from Tom of Finland's original drawings. The resulting drawing can be thought of as more of a mirror of Tom of Finland's original (Figure 13). The original drawing foregrounds a cop who is patrolling a truck stop

as he comes across two men engaged in the initial stages of sex up against a tractor-trailer in the drawing's background. The drawing is a one-point perspective-drawing, a trend that is atypical in Tom of Finland's other drawings. Finland uses perspective in order to create distance between the cop and the other men. The cop is pictured in the extreme right foreground of the drawing, looking over his shoulder and watching the two men. He presents an imposingly large figure, so much so that his entire body is not contained within the drawing. This scale highlights the iconically large hard-on the cop is sporting through his uniform pants. By having the cop wield his erection like law enforcement officers might normally hold their guns, Tom of Finland is playing on the tension between a loaded gun and the weapon-like erection, providing a Finland-esque inflection to Anton Chekhov's insistence that a gun seen by the audience should fire.[47] Like other Tom of Finland drawings, the 1979 drawing demonstrates the artist's interest in how distance is conducive to eroticism. The policeman straddles the line between surveillance and voyeurism as he looks towards the coupling. While in the other drawings proximity raises the tension or facilitates the circulation of erotic gazes around the drawing, in this case the police officer's distance and removal from the "action" is used to play with or even enhance the erotic economy that Tom of Finland depicts. One can't be certain whether the cop will bust the truckers, continue to let their sex arouse him, or join in the fun.

Jones's drawing appears as a mirror opposite of Tom of Finland's original. Compositionally, her drawing has two larger figures foregrounded on the left of the drawing, rather than Tom of Finland's original drawing which had the cop foregrounded on the right. She also reverses the grouping of figures, with two women (one butch and one femme) foregrounded in the drawing and

[47] The actual quote from Chekhov is: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there." From Valentine Tschebotarioff-Bill, *Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom*, p. x.

the cop drawn in the background, while Finland's original drawing had the single figure of the cop foregrounded with two men engaged in sex in the background. The setting for the drawing has also changed. The original drawing took place in a truck stop, a place often associated with transitive sex, public sex, and semi-public sex. Jones's drawing takes place outside of a nondescript institutional building. The two women in Jones's drawing are using the tree they are leaning on to obscure their presence from the law enforcement figure who is guarding the building. In place of the enormous cock that is wielded as a weapon in the original drawing, Jones's drawing depicts the women holding a large automatic weapon.

Perhaps the most significant change within Jones's *Riot Girls* is its (re)deploying the tensions between eroticism, voyeurism, and violence. In substituting the cop's cock for a gun, Jones insists on upping Finland's ante of the original drawing—all the while considering the pleasures that could be derived from the change in erotic equations. What I mean by this is that within *Riot Girls*, the eroticism is relocated to the femme's look of aroused anticipation as she and the butch watch the unsuspecting guard. She is depicted with her eyes closed, mouth slightly open, as her hand is poised on the butch's hip. The camp of Tom of Finland's original drawing comes from the exaggerated member of the cop but also from the complete disconnect or ambivalence of his expression, which appears neither aroused nor concerned, but neutrally blank. In Jones's drawing, however, the camp comes from this relational trivializing of the weapon/cock dynamic. And for the butch and femme punks, it seems that size does matter. While the potential for eroticism within these politically loaded confrontations was something connoted in Jones's *I'm A Fascist Pig* series, *Riot Girls* is much more forthright about how it demonstrates the power and sexual pleasure that come from potentially violent confrontations with forces linked to institutional control. Jones redeploys tensions inherent in Tom of Finland's 1979 drawing to make space for a less explicit, but not exactly less potent, eroticism between women.

Curation and the relations it simultaneously brings together and complicates—be it eliding distinctions between present and past, manhood and womanhood, presence and absence—facilitates the camp of Jones. Jones crafts a form of camp interested in emphasizing its play with and transformation of curated drawings from Tom of Finland's progidous erotic corpus. What I've characterized as Jones's compositional intimacy with Tom of Finland's drawings mobilizes the compositional arrangements along with the erotic and violent undercurrents of the art while contouring these forces to facilitate the punk aesthetics and political thrust of the queercore movement. Yet, despite these new inflections, we are meant to see the traces of Tom of Finland's art in the *Tom Girls* series. Jones's deviations are both clear and *queer*, but there is still a sense in which her work is concerned with the tension between past and present, presence and absence, and the play between these concepts. This is why I see Jones's curation as more than selection and assembly—although that undoubtedly is crucial to the project. Curation, as I see Jones employing it as a methodology, cultivates relationality. This moves beyond artistic decedents or transcendence. Tom of Finland's art is not just usable for Jones. It's relatable—to the political aims of the queercore movement and to the erotic lives of punk dykes. Through her curation of Tom of Finland's drawings, Jones shows that pasts can speak to each other through their relatability where curation becomes a space to stage and mark these interrelations and their resonances. This conceptual intimacy brought about by Jones's curation results in the camp where punk butches and femmes fill the compositional space left by beefcakes. The curational approach of Jones demonstrates how, despite difference in time periods, politics, gender, and sexuality, there exists some space—poetic, conceptual, or artistic—where her punk butches and femmes *can* be the queer kin of Tom of Finland's rough trade.

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Chapter 2

Lesbian Camp and Representational Binds

Lesbian camp could be said to be similar to the "100-footer."

We all know a "100-footer" when we see her. We might see her across the parking lot, the produce section, the party, the pool. It might be her hair, her walk, or her clothes that mark her as a "100-footer." The earring in her ear. The carabiner clipped to her khakis. Her practical, nearly always closed-toe footwear. The bow tie. The suit. The button-down. A vest of down, fleece, or leather? It could be all of these things or could be none of them, but when looking at her we have no doubt of her proclivity for women. We could know nothing else about this woman, but from 100 feet away, there is a way in which her body attests to her desires and perhaps our own. But whether you ache for her to return your or go back to whatever you were doing before she caught your eye, there's a way in which this body, its curves and angles, the way it moves, the way it *is*—if it doesn't completely puncture its context—calls out, insists, and/or arrests through its resolute visibility.

Lesbian camp is the camp that stands out from the other girls like a sore thumb. Though camp itself has been notoriously hard to define, lesbian camp has the distinction of being just as definitionally slippery but also capable of stopping traffic with its unapologetic obviousness. Such Obviousness exchanges the coolness of Sonatagian "pure" or "naïve camp" for intentional camp; camp that is conscious and aware of its efforts to be camp. The coupling of this obviousness and intentionality with the lesbian's famously ambivalent relationship to aesthetics gives lesbian camp its charm or its cringe-worthiness, depending on which camp you belong to.

Ironically, though lesbian camp shares some affinities with the "100-footer's" unmistakable and flagrant visibility, it has not received a great deal of scholarly attention despite its somewhat tentative inclusion in B. Ruby Rich's movement-defining ~~article~~, "New Queer Cinema." In this 1992

article about the preceding year's Amsterdam Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Rich notes a trend in the films by lesbian directors. Rich explains that:

> …a new type of video surfaced here, and with it emerged a contemporary lesbian sensibility. Like the gay male films now in the limelight, this video had everything to do with new historiography. But where the boys are archeologists, the girls have to be alchemists. Their style is unlike anything that's come before. I would call it lesbian camp, but the species is, after all, better known for the kind of camping that takes place in a tent. And historical revisionism is not a catchy term. So I'll borrow from Hollywood and think of it as The Great Dyke Rewrite. (25)

Despite going so far as to say that Cecilia Dougherty, Cecilia Barriga, Kaucylia Brooke and Jane Cottis all produce films that seek to intervene in conversations and perceptions about lesbian historiography through unique styles, the lingering campfire smoke linked to this "species" of directors makes Rich playfully hedge on just whether or not these films could be camp. The joke is certainly funny and low-hanging fruit. But, interestingly enough, the joke also seems to be all of the justification that Rich needs to forgo classifying these films as lesbian camp.[48]

This chapter will, good-naturedly, take Rich's first impulse—to call these films lesbian camp— and run with it. It agrees with Rich's initial claim that lesbians might have to negotiate a different approach to representing a history where they are largely missing from representation, but insists that, despite jokes to the contrary, lesbian filmmakers are capable of producing their own distinctive brand of camp. Rather than see lesbians as inherently limited in their ability to produce camp due to the ways that stereotypes, assumptions, and poor aesthetics congeal around figures in

[48] I also say this not to dismiss this move of Rich's but rather to mark the ways in which her coverage of the LGBTQ films in the last three decades of the twentieth century is capable of providing a sense of the genres, styles, and—maybe more importantly—the communities that coalesced around film festival circuits.

lesbian communities, this chapter claims that when it comes to lesbian camp, where there's smoke, there is also fire.

So, where Rich labels lesbian camp and then pivots toward the field-defining glory of queerer pastures in her 1992 article, I will insist on both lingering with Brooke and Cottis's *Dry Kisses Only* and affirming their work as lesbian camp. Like other camp producers that I examine in this project, Brooke and Cottis use several strategies to underscore and alleviate representational wrongs often inflicted on lesbians and the women who love (and/or lust after) them[49] by more and less well-meaning creators through the twentieth century and beyond. My interest in Brooke and Cottis's effort coalesces around the reflexivity of the film and work in different forms of media, which I've argued characterizes approaches to the camp by and for lesbian and queer women in the 1990s. But, I'll be honest, I am also drawn to this film because it's a bit of a mess.

Dry Kisses Only delights in the appeal and the frustration of subtext and its histories within lesbian communities.[50] So, there is no great irony than that *Dry Kisses Only* is both appealing and frustrating. Part of this is due to the film's uneven distribution of many different elements, resulting in a conglomeration of material that the film *just* manages to encapsulate. While I will argue that the film's TV documentary and accompanying "lesbian on the street" interviews provide a much-needed throughline and point of connection in an otherwise greatly disjointed film, these are just two elements of the film. In addition to the fake documentary and interviews, the film also includes

[49] A few notes on my choice of unorthodox terminology here. While Brooke and Cottis are very clear that they are interested in "lesbian" representation, filmic and visual tropes associated with "lesbians," and how "lesbian" communities make sense of a Hollywood film history that makes them into caricatures or ignores their existence completely, I've opted for a less-essentialist model that is more reflective of our contemporary conceptions and terminology. Brooke and Cottis's use of "lesbian" in their film makes sense given the film's moment of the 1990s but makes less sense now. I want my language to provide an ambiguity, one might even say a certain fluidity, that encompasses the intense, frivolous, long-lasting, fleeting, emotional, personal, impersonal, and/or sexual ways that all women can love other women—flavors and labels be damned.

[50] This is a film that is often brought up as a brief example of pre-New Queer Cinema ways of reckoning with issues of representation—though not as lesbian camp— as in Catherine Lorde's "Plotting Queer Culture," Ernest Larsen's "Laughing Matters Out Of Place: Obscenity, Dirt, and Video," and, most recently, Katrin Horn, "The Great Dyke Rewrite: Lesbian Camp on the Big Screen."

shots and sequences from Hollywood films, a short film/experimental interlude, two comedy sketches, and Brooke and Cottis's reimaginings of certain scenes that make lemonade out of the subtextual lemons of sapphically-tinged representations. As one can imagine, the juxtaposition of the film's many moving parts gives it an air of ridiculousness that carries over into its production of camp which—like the film overall—careens between excruciating explicitness and a subtlety that, frankly, surprises at times.

Central to all of the many different camp efforts Brooke and Cottis undertake in *Dry Kisses Only* is the issue of representation as it pertains to lesbians. For those uninitiated and/or unware, the problem of representing lesbians is one that is no less relevant, even in the 29 years that separates *Dry Kisses Only* from our current moment. It's my contention that both lesbian camp and the lesbian genre film suffer from the same issue bound up in the tension between the idea/the identity of a lesbian—or a woman who prefers to park her genitals alongside another woman—and the means we have of representing and recognizing this proclivity. I think most of the representational problems of the Sapphic (and other ways of living outside of gendered and sexual normativity) can be chalked up to the role/risk of stereotypes and the way nearly all representation can only ever represent, truncate, and/or compress. After all, even the best intended representation will never capture what it means to be a lesbian. Part of what this chapter will argue is that lesbian camp has its own means of navigating this representational bind, namely that Lesbian camp can mobilize and then use the momentum of these clichés for its own purposes and pleasures.[51]

I've settled on this notion of "mess" or "messiness" to think about lesbian camp because the definition of mess accounts for portions in excess, associations with tastes that are "somehow unpalatable," its work denoting a state of dirtiness of untidiness, something "bungled" or

[51] These efforts to represent something authentic about lesbian life often having to engage stereotypes and the other representational baggage or drift off into earnestness or a seriousness that well beyond the traditional purview of camp.

"mishandled," and the way that messes often appear in places where they should not, but also for the ways messes "puzzle" (OED). Additionally, and maybe more importantly than bridging notions of the untidy—that which is out of place entirely—I think that the mess and messiness can function queerly, connoting transgression, subversion, and—if we think about its erotic potentialities—serving as some indicator of our arousal, orgasm, and/or pleasure.[52] And it's this value that I'd like to insist on in the discussion of the film that follows and also in thinking about lesbian camp more broadly: that despite the ways in which it might not conform, that it might complicate or willingly diffuse conceptions of camp as they traditionally circulate, there is still some value or pleasure to be found in the efforts.

I want to begin my examination of *Dry Kisses Only* by thinking about one sketch that maybe best, if unsubtly, epitomizes both the representational project that Brooke and Cottis undertake throughout the film and how lesbian camp frequently works with and against stereotypes that cohere around lesbians. By far the better of *Dry Kisses Only*'s two comedic sketches, Brooke and Cottis's take on the lesbian vampire trope in the Dykenna and Dykella sequence demonstrates that part of lesbian camp lies in the acknowledgment of the pitfalls that have plagued our representations. This sequence is comprised entirely of shot-reverse-shots of Dykenna and Dykella (played by Brooke and Cottis) as the two lesbian vampires have a discussion about the pitfalls of lesbian vampire films. Throughout the sequence, Dykenna and Dykella are shot in extreme close-up, so that only the lower third of their powdery pale faces (their mouths, lower jaws, and chins) are visible. Very red lipstick makes the vampires' lips stand out from the rest of their faces.

The sequence begins with the vamps using what might be their best or their worst Eastern-Eurpoean accents to point out some of the shortcomings of the lesbian vampire film genre by

[52] The affinities between mess and queerness also served Heather Love in her 2016 short article in the special issue of *Women Studies Quarterly* on queer methods. For more see Heather Love, "Queer Messes."

posing questions to each other. Some of these questions include: "Why, I ask, do my sucking sisters always die?," "Why can't the bloodsucking lesbians live happily ever after?," "Is it, that [lesbian vampire] sexualities are vamped up for the Draculas in the audience?," and "Why is it that these lesbians on screen touch each other like they are glass.? Don't they like to fuck?" While each of these questions gestures toward very real representational problems for lesbians in Hollywood film—that of lesbian characters always dying, one of the women in the couple going off with a man, sex between women being used to entice a male audience or outrightly dismissed as "not counting" as sex, and the ridiculous chasteness that often accompanies sex scenes between women in film—Dykenna and Dykella's intense discussion of cinema's Sapphic shortcomings elevates the discussion to a form of foreplay. As the sequence progresses, their dry besmirched mouths become moist, dripping, and ultimately sopping with blood. Halfway through the sequence, as Dykenna has worked herself up into a frenzy that seems soon to be punctuated by her orgasm, Dykella interrupts with "another query" about the class disparities between the vampire (who is usually rich) and the unsuspecting victim (who is not). Though Dykella is able to procure a few more moments for questions, the sequence ends with breathless moaning, name-calling, and the orgasm Dykenna has been waiting for.

This sequence exemplifies the literal and figurative qualities that I would like to ascribe to lesbian camp as messy camp. As much as Dykenna and Dykella are put out by representations of lesbian vampires, the discussion of these films' flaws also turns them on. Brooke and Cottis acknowledge the caricatures made of lesbians in Hollywood films by having caricatures of lesbian vampires explain how and why these films are problematic. The figural mess of having to recognize the currency of these stereotypes—which could be seen as giving them credit or undue influence—is mitigated by Brooke and Cottis's very literal reveling in them. By having the blood-soaked mouth play stand in for (cis)womanly arousal and sexual pleasure, Brooke and Cottis circumvent the

representational boundaries that deem lesbian vampires as sexual but sexless. Their strategy shows the problems but also the potential that representational stereotypes can pose within lesbian camp.

This is a strategy that continues throughout the film through Brooke and Cottis's spin on the television news magazine genre that sets about to exploit the representational techniques of TV news broadcasts to make the issue of lesbian representation central to their film and their camp. In these segments of the film, the camp hinges on Brooke and Cottis's ability to call attention to how television news programs construct naturalness, credibility and authenticity. This is a construction that Brooke and Cottis manipulate and exploit in their efforts to chronicle the problematic representational history of lesbians. As a complement to these traditional television news scenes that take place "in studio," the directors also stage "lesbian on the street" interviews in order to see what 1990s lesbians think about how film has represented their sexuality. Additionally, and in the spirit of lesbians appearing where they traditionally don't in twentieth century film, the filmmakers also re-create film scenes from classical Hollywood cinema to transform Sapphic subtext into lady-loving contexts. Both the news broadcasts and the film reimaginings are undertaken to point out and rectify problems of lesbian representation, and the majority of what follows in this chapter examines these efforts of Brooke and Cottis, which offer critiques and alternatives to a void of lesbian representation. However, the conclusion of this chapter will take up the other side of the representational coin, so to speak. What I mean by this is that there is a presumption that more LGBTQ representation is always a positive. This is evident in Brooke and Cottis's approach in *Dry Kisses Only* and also reflective of the time period of the film's production, which was more than half a decade removed from the heyday of lesbian representation that emerged in the late 1990s and carried over for the next decade. Yet, as mentioned previously, lesbian representation is still an issue that remains relevant despite the preponderance of lesbian films made since 1990. My conclusion uses a strange sequence near the end of *Dry Kisses Only* to think about how the increased

representational visibility that might be seen as a net positive for LGBTQ communities should also be seen in light of which bodies representation often excludes in rendering LGBTQ life representable in the first place. What Brooke and Cottis ambivalently stage as a confrontation between lesbian representation and the mess that certain lesbian bodies can make of these representational efforts, I insist is a representational dilemma that we should take seriously. Ultimately, it is this reflexive willingness to apply the problems of lesbian representation to their own efforts to represent that allows *Dry Kisses Only* to illuminate how lesbian bodies, in their stereotyped, represented and unrepresented forms can, intentionally or not, make a mess of camp.

All the News That Fits Their Bit: The *L.E.S. News* Broadcast in *Dry Kisses Only*

Counterbalancing the heavy-handed camp that comprises sketches like the Dykenna and Dykella sequence is Brooke and Cottis's approach to incongruity meticulously rendered from the exploitation of different qualities and expectations associated with television news broadcasts. This mix of the explicit/ridiculous with the attention to media forms and techniques shows that camp in *Dry Kisses Only* is not a sum of effects that amps up as the film goes on. Rather, Brook and Cottis demonstrate the impulse to curate different media forms and genres to facilitate their varied, if uneven, approaches to camp. Among these strategies is marking the qualities of the news broadcast genre that thrive on an unquestioned naturalness and stylistic polish.

The *L.E.S. News* broadcast/news documentary and the "lesbian on the street" interviews that accompany them serve as an anchor to the amalgam of a film that *Dry Kisses Only* is. These sequences, which are interwoven throughout the film, take up the wooden form and casual style of a 1990s news documentary to comment on history and film fandom and its relationship to lesbians, bi, and queer women. These broadcast sequences present Kaucylia Brooke as the *L.E.S. News* "host" of a news documentary/current affairs program that examines and comments on the

historical plight of the lesbian filmgoer as she has dealt with the representational voids or travesties that have comprised the lesbian's appearance in classical Hollywood cinema. Clips from films like Edmund Goulding's *The Great Lie* (1941), Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Robert Aldrich's *The Killing of Sister George* (1969) and Tony Scott's (in)famous "lesbian" vampire film *The Hunger* pervade *Dry Kisses Only* in a similar vein as Vito Russo's highly influential book (and later, in 1995 LGBT documentary) *The Celluloid Closet*.

In fact, it is tempting to think about parts of *Dry Kisses Only* as a precursor to Vito Russo's iconic documentary as a majority of *Dry Kisses Only* is comprised of clips and commentary on films that fail to satisfactorily represent sexual and emotional relationships between women or films that were fodder for lesbian spectators and the ways they read such films subversively. Yet through a variety of methods, Brooke and Cottis rely on the conventions, expectations, and manners associated with television and television news documentaries in order to make their camp.[53] While both Russo and Brooke and Cottis are making efforts to re-remember film history by charting homosexual subtexts and characters in classical Hollywood cinema that often linger in varying degrees of presence, Brooke and Cottis seem to double down on the history of (in)visibility of lesbian characters and stories by making lesbians the forefront of the *L.E.S. News* broadcast. Their work, like Russo's, curates instances of homosexual characters and themes in film, but Brooke and Cottis are not content in tracking lesbian representation. Rather, they also set about through *Dry Kisses Only* to problematize lesbian representation in all the forms it takes. There are two main strategies that they use to accomplish this—namely mitigating the expectation of professionalism of the news documentary host and calling attention to the complex ways that television news trades on a strange brew of the real, the staged, and the contingent.

[53] For more see Jane Cottis, *War on Lesbians* (New York: Women Make Movies, 1992).

In their chronicle of just how equally tantalizing and frustrating representations of lesbians, bi, and queer women are in classical Hollywood cinema, Brooke and Cottis create camp through their exploitation of traits of television and television news, a form of media that relies on its efficiency, its polish, and its ability to link segments of time together in ways that are predictable and unobtrusive. Needless to say, *Dry Kisses Only* shows how bad television news can make good camp. This is a departure from *War on Lesbians* (1992), Cottis's follow-up to *Dry Kisses Only*, which is a much more focused film in which the structure of a news broadcast is used to facilitate a collection of earnest interviews with a community of lesbians. Though this second effort of Cottis's is far removed from what I argue lesbian camp is, both *Dry Kisses Only* and *War on Lesbians* attest to trends in the work of women filmmakers in the 1990s who were thinking about sexual and gender difference through conventions and forms of different media. This is a trend that Helen Westgeest explains in her book *Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach*, where she notes that the 1990s was a time when many women experimental filmmakers were reflecting on the mainstream media's often taken-for-granted role in that contemporary political climate (165). Westgeest discusses the work of Anja Osswald, who asserts that video's relation to television allows it to be a formidable means of critiquing television's representation of largely normative identities and fixed power relations (39). In this light, I see Brooke and Cottis' pairing a topic like lesbian representation to the television documentary format to be a choice that is very aware of the oddness of such a pairing in its contemporary moment of the 1990s. In a similar manner in which the subject matter of the film seeks to address the ways that lesbian representation in mainstream Hollywood film is lackluster or non-existent, the Brooke and Cottis are also cognizant of the ways that certain traits associated with television news documentaries might be in tension with lesbians and their representations.

In his essay "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium" David Antin discusses some of the characteristics of television as a medium, noting that it is television's work with and actual

selling of time that makes the medium distinctive from others. While other media scholars and theorists have focused on television's "liveness," its associations with truth and "the real," Antin explains it is television's accounting for time that has the most bearing on the way programs are constructed. This means that time is "television's only solid, a tangible commodity that is precisely divisible into further and further subdivisible homogenous units" including units for programming and units for advertising (156). This leads to the segmentation of programming that anyone who turns on their television sets would be familiar with. Yet Antin explains that despite the fact that their programming is comprised of segments, television broadcasters go to great lengths to make this segmentation as unobtrusive as possible (158-9).[54] However, Brooke and Cottis forgo this practice. *The L.E.S.* news documentary (and the "lesbian on the street" interviews that are linked to it) is one of the few conceptual moorings that promotes as much coherency and sense of continuity as the creators of *Dry Kisses Only* are interested in fostering. In a film which willfully disregards approaches that might facilitate coherency between its segments, the creators instead rely on the film's broader concern with lesbian representation to provide the links between the many different facets of the film that orbit the news documentary. Yet even in these sequences that contribute to some semblance of coherence and consistency, Brooke and Cottis find intentional and unintentional ways of undermining expectations of polish and seamlessness that go hand in hand with televisual programming. Traditional television broadcasts are also segmented, their segments are driven by advertising breaks that occur in predictable patterns, as Antin indicates. John Ellis in the canonical "Cinema and Broadcast TV Together" reflects a similar sentiment about television's predictability

[54]Antin writes "Since commercial time is the most common signature, we could expect it to dominate the tempo of television, especially since the commercial segments constitute the only example of integral (complete and uninterrupted) presentation in the medium … Both commercials and programs are assembled out of the same syntax: the linear succession of logically independent units of nearly equal duration… It is probably fair to say that the entire technology, from the shape of the monitor to the screen to the design of the camera mounts, was worked out to soften the tick of its metronome. Almost every instrument of television technique and technology seems to have the effect of a shock absorber."

when he claims that "The centrality and familiarity of broadcast TV create definite ideological limitations in its work. TV is required to be predictable and timetabled; it is required to avoid offense and difficulty" (251). In *Dry Kisses Only,* however, there are no commercial breaks, and this affects the film in several ways. There is no way to hazard how long a segment will run and no way to smoothly translate between tones that might grate against each other. And (as my examples will demonstrate) while the film had a modest production budget that didn't allow for the most careful of editing or transitions, *Dry Kisses Only* seems to thrive on its obtrusiveness, the uneven tone brought about by abrupt cuts between sequences, and a lack of predictability.

Brooke and Cottis's leveraging of obtrusiveness does not stop at their free-ranging formal liberties. They also do their best to mussy up expectations of professional polish. Antin calls this set of expectations that are the standards of television broadcasts "smoothness," and it thrives on a mixture of authority, creditability, and polish. Antin links "smoothness" to a code of behavior that emphasizes mastery and control and competence where signs of unpredictability,[55] surprise, and/or hindrance disrupt the forward-progress of the broadcast (153). Brooke and Cottis intentionally compromise the "smoothness" of their *L.E.S.* news documentary by keeping flubs and gaffes in their film. The first example of this occurs in the second shot of Brooke in the home-office as she explains the Hollywood convention of corralling sexual and emotional relationships between women into sub-plots, which play second fiddle to the primary narrative of a film. As the shot begins, Brooke begins to talk but is interrupted by Cottis's voice in voice-over. The shot remains unaltered.

[55] This differs from the feigned, improvisational pleasantries between anchors that Stanley Cavell writes about in "The Fact of Television." Cavell writes that "So hungry are we for the unrehearsed, the unscripted, that the persons at news desks feel obliged to please us by exchanging pleasantries with each other as transitions between stories. This provides a primitive version of the complex emotion in having an actor step outside his or her character as part of his or her performance…Since the practice of exchanging pleasantries reveals that the delivery of news is a form of acting (it may, I suppose, have been meant to conceal the fact)—hence, that for all television can bring out, the news itself is likely as not to be fictional, if only because theatricalized—there must be something else television brings out that is as important to us as the distinction between fact and fiction, some matter of life and death. This would be its demonstration that, whether fact or fiction, our news is still something that can be humanly responded to, in particular, responded to by the human power of improvisation." See, Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television."

Brooke frowns and then looks at the camera while Cottis's voice-over continues for another 20 seconds. This happens again later in the film when, with a small cocktail party going on behind her, Brooke begins her sentence "Along with" before Cottis, who is sitting at the back of the room on the fireplace talks and silences her. Shortly after this shot amidst the cocktail party, and after clips and voice-over commentary examine *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), Brooke starts to speak again, and Cottis stands up from the fireplace says "No, no!" and runs toward the camera. These are just a few examples of how Brooke and Cottis include errors in timing, set-up, and script-reading in their final cut of the film.

In addition to keeping technical errors, Brooke and Cottis also do their best to mock the news documentary hosts' attempts at seriousness, austere nature, and authority as she completes her "stand-ups" that offer context and commentary on films from Hollywood's history attempting to represent lesbians. After a montage of stills and clips that demonstrate the problematic and un-satisfying ways that lesbian life and relationships between women has been represented in Hollywood films, the opening shot that begins the host's presentation of the issue at hand—"the lesbian subplot in classic Hollywood cinema"—seems to differ little from the way similar shots are staged in traditional current affairs and news magazine formats. Though *Dry Kisses Only* lacks the production budget to have Brooke appear "in-studio," she appears in in medium shot sitting in a home office, bringing the shoulder-padded glory of her grey suit, along with her agenda, to bear on film representation. Brooke does her best impersonation of a small-market television news personality as she states:

> The subject of our investigation today will be the lesbian subplot within classic Hollywood cinema. This covert, rather than overt, narration can be read through the character's gestures which reveal the play of signs within the sexual logic of the film's

> iconography. These homosexual subplots, or in some cases subtexts, function as a release for those repressed sexual desires for the assumed heterosexual audience.

Brooke's posture is unchanging; her gestures consists of conservative hand movements that often coincide with slight adjustments to her glasses. Yet despite presenting Brooke as a credible, if not authoritative, figure, her language is stuffy and overwrought. The shot's office setting—with bookshelf, books, desk, and file cabinet—lends a formal air to the host's performance which is exemplified in her speech pattern. But despite trappings and a performance that is meant to emulate the news documentary presentation of issues/current events, the content doesn't quite live up to the formal gloss the directors undertake.

Brooke and Cottis's efforts to mitigate the polish and integrity of their faux news documentary only compound as Brooke continues her analysis of representations of what she terms "lesbians" in Hollywood film. Though the jargon continues throughout all the remaining shots of the host, Brooke and Cottis have their host move from the mise-en-scene of the office, where her first shot is filmed, to somewhat less obvious locations for a news documentary host to wax philosophic about the social moralities and imperatives that subtend the Hollywood representational system. Having used her first shot to establish the task that will be undertaken in *Dry Kisses Only*, in her second shot the host heads to the toilet to get down to business while, presumably, doing her own. Brooke begins:

> Let us propose that sexuality is constructed not only by social power structures—such as family, church, and school— but by self-construction, opening the closed system of Victorian, morality-based psychoanalytic theory … However, classic cinema cannot engage this diverse approach as other choices than heterosexuality would upset the balance of good and evil. Clearly, we won't disappear; so the social deviants must be subtexts, without the legitimacy of the classic linear narrative.

Those of us who have always wondered what it might be like to be propositioned in a bathroom now have a better idea of what that might look like, in a very literal sense—and to quite incongruous effect. To a greater extent than in her first shot, the second of Brooke's stand-up is laced with theoretical overtures that comprise the bulwark of a burgeoning queer theory as it is surfacing in the early 1990s—namely parroting Foucault. By locating Cottis's "stand up" on the toilet, the directors are more overtly deriding the pretense of authority, authenticity, and integrity that is tightly connected to expectations and conceptions of television news documentaries. The camp of this scene comes from the directors' juxtaposing high and low to excruciating effect. And while the toilet might be incongruous with "stand-ups" in the news documentary format, the choice might underscore the lack of "legitimacy," social standing, and representation faced by the "we" and "us" that Cottis refers to during her proposition as well as an outside.

Though Brooke and Cottis could not get much lower than having their host deliver her "stand up" on the toilet, the host's next shot has her pull up her white stockings, put on her grungy, well-used work gloves and galoshes, and venture into the garden as she discusses methods for lesbians to take up in order to have better experiences with film representation. While trimming her rose bush as the neighbor's eager Dalmatian jumps on the chain-link fence behind her, the host of *Dry Kisses Only* poses the documentary's solution to the problem of lesbian representation in film, reading and manipulating certain signs for a richer, more satisfying subtext.

Dry Kisses Only exploits several traits of television and television news programing to make their camp. For instance, the news documentary/current affairs programming casts a level of importance on whatever it covers. In contrast to the media environment of the early 1990s, *Dry Kisses Only* insists that lesbians are worthy of note and consideration and uses the credibility that this type of program touts in order to seemingly validate their subject matter. Yet, at the same time, Brooke and Cottis undermine the host's presentation of information (through keeping her tongue-

tied moments and moments where she is cut off by the voice/voiceovers of others) and intentionally put the fashion and manners that prop up television news on ever more shaky foundations. There is a certain theatricality that Brooke and Cottis are calling attention to within the news documentary program and within television as a whole—a theatricality that works hard to mask itself as casualness, as authenticity, as naturalness. The inclusion of technical gaffes that, however briefly, compromise Brooke's ability to convey information and the increasingly odd locations of the *L.E.S.* host's "stand-ups" all highlight the way that something as mundane and straight-forward as a television news documentary still requires a performance.

As I've demonstrated above, there are conventions of television news that Brooke and Cottis push to their limits in their endeavor to complicate distinctions between the natural and performative. The remainder of this chapter will concern similar moves by the directors to complicate distinctions between the real, the unreal, and the representation, between the staged and the unstaged, and between fantasy and reality. This impulse to complicate concepts that often work as binaries is linked to the harsh representational binary that nearly always accompanies lesbian representation in Hollywood film, where lesbian woman are either problematically present or absent altogether. While my next section will take up the possibilities that fantasy provides in *Dry Kisses Only*, the remainder of this section will examine the ways in which Brooke and Cottis demonstrate that the firm lines that television news coverage draws between the worlds in and outside the studio are actually only degrees of separation, where both worlds are governed by its methods of presentation.

Given its era of the early 1990s, *Dry Kisses Only* cannot provide examples of unproblematic lesbian representation in film. The film finds itself at the dreaded crossroads of lesbian representation, where, at this moment in time, the choice is between disappointing, homophobic,

and unsatisfying representations or none at all.[56] In addition to the formal "in studio" commentary provided by Brooke as the host of *Dry Kisses Only*, Brooke and Cottis also give "real" lesbians a chance to comment on how lives like theirs have been taken up in film. This is done primarily through the use of "lesbian on the street" interviews. Intercut with the host's commentary are three staged interviews, where "field" correspondents search for lesbians in their natural habitats and ask them about their own personal histories and thoughts about lesbians in film. Our "lesbians on the street" each relate their frustration with the way that film has traditionally treated lesbians.

The first of these "lesbian on the street" interviews takes place on the side of a busy street. After searching the street for signs of lesbian life, the correspondent —Jane Cottis— remarks that it might be hard to find lesbians on the street in a city where most people have cars. A man with a beard in a white shirt and tie passes by Cottis and the camera, and she posits "I don't think that's a lesbian." After at least eight seconds of watching Cottis look at passing car and foot traffic for lesbians, Cottis spots a sign of life and gestures off camera, "That could be a lesbian over there." The interview begins a few seconds later:

> Cottis: Excuse me, madam. Are you a lesbian?
>
> Lesbian: Why, yes, I am. How did you know?
>
> Cottis: Well, I didn't know, so I figured I'd ask. We are interviewing lesbians on the street about film. Have you seen any good lesbian films lately?
>
> Lesbian: I didn't think that there were any. We always just had to make it up as we went along.
>
> Cottis: What did you make up?
>
> Lesbian: My whole life.

[56] As of the time of writing, 2019, we would have to make this crossroads a three way stop in order to account for the well-intended but overwhelmingly bad "lesbian films" made in the mid-late 90s.

While the humor in the traditional news documentary portion of the film is derived from the liberties taken in the host's "stand-up" locales or musings, the "lesbian on the street" interviews are humorous for the ways that they intentionally compromise what is traditionally thought of as an improvisational interview with a staged one. Additionally the camera arranges and condenses the space of the frame, which plays a direct part in the awkward tone that ends this shot. After answering the correspondent's second question in a way that subtends the premise altogether (Cottis's question was about "good lesbian films" and the lesbian's answer was that she "didn't think that there were any), the "lesbian on the street" implies that because good/satisfying representations of lesbian life on film did not exist, "We always just had to make it up as we went along." Though certainly, given Cottis's question, it might make sense to read the "it" of the "lesbian on the street's" answer as related to the "good lesbian films" in Cottis's question and the "any" of her own immediate answer. But it appears that Cottis is keeping track of the "lesbian on the street's" grammatical slip. Cottis inquires into "what" exactly was being made up, to which the "lesbian on the street" responds, sincerely, "my whole life." The interview and shot end immediately after her comment. It is moments like this in which the earnestness of the "lesbian-on-the-street's" answer and the staged-spontaneity of the "lesbian on the street" interview rub up against each other awkwardly. But this goes beyond Brooke and Cottis's substitution of spontaneous interviews of lesbians on the street for staged interviews of lesbians made to look spontaneous. The directors present the shot taken from their static camera on a street corner as recording events as they unfold. Yet, by the shot's end, where our first lesbian on the street attests to the ways that not only Sapphic subtexts but, in fact, her "whole life" has had to be made up, it is clear that the camera—while unchanged from its original static position— compresses the effect of the woman's statement. This is part of what Peter Conrad, in his book length essay *Television: The Medium and Its Manners*, explains as television's lack of neutrality. Though many viewers think it capable of "professing sympathy or at

least impartiality, the camera is all the while cynically interfering in the reality it examines (35).[57] Not only the earnestness of the "lesbian-on-the-street's" answer, but its emotional, sentimental, and existential weight is compressed to such a degree that it leaves the answer sounding pitifully melodramatic. The result is an awkwardness that punctures the façade of gaffes and the consistently wooden, staged tone that pervades the film otherwise. The first of the "lesbian on the street" interviews shows both the traditional trajectory these interviews take within the film and also illustrates how Brooke and Cottis allow tonal inconstancies to remain. This first "lesbian on the street" interview renders the televisual cynicism that Conrad describes. The ending of this first interview seems telling of how camp can be compromised by the intrusion of ambiguous tones, and a certain way of letting the awkward lay unremarked upon. The camerawork and the staging of this scene compress the depth of the lesbian's statement that the lack of representation in film caused her to have to make up her "whole life." This compression leaves a void that looms awkwardly. All hopes for the accompaniment of additional context—either clarification from Cottis, a jab by her, something, anything—are soon dashed. Instead, we are left with the cut that truncates the first of the "lesbian on the street" interviews, leaving the chasm between the intent of the first "lesbian on the street's" remark the tonal inconsistency it initiates.

Perhaps even more than the first lesbian on the street interview, the second seems more interested in playing with the durational dimensions of the actual search for lesbians on the street, or in this case, on the beach. While the first interview with Cottis as correspondent moved through that search more quickly, the second "lesbian on the street" interview meanders a bit as the search

[57] In a similar move, Antin links the formal and technical development of video to the television news industry and highlights how both media trade on a fantasy of a pure reality that is not deliverable. He writes "Just as the photographic reproduction capacity of the camera is essentially equivocal and mainly significant as mythology, so is the fabled instantaneity of television essentially a rumor that combines with photographic duplicity to produce a quasi-recording medium, the main feature of which is unlikeliness in relation to any notion of reality." See, David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," p. 151.

unfolds. Whereas the first "lesbian on the street" interview demonstrated the way the television camera seemed to cynically compress sincerity, making its efforts to evoke something bigger than or outside the concerns of the screen ridiculous, the second of the "lesbian on the street" interviews is concerned with using television's association with liveness[58] to 1) continue to note the ways that the gaze of the camera is loaded and 2) reflexively gesture toward the camera's role in exoticizing the normative and normalizing the non-normative. Another crucial difference between the second "lesbian on the street" interview and the first is that the directors do not use static shots in this sequence. Instead the camera tracks forward, pans, and zooms as Cottis leads the search for "lesbians on the street." The camera's movement through space attests to what Antin calls the television's "illusion of immediacy, which it defines rather precisely as the feeling that what one sees on the TV screen is living and actual reality, at that very moment taking place" (54). As the second "lesbian on the street" interview begins, the camera pans up and down the beach as Cottis begins the film's second search:

> Cottis: We are here to interview the lesbian on the beach. And are looking—um—off in the distance to see if there are any lesbians on the beach today; we can ask them about lesbians in film. The beach, we figured, is a very good place to find lesbians. Do you see any coming? Now these two women right here look like they might be lesbians on the beach. We'll ask them when they get closer. If you look over we see what looks like a regular heterosexual family and it looks like they probably are not lesbians on the beach. And if you look off in the distance further there's an older couple. Now, they could be an older gay man and lesbian woman who've lost their partners, but it's hard to tell.

[58] In his essay "Attraction to Distraction: Live Television and the Public Sphere" James Friedman explains that range of different viewer relations the television news fosters in its cultivating and relying upon the element of liveness. For more see James Friedman, "Attraction to Distraction: Live Television and the Public Sphere."

[the women walking together have come to where Cottis is on the beach]

Excuse me. Excuse me. We are interviewing lesbians on the beach, and I was wondering if I could ask you a question. Are you, in fact, lesbians?

Shoe-wearing lesbian: Yeah.

Cottis [to shoe-carrying lesbian]: And are you also a lesbian?

Shoe-carrying Lesbian: Yeah, I am.

Cottis: Well, we are very lucky today, ladies and gentlemen. Now, what I want to know is, what lesbian movies have you seen lately?

The feeling of immediacy is enhanced by Cottis's use of phrases like "off in the distance," "If you look over, we see…," and "And if you look off in the distance further…," which not only narrates but directs the camera. After Cottis's question the camera quickly pans left and right in a simulated, unspoken "no," indicated by a shake of one's head. This gesture calls attention to the conventions that hold the camera as autonomous and impartial but also deems those conventions as illusory. The camera is concealing as much as it is revealing.

As stated previously, the entirety of Brooke and Cottis's *L.E.S.* News documentary hangs on the notion that lesbians are worthy of representation. While they are forced due to Hollywood history and conventions to acknowledge lesbian representational marginality and its absence, the "lesbian on the street" interviews provide the directors with a means to envision a society in which lesbians are the expectation and the norm. This manifests itself in the way both Brooke and Cottis, as field correspondents, point out and dismiss heterosexual people as they appear in the course of their interviews with lesbians. In the second "lesbian on the street" interview, Cottis dismisses a "regular heterosexual family" and assumes that the man and woman walking together down the beach "could be an older gay man and lesbian woman who've lost their partners." Here, homosexuality is a presumption that the camera reinforces. The regular heterosexual family is so far

in the distance as to be hardly visible even under the camera's considerable zoom. Because of the everydayness of heterosexuals, the normativity of this family is routine but also made exotic by the framing of the documentary. The family is quickly remarked upon then dismissed by Cottis as the camera quickly pans over them. The interviewees by contrast are shown clearly in medium shot.

Though I've cast the faux television news documentary and its accompanying "lesbian on the street" interviews as the anchor of this film, any impulse to view these as uncomplicated stabilizing forces in *Dry Kisses Only* is misguided. Brooke and Cottis certainly do not employ these conventions thoughtlessly or earnestly, they are in on the act of camp. What I mean by this is that these sequences derive their impact not from their stabilizing potential or the coherency they might be seen to provide for the film but for how the directors routinely and mercilessly undermine the integrity of these segments through the decisions to keep their technical gaffes, their contradictory staging of interviews that are guiltlessly positioned as spontaneous, and the affordances they make for the awkward. The television documentary, a genre that is often associated with facts, stability, polish, predictability, routine, and planned contingency, is found wanting due to the directors' intentional interference and manipulation. This meddling is self-aware, knowing, and calculated. It calls attention to the television genre's hollow promise of naturalness that is ultimately planned and constructed. While I want to position this overt, reflexive critique of media forms as a practice that is a crucial part of lesbian camp, it is also only one side of the coin. Lesbian camp in *Dry Kisses Only* is part fun-house, where things are not what they appear and also appear to be what they are not. My next section will stray a bit closer to Rich's first assertion of historiographic practices undertaken by the suite of films she hesitates to call lesbian camp. But to do that, I'll have to insist that we leave this fun-house of lesbian camp and strap in for Sapphic feats of alchemy.

Representational Re-imaginings in *Dry Kisses Only*

Though most of *Dry Kisses Only* centers around a fake news documentary whose polish, professionalism, and phlegmatic tone are intentionally undermined by the film's directors to produce camp and camp effects, it also insists on having its way with certain canonical Hollywood films in an effort to show how "at home" and already present lesbian themes and stories are within cinema. Yet the film also takes things one step further. Rather than just show how these tensions already exist, Brooke and Cottis find ways to bridge what often seems like a disconnect between lesbian representation in Hollywood cinema and the desires of lesbian, bi, and queer women. They accomplish this through the reimagining of scenes from famous films, where what traditionally has been the fodder for subtleties of Sapphic subtext is reworked to banish any sense of subtlety.

I think it's important to pause a moment and underscore the importance of the work that Brooke and Cottis do in recontextualizing famous narratives, dynamics, and representations about women to bring out their queerness. In the context of camp as it has been written about since the 1960s, its role as a subversive reading practice is well documented.[59] The work that Brooke and Cottis undertake in these segments of their film seems to be taking what was the work of imaginations starved of actual representations, imaginations that had to transform the looks and touches between women in films into the fantasies that suited their desires for women, and making the connotative explicit. In her book *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability,* Patricia White writes of *Dry Kisses Only* in the context of crystalizing and remedying the bind of the lesbian spectator:

[59] One particularly fantastic summation of camp as a subversive reading practice comes in Andrea Weiss's chapter "The Vampire Lovers" where she writes, "Although usually considered to be the province of gay male culture, camp is a frequent component of lesbian spectatorship as well, arising from the relationship between theatrical and melodramatic qualities in the cinema on one hand, and those perceptions of the world which are informed by one's gayness, on the other." For more see Andrea Weiss, "The Vampire Lovers," p. 107.

> Clearly we need to bring attention to the psychic mechanisms and social practices together in discussions of lesbian spectatorship: after all, lesbianism is both a social identity and psychological investment in loving women. One goes to the movies and can evaluate what one sees there as 'a lesbian,' at the same time that something in the cinematic experience calls forth, confirms, and specifies lesbian identities. I think it makes a lot of sense to link "gynophilia"—the love of women—with cinephelia—the love of movies—, to recognize that cinema's stock and trade, the eroticized image of Woman, is also addressed to us. The spectatorial position entails its own form of disavowal. (30)

As White explains, the bind of the lesbian spectator of classic Hollywood cinema is one of seeing what's, more often than not, never actually there or having to routinely disavow the attempts that are made to represent our love, life, and/or sex as problematic. White and I both agree that *Dry Kisses Only*'s reimaginings both call attention to the representational shortcomings of Hollywood film, and (finally) show ways of reclaiming representational space and affirming our fantasies. I, however, would also like to look at this work—at the nexus of representation, stereotypes, fantasy, and the work in and through representational forms and genres—as lesbian camp.

This practice of reimagining scenes culminates in Brooke and Cottis's addendum to the iconic backstage scene in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950).[60] Mankiewicz's original sequence follows after the seemingly pitiful Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) is invited backstage to meet her aging stage actress idol, Margo Channing (Bette Davis) by Channing's best pal, Karen (Celeste Holm). Eve wins over the hobnobbing theater folk with her tale of tragedy that starts as she works as a secretary at a brewing company in Milwaukee, marries Eddie whom she meets at her

[60] Judith Mayne, in the conclusion to her book *Directed By Dorothy Arzner,* briefly mentions *Dry Kisses Only* and specifically this reworking of *All About Eve* in the context of the climate of the closet and the ways that homosexuality was often only acceptable in films at the subtextual level. For more see Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* p. 180-181.

community theater group, and then loses Eddie in the war. Eve's tale moves Channing's theater pals and even the cynical Channing herself (along with her stone-faced companion Birdie!) to shed a tear or two. In *Dry Kisses Only*, Brooke and Cottis insert what I'll call Sapphic Eve's story in the place of Eve Harrington's. The directors replace the sequence's medium shots of Ann Baxter's Eve Herrington with shots of Kaucylia Brooke playing Sapphic Eve. Brooke sports a funny hat and trenchcoat and is depicted against dated floral-print wallpaper. Shot in black and white, Brooke and Cottis's Sapphic Eve shots match the mise-en-scéne of the original film while molding the script to reflect Sapphic Eve's proclivity. Sapphic Eve's story is similar to Eve Harrington's except that details about her life are altered to reflect Sapphic Eve's life as a lesbian. She also addresses her story to Bette Davis, rather than Margo Channing. The overall trajectory of Sapphic Eve's story is the same since she, too, is from Wisconsin, has a penchant for the make-believe, and comes to love a star after she experiences the untimely loss of a lover. However, Brooke and Cottis have made strategic alterations to Eve's monologues to reflect her lesbian sensibility. For instance, while Eve Herrington decides to stay in San Francisco after traveling there to meet Eddie and learning of his death, Sapphic Eve leaves the monotonous humdrum of poor Wisconsin farm life for San Francisco because "mom and dad didn't really seem to understand" her. Where Eve Herrington meets Eddie through her community theater group in her otherwise boring Wisconsin town, Sapphic Eve meets Edie—her "handsome" Air Force pilot—at the gay bar that she works at in San Francisco.

In addition to alterations of the storyline/trajectory, Brooke and Cottis manipulate the reactions of *All About Eve*'s main characters. Davis, Holm and Hugh Marlowe. Within the original film, the sequence of Eve relating her tragic history to the theater folks is comprised primarily of medium-shots of Eve Herrington as she tells her story, medium-close ups of Margo Channing as she reacts to Eve Herrington's story, and two-shots of Karen and Lloyd also reacting to Eve Herrington. While Brooke and Cottis take care to ensure that their filmed replacement for Anne Baxter's/ Eve

Herrington's shots replicates the original shot set-up and mise-en-scéne in exact and convincing ways, respectively, they choose to keep the original film's reactions to Eve Herrington's story but have their fun reordering these shots in ways that are subtle enough to leave the narrative integrity of the original scene undisturbed yet also obvious enough to impart camp effects through the incongruous, noticeable differences between *All About Eve*'s backstage scene and Brooke and Cottis's reimagining of it.

One example of Brooke and Cottis's manipulation of the reaction shots to Eve Herrington's story is their delightfully twisted recontextualization of one of Karen and Lloyd's reactions. The two-shot that appeared in the original *All About Eve* comes as a response to Eve Herrington's well-informed, feigned inquiry into whether Lloyd Richards was "with the OWI" during the war. A medium-long two-shot of Karen and Lloyd follows, where Karen casts her eyes down from Eve Herrington with a concerned look on her face while Lloyd—clearly already dazzled and charmed by Eve's attention to detail without bothering to question how and why'd she would want to know these details— smiles from ear to ear and nods his head in amazement. The stark contrast between Karen and Lloyd's reactions to Eve's assertion wrapped in the guise of a naive question is employed to great comedic effect by Brooke and Cottis. The directors transplant this two-shot so that it follows Sapphic Eve's self-deprecating interrogative "Oh, but I'm talking perversely, aren't I?" which proceeds her disclosure concerning her childhood, the way she would "play silly games with other girls," and the ionic line from *All About Eve* where "the unreal just became more important that the real." The incongruity between Karen and Lloyd's reaction to Sapphic Eve's question regarding whether or not she is "talking perversely" seems to compound with its new location in Brooke and Cottis's reimagining. Though Karen clearly seems concerned by Sapphic Eve's rhetorical question, Lloyd's large grin and enthusiastic nodding not only confirm the perversity that

Sapphic Eve has coyly asserted about herself but also give the impression that Lloyd is definitely excited by, this perversity.

Brooke and Cottis also take some liberties with the reactions of Margo Channing/Bette Davis. The directors duplicate, relocate and reuse a medium close-up shot of Margo Channing taking a long drag on her cigarette and exhaling. Within the context of the original *All About Eve*, this medium close-up was used as Channing's reaction to Eve Herrington's introductory remarks to her life story when she explains that she was an only child who was drawn to play-acting. Yet in Brooke and Cottis's reimagining, this medium close-up is relocated and used as a reaction to Sapphic Eve's contextualizing the short-lived domestic bliss that she and Edie had in San Francisco while the war in Europe loomed overseas. Well-removed from the context of Margo Channing's impatience at the waste of her time listening to an obsessed fan's platitudes toward the beginning of *All About Eve*'s backstage scene, Brooke and Cottis's relocation of this reaction shot provides a new context—one in which the cool impatience of Margo Channing's original shot now makes Bette Davis seem as if her inhalation is a nervous response to the foreboding turn in Sapphic Eve's tale. To very predictable but hilarious effect, Brooke and Cottis also reuse shots of Davis blowing her nose at the conclusion of Eve Herrington's tale of love, loss, and the inspiration she takes through watching Channing's plays. Though the context of this nose-blowing is unaltered, Brooke and Cottis forsake the single perfunctory shot of Davis clearing her nasal passages and instead multiply this act an additional four times in secession to punctuate the sequence.

Brooke and Cottis's reworking of this scene from classical Hollywood cinema reflects the interesting differences between how the camp traditionally associated with gay male culture takes up its attachment to aging starlets like Margo Channing (and, well, Bette Davis) and the way that these same stars seem to reflect different concerns or values within lesbian culture—and within lesbian camp. Along with the likes of Joan Crawford, Barbra Stanwyck, and Mae West, stars like Davis, both

on and off the studio backlots, faced public disdain, their declining popularity, and/or aging with a certain amount of defiance and—if not always a lot of dignity—a lot of style. Several scholars of camp and gay culture alike have explained that it's this personality-laden resistance of the inevitable that reflects, relates, or approximates the singular and collective day-to-day struggles gay males face in the cross-hairs of normative society.[61]

But when it comes to lesbian camp, style isn't everything. Where a traditional or gay male centric notion of camp might use Davis's iconic status as an avenue to honor emotion that the community might not be able to express about their daily struggles or to see her endeavor to endure the indignities of aging as a parallel to the community's struggles to survive and thrive in climates of homophobia, this same persona is used differently by Brooke and Cottis. While the figure of Davis as a strong, independent woman is acknowledged by the film and filmmakers, they are careful to frame Sapphic Eve's worship of Davis not from solely her perception as a strong personality/woman but from what her interactions with other women mean—the way that they can be made to index sexual and emotional connections between women. In fact, there are certain points within Brooke and Cottis's reimagining that could be seen as cutting Davis's larger-than-the-screen persona down to size— where the ice queen's extravagant gesture of smoking in the original *All About Eve* is truncated and downplayed, the directors' own Sapphic Eve has moved Davis in ways that only her besieged nasal passages can express, and express, and express (…and express and express).

Brooke and Cottis rework the backstage sequence from *All About Eve* so that it becomes imaginary, a way they can stage and reflexively manipulate the ionic Hollywood film so that it stands as part of the plight *Dry Kisses Only* seeks to address but also, crucially, part of the solution— where,

[61] See David Halperin's "The Passion of the Crawford," Daniel Harris's *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, and Richard Dyer's "Judy Garland and Gay Men."

to paraphrase Eve Herrington and Sapphic Eve, the unreal becomes more real than the real. This is not only a literal replication of a line from the film but a gesture to both the horrendous disparities between the representational fancies of generations of women who desire other women and how they find their lives, bodies, and relationships represented in mainstream Hollywood cinema. For so long, and not unlike Sapphic Eve, these women could only latch onto the subtext, the touches and looks between women characters in classical Hollywood cinema. Just as Sapphic Eve relates the way she uses these filmic fragments for her own devices, through the reworking of a sequence from an iconic Hollywood film, Brooke and Cottis have actualized what has historically been a feat accomplished through one's interiority—as the *L.E.S.* Broadcast and its "lesbians on the street" attest to later in *Dry Kisses Only*. Camp helps Brooke and Cottis straddle this representational divide. The camp effects that are created by these filmmakers mark the place where subtext is, finally, seduced—turning even the most famous subtextual fodder into Sapphic gold.

Conclusion

To return to B. Ruby Rich's remarks on what she hesitates to call lesbian camp, Rich explains that the films produced by gay men at the 1991 Amsterdam Gay and Lesbian Film Festival were engaging in a form of archeology rather than the "alchemy" that characterized the films of lesbians like Brooke and Cottis. If we want to take Rich's metaphor as gospel, there is a way that Brooke and Cottis are both literally and figuratively taking film fragments that contain or are read as containing lesbian subtext and turning them into full-fledged lesbian representations. We see this in the *All About* (Sapphic) *Eve* section of Brooke and Cottis's film. But I think we might also picture a film like *Dry Kisses Only* turning more traditional conceptions of camp into something else. Something that is more open to earnestness and contingency. Something that allows for disruptions that might puncture and compromise camp. Something that is willing to leverage a few chinks in the

play of artifice and surface that comprises camp's opaque and seemingly impenetrable armor for the sake of representing dykes everywhere.

In a film that is chronicling, bemoaning, and advocating for lesbian representations and depictions of lesbian life within film, visibility of discernable images of lesbians in the film is crucial. The primary function of the staged "lesbian on the street" interviews is to give *L.E.S. News Service* viewers a chance to hear from "real" lesbian viewers like themselves. These "lesbian on the street" interviews are meant to accomplish this, along with providing less formal language and opinions that substantiate the material in the newscast. Yet, even in a film that is addressing lesbian representation, it's worth noting that the lesbians featured in these interviews are generally feminine and look to be in or past their mid-30s, white, and middle-class. Now, I realize that these interviews are a) staged, and b) likely made up of friends and/or acquaintances of the filmmakers. However, I do want to point out that Brooke and Cottis do not represent older lesbians, larger women, or masculine-of-center women in the film. Given the implied goal of the "lesbian on the street" interviews, to find out the movie tastes and opinions of an Average Jo, perhaps the fact that the film ends up representing average lesbians is just playing to that goal. However this does point to the representational pickle that my introduction alluded to: namely that representation seems to condense the stylistic and gender variations that are present in lesbian life—where representing every lesbian turns into representing average lesbians. One benefit of averageness that might explain Brooke and Cottis's approach is that, by sticking with representing middle-of-the-road lesbians, the directors avoid stereotyping which, after all, is one of the many representational hang-ups they have in regard to how lesbians have been represented in film. There seems to be unresolved tension between the notion of a lesbian, how lesbians have been represented, and the stereotypes and clichés that pervade both. To conclude this chapter, I will focus on the third and final of Brooke and Cottis's "lesbian on the street" interviews to argue that part of what is distinctive about lesbian camp

is its ability to question whether or not this tension between lives lived as lesbians, representations of lesbians, and stereotypes of/about lesbians is always oppositional, always problematic, and always unproductive. The third and final "lesbian on the street" interview continues Brooke and Cottis's use of a disruption that compromises certain elements of their film, including its own camp. Strangely enough for a film about lesbian representation, the final "lesbian on the street" interview has its camp disrupted due to the intrusion of two lesbians.

Like the other two "lesbian on the street" interviews, the third has Brooke venturing to a slightly different habitat to interview more lesbians about how their lives/identities have been represented in film. Brooke is framed in medium shot, with a sparsely-treed, meandering canyon road dotted with large homes to the right of the frame and a curbed suburban street to the left of the frame. As she begins her opening remarks as field correspondent a Young Leather Dyke can be seen walking in the distance on the street behind Brooke, far in the background of the shot. The Young Leather Dyke hops on the curb and continues balancing herself as if she's walking on a tightrope as Brooke begins her stand-up:

> Brooke: Hello, I'm Kaucylia Brooke and I'm here with *L.E.S. New Service* today looking for the lesbian on the street. We are here in a kind of older neighborhood, hoping that some young women will walk by that we can interview about our questions about lesbians in film. And I hear some footsteps, and if we are lucky—
>
> Yes indeed! Excuse me, ma'am, are you a lesbian?

Unlike in the previous two "lesbian on the street" interviews, our Young Leather Dyke has an immediate answer for the correspondent's question about "lesbian film," and the answer does not comment on any kind of lack in lesbian representation. The Young Leather Dyke then goes on to discuss how *Virgin Machine* (Treut 1988) is better than other lesbian films due to the ways that the film dabbles in genderfuck rather than maintaining a more mundane, "vanilla" approach to depicting

lesbians. She continues "In *Virgin Machine*, you know, you see 'aw yeah, man. That's Susie Bright. She writes for *On Our Backs*.' And there she is flicking a clear dildo at the screen. You know? And it's like much more progressive than *Desert Hearts* ever got. It showed real lesbians. Most of the women in the show were real lesbians." When thinking about how the "lesbian on the street" interviews have worked together over the course of *Dry Kisses Only*, it is clear to see that they seek to represent a few different perspectives on lesbian representation in film. The first interview sought to bring up the lack of any direct representations of lesbians and the ways that women "made up" and relied on practices like camp in order to see themselves reflected in film. The second interview focused more on the problems of classification that arise now that (then) contemporary film has attempted—with varying degrees of success—to depict lesbians. The final interview hits upon a slightly different vein of thought, namely the existence of independent and experimental cinema and the place for depictions of lesbian lives outside Hollywood cinema. Yet, for a film that has, thus far, solely concerned itself with representations of lesbians, this final "lesbian on the street" interview seems to chart a move toward a kind of authenticity associated with what it might mean for "real" or actual lesbians to be depicted in representations of lesbianism in film.

This shift in concern seems to be part of the filmmakers' reflexivity at work. The move toward the topic of lesbians being represented in film by actual lesbians has a heavy dose of irony as it surfaces in a staged interview also concerned with finding out what "real," everyday lesbians think about how lesbians have been represented in film. Because these interviews are staged, the filmmakers are showing their play with not only the conventions of the news documentary form but also with real and unreal and how both come to be represented. Though the majority of *Dry Kisses Only* seems more concerned with camp as it is generated through the reveling and reinscribing of artificiality, I've gestured toward how the film also holds open a place for interruption and

disruption—and also how these disruptions create spaces that diffuse and/or complicate the camp approach developed through the course of the film.

The third shot of the final "lesbian on the street" interview is where we see the directors' work with disruption come full circle. The Young Leather Dyke continues to wax poetic about why and how she sees *Virgin Machine* as a better "lesbian film" than representations of lesbians in more traditional Hollywood cinema. The third shot begins with the same medium shot setup that has predominated in this "lesbian on the street" sequence, with Brooke on the right side of the frame and the Young Leather Dyke on the left side of the frame. The background of the shot is comprised of the gently rolling slopes of the upscale neighborhood settled in the canyons of a California suburb. Brooke is ready to resume the interview and looks at the Young Leather Dyke. The Young Leather Dyke however, is preoccupied with something off-camera; her sightline passes beyond the frame to the left. Brooke speaks to attempt to bring the Young Leather Dyke's attention back to the interview, saying, "Ok, so…," but whatever is holding the attention of her young interviewee now also stops Brooke mid-sentence. The Young Leather Dyke turns smiling, to Brooke, unsure of how to proceed, and mumbles something quietly. The Young Leather Dyke turns away from Brooke, returning to her original position, but continues to smile nervously at whatever has caught her attention off-screen. Brooke maintains her own look out of frame for a second but then seems to decide to ignore what is going on off-camera and, again, attempt to continue the interview.

> Brooke: Let's—
>
> Young Leather Dyke: [quickly turning back to Brooke and sayings something else intentionally quietly, before turning back around to look out of frame, smiling]
>
> Brooke: Uh. So—uh. Let's go back to Katherine Hepburn. Ok?

[the Young Leather Dyke continues to look off-screen. Brooke looks to her but, seeing that she is still preoccupied with something off-screen, she also looks out of frame to the left.]

Hello?

Voice from off-camera: Hi.

Young Leather Dyke [continues to look off-camera, smiling]: Hey.

Voice from off-camera: [says a sentence that doesn't register clearly]

Brooke: [laughing nervously] You want to see it when it's done?

[The camera pans to the left, turning well over 90 degrees, to capture two suburban lesbians descending the concrete steps that connect their house to the street, where their car is parked.]

Suburban Lesbian: Yeah, put a notice on our door. We'd appreciate it. After all, it was filmed in front of our house.

[The suburban lesbians get in their car. The camera pans back to its original position with the Young Leather Dyke and Brooke framed in medium shot.]

Brooke [quietly, to the camera operator (Cottis)]: Did you get that?

Cottis: [responds nearly inaudibly from behind the camera]

Brooke: Ok. So yeah.

Young Leather Dyke: So there are dykes in the suburbs!

Brooke: Yes, there are—

Young Leather Dyke: They're just hidden.

Brooke: Right. Hidden but findable.

In the ways that Brooke and Cottis have used and undermined the form of the news documentary to produce their work of camp, one of the primary tensions at work has been between the dryness of

the host's report and the reaction of the lesbian community via these staged "lesbian on the street" interviews. Staging these interviews aids Brooke and Cottis in ensuring a congruity between what is said in the interviews and the film's intention while also simultaneously spoofing the news documentary genre by manipulating expectations of spontaneity, impulsiveness, and the sense that anything could happen or unfold in front of the camera by ensuring that none of this actually happens—by calling attention to clichés and the staged nature of these supposedly off-the-cuff moments. Though, due to the fact that these interviews take place in public—although in progressively less populated locations—there are allowances that the directors make for the un-predictable. But even these are met with predictable (but still funny) jokes. Jokes like "that doesn't look like a lesbian" as a white man in a suit and tie passes Cottis while she "reports" on the street, or Brooke's observation that the straight family frolicking is probably "not lesbians on the beach" are easily made, with little or no risk involved. After all, the world is crawling with straight people. What is not so easily handled, however, is the way an actual lesbian couple intrudes in the final "lesbian on the street" interview. In a film about lesbian representation that interviews lesbians in a fake broadcast by *L.E.S.* News Service, it is interesting how the film's reckoning with tone, the way it exploits and manipulates form, and its play all seem to unravel because of the intrusion of two real—"100-footer"— lesbians into the final "lesbian on the street" interview. In a film that is heavily invested in subtexts and contexts, I think it is telling that the appearance of two lesbians on the street walking from their home to their car is an intrusion—one that derails the filmmakers' play between completely staged and real-appearing, between the lives of lesbians and women who love other women and how those lives are represented (or not) in film. After over an hour of spoofing a news documentary, and through camp produced by the development and manipulation of façade, artifice, detachment, insincerity, and cliché, *Dry Kisses Only* appears to actually document. And the result is the complete dissolution of the play, a compromising of the camp the film has crafted.

In the end it is the real "100-footers" that become the disruption by their intrusion into the play of surface and manufactured spontaneity. Their unplanned, unstaged presence within the final shot of the third "lesbian on the street" interview simultaneously turns the theater of the television news setup into documentary. "Lesbians" become, well, lesbians, derailing the interview and, arguably, the film. This final "lesbian on the street" interview acts as a stage where representation meets seeming actuality, where the irony of suburban lesbians somehow intruding into or disrupting a fictional film interview about lesbian representation completely demolishes the layers of staged fakery that have predominated Brooke and Cottis's film. Yet this heavy dose of irony is just part of what causes *Dry Kisses Only*'s camp to evaporate in the final "lesbian on the street" interview. Despite how most of their words are muffled, the video quality, and the briefness of their walk to their vehicle—and in spite of the Young Leather Dyke's performed exuberance about radical lesbian film—it is the "100-footer" glory of these lesbian bodies that intrudes on this interview that was framed as being Brooke and Cottis's nod to less conservative representations of lesbians in and out of film. To me, what is almost poetic is how this final "lesbian on the street" interview stages a confrontation between representing lesbianism/lesbian culture and the intrusion of some forms of lesbian visibility—like the "100 footer" and or the butch. There is something about the way these bodies are in the world, their obviousness, their unruliness, their anachronism or visual excess, that does not seem to reconcile how representations of lesbianism have to condense, distill, and perhaps put too fine a point on this particular way of being lesbian.

Lesbian camp, like the camp I've located in *Dry Kisses Only*, makes room for these fractures caused by certain forms of lesbian visibility. It can do this due to its recognition of the (larger-than-we'd-like) role that stereotypes and clichés play in the way society understands us while affording room for the ways these stereotypes also, inevitably, tell us about our community. Perhaps it is our own images and/or our outstanding images that do tend to complicate camp for lesbians. With

fewer satisfying representations than more normative communities,[62] there is an instinctual disavowal and impulse to appropriate, via camp, what denigrates us; to take forms like the television news documentary and bend them to our will as we expose them for what they are rather than the ways they disguise themselves. But there is also the knowledge that some bodies—like the 100-footers, for example—epitomize every preconception, hitting every branch on the tree of lesbian stereotypes…on their way to the potluck. There is need to allow for room for these bodies, their impact on representations of lesbians and women who love and desire other women, and the ways that their visuality can upstage camp's theater.

[62] It is also worth noting that lesbians, particularly the white lesbians that comprise the communities and creators I've covered so far, have more to their archives than many other non-normative communities. The chapter that follows will consider how camp helps to facilitate memory in archives that don't exist for some black communities.

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Chapter 3

Sometimes You Have to *Curate* Your History: *The Watermelon Woman* (1997) as a Work of Camp

In a twist of fate—or, rather, a twist of camp—three months after the release of *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye 1997), Artspace Books published *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* containing 75 photographs taken by Zoe Leonard and captions created by Leonard and Cheryl Dunye. Dunye's film, *The Watermelon Woman*, focuses primarily on the efforts of the film's Black lesbian protagonist, Cheryl (played by Dunye), as she undertakes her first documentary film which is a search for information about Fae Richards, an uncredited Black actress working in Hollywood in the 1930s. In the course of her search, Cheryl learns that Richards had many relationships with women throughout her life, including one with a white director with whom Richards often worked during her time trying to make it as an actress in Hollywood. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* is a strange document marked with many of the eccentricities and theoretical conceits that inflect Dunye's film, which include playing/manipulating the often taken-for-granted links between photography and indexicality and an ambivalence about the seriousness of documentary as a whole.

Thinking about the relationship both *The Watermelon Woman* and *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* have to seriousness is important for understanding their relationship to camp. This requires differentiating Dunye's camp from more traditional forms of camp that have a much stricter focus on aesthetics and style over content and form. Dunye's camp is aware of itself as camp and political in its aims. These last two criteria in particular, would disqualify Dunye's work from camp under Susan Sontag's rubric of sorts that she outlines in "Notes on Camp." Yet, this chapter—and larger project—insists that if time can change a text's or object's relationship to camp, the passage of time can also change how we theorize camp. While Sontag and I might prove interesting bedfellows given our divergence in thoughts and opinions about camp, I do think that her attention to camp's relationship to seriousness is fascinating to consider alongside a text like *The Watermelon Woman*.

Among Sontag's several notes on camp's relationship to seriousness is one that states that camp is a sensibility that, "among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous" (276). The politics of Dunye's project, which include foregrounding the limits of archives, history, memory, and institutions in documenting Black history, are quite serious. I wouldn't say there is any conversion of this serious matter into anything that approaches frivolousness. However, this chapter will detail how Dunye uses many documentary conventions and techniques throughout *The Watermelon Woman* to complicate straightforward readings of her film. Among Dunye's approaches to *The Watermelon Woman* and the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* is the fabrication of materials that simulate the historical. There are moments within the film and elements attached to the archive that call attention to the creation of these materials and the need for their creation, where their existence indexes the necessity of their facsimile. This demarcation does undermine reading the film as a serious documentary and a serious archive, but that kind of seriousness is far from Dunye's intent—nor does it make the concerns of the film or the archive frivolous. Rather, it marks them for what they are: camp play with documentary forms and fiction.

A second of Sontag's notes that is worth parsing here in relation to *The Watermelon Woman* and the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* is the idea that in camp "the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (283). There are several questions concerning potential and outright failure in both *The Watermelon Woman* and the *FaeRichards Photo Archive*. Do the ways that these works, at different moments and through different means, attest to and reiterate their fabrication constitute a failure of seriousness? Do the acts of a creating fake documentary, a fake archive, or fabricated historical artifacts constitute a failure of seriousness? Is failing to be serious the same as failing to be real? In both artistic efforts, the fake documentary and the fake archive, I see Dunye unraveling any dichotomy between fiction and failure as well as demolishing hierarchies that would endow history

and reality with more import than fiction. This chapter will demonstrate that there are many moments within the film and the archive where Dunye lays her cards on the table regarding both works' contested relationship to realness through the display of fabricated historical artifacts and the sense of the real that both texts repeatedly question.

What ultimately accounts for how seriousness fails in Dunye's work is that both the fake documentary and the fake archive are produced through Dunye's play with historiography and what appears to be real, but this fakeness is also inevitable due to institutional and structural forces of racism, its by-products, and consequences. What makes *The Watermelon Woman*'s and the *Fae Richards Photo Archive*'s failed seriousness different from the failed seriousness that constitutes other forms of camp is the play that undermines both works' seriousness from within as well as the structural forces that are implicated in this failure of documentary, of history, of genre.

Creation is vital to Dunye's approach to re-write and challenge historiographic efforts. However, this chapter will argue that the way that Dunye's creatively rethinks or outthinks notions of archives, history, fiction and reality is not only a result of Dunye's creation but also her *curation*. Curation allows Dunye to mobilize failures within her film as wells as call attention to the failures that necessitate her approach. I argue that Dunye uses curation to critique institutional racism that compromises the histories for communities of color and that part of her approach relies on literal and figurative circumventing of more normative archives and institutions, where exterior shots of Philadelphia scaffold Dunye's fictions—facilitating her efforts to create through curation.
To creatively augment film history as Dunye does, to create something where little to nothing exists or remains, is one strategy that Dunye employs to both prevent and highlight historical erasure. This is an intent that is as reverent and as it is resolute in its duality: to hold open a place for these lives lived that left no archivable impressions or traces while calling attention to the archival failures responsible for this loss of history.

Curation, I'd argue, is the methodology Dunye uses to achieve this duality. It allows her to create a semblance of Fae Richards's invented life and history while also making that fiction very much at-home in the archives that exist. Curation allows for the interweaving of history and literal ways of making history without creating hierarchies between the two. *The Watermelon Woman* takes great care to sketch the contours of the fictional life of Fae Richards—but also, crucially, its gaps. These gaps are necessary for the film's distinctive brand of camp, which results from the subverting and reflexively troubling ascriptions of realness to film generally and documentary specifically. The film's camp is at once a critique of these gaps and a method that exacts creative and artistic potential from these gaps in order to call into question historiographical practice. To put it another way, Dunye's film is clearly an indictment of the institutional and archival failures primarily responsible for the necessity of fabricated history. Yet, what I want to call her curational camp practice—her manner of fabrication, lamination, and interrogation of history and history-making—utilizes the structural gaps that account for its necessity. These gaps and relations facilitate the elision of firm boundaries between past and present, history and fictions, the real and the unreal.

To put it simply, for Dunye, what's necessary or a necessity for her invention and creation establishes the parameters and guiding principles for her project—a project that will then critique these structural inequalities responsible for her approach. In interviews, Dunye has explained that the archive she curated with photographer Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive,* was a necessary approach that resulted from both a lack of historical material and barriers that limited her access to existing historical materials. In an interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson, Dunye explains:

> The idea to create an imaginary archive for *The Watermelon Woman* was part necessity and part invention. After completing the script, I began to search for archival material to use in the film at the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. While the Lesbian Herstory Archive was

> filled with juicy material from African American lesbian life, including the Ira Jeffries archive (she appears in the film), it had no material on African American women in Hollywood. The Library of Congress, on the other hand, had some material from African American women in Hollywood, but none on African American lesbians. And as those resources were beyond my budget at the time, I decided to stage and construct the specific photos that I needed for the film and did that in collaboration with Zoe. The creation of the seventy-eight prints also allowed us to fundraise prior to the production in a limited-edition show/sale at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York City. (82)

The Fae Richards Photo Archive was not only a curation that was a key catalyst for much-needed fund raising early in the project, but accordingly the videoed footage taken of Dunye's and Leonard's historical stagings appeared throughout *The Watermelon Woman*. Alexandra Juhasz, a film scholar who also produced *The Watermelon Woman*, explains that the photographed and videoed scenes that comprise the curation of Fae Richards's fictional life also had a very practical role to play for the independent film's bottom line. She writes:

> the 'documentary' sequences, filmed in video with a low budget and amateurish quality, although necessary for narrative and ideological reasons, were pragmatically useful as well, in that they were significantly easier and cheaper to produce than our 16mm narrative sequences shot following the conventions of Hollywood production and storytelling. For us micro-budget indie filmmakers, the fake documentary portion of our film was a budget reliever as well as idea generator. (6)

Both Dunye's and Juhasz's comments about the role and significance of the staged photos and videos make clear that elements of curation were important to the film from its inception. This curation was generated by necessity—different barriers to access and financial constraints—but also

creatively generative, allowing Dunye to create, critique and let the relations between the different narrative, historical, and material strands of *The Watermelon Woman* erode easy distinctions between the real, the fake, and what counts or doesn't count as history.

I want to ground my discussion of curation and its role in the distinctive brand of camp that Dunye trades in with two more explicit examples of the practice as it pertains to the film. The first could arguably be seen as the curation that gave this project its start—*The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. That Dunye might produce, with Leonard, a curated version of Fae Richards's life is hardly surprising, given that Dunye worked at several points throughout her career as a curator.[63] The photo archive includes 78 photographs created for the film, complete with captions that elucidate the life of Fae Richards. Despite the cover's indication of Leonard and Dunye's authorship (their names, accompanied by the titles "photographer" and "filmmaker," respectively), one might be inclined to first view the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* as a photo album. Just as *The Watermelon Woman* campily dangles the cherished relationship both film and photography share with indexicality and the indexical's traditional relationship to real traces of what appears in front of lenses or what forms leave their impressions on each medium's stock, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, too, relies on cultivating a critique of historical erasure and loss through the creative liberties taken by the film's creators in their fabrication of history. Curation facilitates the often-competing registers and tenses of this photo archive, just as this chapter will argue it fosters and plays with the theoretical density and narrative weight of history in *The Watermelon Woman*. Yet, what the film accomplishes through Dunye's narrative and figurative contestation of realness, the photo archive accomplishes through a certain disorientation brought about by the relating layers of the archive's curation. For example, the

[63] Her work includes the curation of several exhibitions including "A Journey Through Gay Communication and Advertising" for Homotropolis in Copenhagen, "Glyphs: Acts of Inscriptions" for the Nichols Gallery at Pitzer College, and "Agitated Histories" for SITE-Santa Fae. Dunye was also the media arts curator for the 13th and 14th National Queer Arts Festival, the curator for the Platinum Festival at the 27th OUTfest in Los Angeles, and film and video curator for the DCTV Film Festival, the Philadelphia Film Festival, and for The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

inside cover has space for the reader's personalizing note or inscription followed by a page adorned with Richards's signature prefacing the more expected formal title page and copyright materials. Inside the archive are 75 photographs scattered throughout Fae Richards's fictional life, with each photograph hand-labeled with a number that corresponds to an entry in the "List of Photographs" and type-written captions in the back of the archive. This interesting mix of contexts and their simulated temporalities inflect and complicate a reader's experience of this archive. Just as the blurb on the back cover of the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* attests to the fictional nature of Richards's life, the photographs contained in the archive attest to the character's history, where the fabricated photos index only a chemically-induced facsimile of age and the efforts of the wardrobe, make-up and hair teams during production. While the publication material frankly frames the archive as a reproduction of history, the contents of the photo archive playfully complicate this. This can be seen, first and foremost, in the captions contained in the "List of Photographs" which offer plausible and fictionally authentic details that illuminate the fictional life of Fae Richards. Though Fae Richards's life is fiction, it does have a history. And with each captioned photograph, Leonard and Dunye are coaxing depth where it might be least expected.

For example, while the majority of the photographs have Richards depicted at social events with friends and lovers or are evidence of her career as an actress trying to make it in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, this is not always the case. Four of the first five photos in the archive are comprised of two shots of Fae's sister, Reba, her friend Fred DeShields, and former lover Oscar Williams. The sixth photo in the archive is of the Van Clyde family, for whom Fae worked for as a servant from "at least 1926-1931" (22). These photographs and their captions are made relevant not by Richards's presence but by the way they texture her absence and relate to the curation that comprises her fictional life.

The captions in and of themselves are interesting in that they reflect Leonard and Dunye's penchant for mixing tenses and temporalities within *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. The captions are distinguished from the modern font and pagination choices that comprise the archive's publicational materials. Rather, the captions contained in the "List of Photographs" are type-written from an objective, third-person point of view. The corrections, typos, and spacing errors that would be indicative of life without the convenience of "delete" or "backspace" buttons are present throughout the list of 73 captions. This aesthetic choice presents the captions as being created during a separate temporality—occurring sometime after the end of Fae Richards's fictional life in 1973 and before the archive's publication in 1997—that is meant to distinguish the archive's assembly from its publication.

In addition to the different simultaneous and conflicting tenses and temporalities that are captured in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive,* the creators also produce several marks of Richards's that are as puzzling as they are enticing. Richards's signature, for instance, is the only item on the page that proceeds the title page of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, and it is also present at the bottom of the back cover. However, these signatures are not the most puzzling of Richards's in the archive. Though a few of the photos in the archive could be said to have marginalia with brief captions and labels (in addition to the contexts captions at the back of the archive provide), only one—written in black pen—indicates labeling purporting to be made by Fae's own hand. This occurs in photograph #13, where, in addition to the "official" caption at the back of the archive that states "Fae Ric hards [sic] and friends. Josie, Bobbi, and unidentified man. June 1926," Fae has hand-written labels for "Bobbi" and "Josie" and labeled herself as "Me" with an arrow pointing from "Me" to her image seated on a sofa, smiling at the camera with a martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Fae's tantalizing marks that fictionally index her interaction with the materials that comprise her equally fictional archive chafe with Leonard and Dunye's acknowledged creation of her life. Both the

signatures and this mysterious labeling animate Richards in ways that surreally compete with the conceptual fabrication of her life and the archive's own position of documenting Richards's life after her fictional death in 1973. In short, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* is important to consider alongside *The Watermelon Women* film it helped inspire not only because of its role in the creator's fundraising efforts. What I want to highlight is the methodological value of the archive as a curation: how its tensions, complexities, and relations among its elements cohere to blur the lines between art and history in experimental and provocative ways. Furthermore, I want to chart what I see as Dunye's continued use of this curational methodology in *The Watermelon Woman*.

Curation is a practice that Dunye utilizes at several points in the her film. One example is during a sequence that takes place roughly 30 minutes into the film after Cheryl and Tamera's mixed success at the public library trying to find information about the watermelon woman. The shot is a close-up of Cheryl holding black and white photos of black actresses in front of her face. Cheryl manually churns through photos of famous black actresses of the 30s, 40s, and 50s like Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, Lillian Randolph, and Juanita Moore. Interspersed between the larger black and white photos are two Polaroids of Fae Richards in several of her acting roles, including her work on *Black Guns* (1944) and *Mr. Owens Meets His Match* (1937), as well as a publicity photo of Fae dressed in a maid's uniform looking startled by the camera as she holds a vase of roses.[64] At the end of the sequence, Cheryl lowers the grip of photographs out of frame. She frowns slightly and shakes her head in frustration before the shot ends. Like Dunye and Leonard's work in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, this sequence is complicating distinctions that can be made between real and created history while its composition also juxtaposes real and fictional actresses of color against Cheryl's positionality as an aspiring Black lesbian director. Cheryl incorporates Fae Richards's

[64] The photograph used for *Black Guns* is not actually included in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, but the mise-en-scène and the co-start match photos that are included in the archive. I will take up these photos more explicitly in my conclusion. For more see *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*.

fictional Polaroids without attempting to conceal or elide the fictional nature of these photos. What makes the photos of Richards stand out from the photos of the other actresses in the montage are that they are Polariods while the others are a mix of 4x6 and 5x7 publicity photographs. Though it is conceivable that those who watch *The Watermelon Woman* could overlook these differences between the photos of Fae Richards and her nonfictional counterparts, it might still be overreaching to see Dunye's work, in this scene and in other places in the film where she continually embeds her fake archive within a real one, as sleight of hand.[65] Viewing these curational moves as dishonest or trickery overshadows Cheryl's ambiguity in that scene as well as this dual impulse I've located in Dunye's literal making of history and historical artifacts for the film. After all, Cheryl can be seen engaging in a tradition of image production within Black culture with its roots in countering the proliferation of racist imagery.

In her chapter "In our Glory: Photography and Black Life" bell hooks writes on the importance of photography in "any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual" (57). hooks writes that photography and its display were crucial to the developments of counter-narratives that refuted racist, stereotypical images of black people that circulated within national culture. She writes:

> Since no 'white' galleries displayed images of black people created by black folks, spaces had to be made within diverse black communities…The camera was the central instrument by which black folks could disprove representations of us created by white folks. The degrading images of blackness that emerged from racist white imagination and that were circulated widely in the dominant culture (on salt shakers,

[65] Thelma Willis Foote, for example, writes "[Dunye's] mock-documentary perpetrates a hoax on viewers who presuppose that the documentary form provides an unmediated and truthful record of past realities or that word and image always reference an external reality." See Thelma Willis Foote, "Hoax of the Lost Ancestor: Cheryl Dunye's The Watermelon Woman."

> cookie jars, pancake boxes) could be countered by 'true-to-life' images…When we concentrate on photography, then, we make it possible to see the walls of photographs in black homes as a critical intervention, a disruption of white control over black images. (59)

In Black Photography, hooks sees a means to wrest control over the visibility of Black images from racist, demeaning imagery produced by whites for their literal profit. She names not only the display and collection of Black photography within the Black home as a means of resisting the circulation of negative images but also, importantly for a discussion of Dunye's work, images that are "true-to-life." Though the "true to life" in hooks's statement can be read as juxtaposing the racist imagery and stereotypes that are disseminated throughout popular culture with photographs reflecting the real lived experiences of Black people and people of color, there is a subtlety to her phrasing that is telling. Namely, hooks dangles the promise that there can be photography that reflects authentic, real-seeming facets of Black life that might not actually be real. Or to put it another way, without being real, there is a way for Black photography to speak a relational truth about Black cultures and lived experiences. Dunye's work in *The Watermelon Woman* epitomizes the power of this visibility of Black images to speak to aspects of Black life without necessarily being real. However, she also critiques the necessity of the circumstances that determined her creative course to interrogate what passes for history while also inventing history.

To me, Dunye's work within *The Watermelon Woman* and the politics of its creation/fabrication are also important to bring into dialogue with what Nicole R. Fleetwood describes as the "theater of social protest" as it was photographed during the years of the civil rights movement (36).[66] Fleetwood examines the role of iconicity in civil rights photography, namely the

[66] Fleetwood's chapter charts Charles "Teenie" Harris's photographic practice that is not predicated on iconicity, but is rather focused on what Fleetwood calls "a myriad of small acts" in and around the Pittsburgh neighborhood called "The Hill" over the course of his decades-long career, where he amassed over 80,000 negatives depicting black life in the

untitled photograph of Rosa Parks riding a Montgomery bus. She quotes Fred Gray, the lawyer who represented Parks in her court case, on the enduring power of the photograph despite its staged quality. She writes:

> For Gray, the staging of the event and the fact that the photographic subjects understood the weight of the image as it was taken do not lesson the importance of its representational impact. Gray argues that the image still stands for "truth" of racial segregation and black disenfranchisement…Attempts to demythologize these iconic photographs do not challenge the significance of the activism and protest represented (staged or not). Instead, context provides a more complex understanding of the strategies involved and deliberate actions taken to actualize black freedom struggles. They are part of what we might call the theater of social protest, instead of "raw" and authentic documentation of social injustice. (36)

While Fleetwood ultimately uses the iconicity of this strategy of civil rights photography to juxtapose against her own examination of Charles "Teenie" Harris's focus on the smaller, granular, everyday moments over his decades photographing "The Hill" neighborhood of Pittsburgh, her quoting of Gray establishes how a certain creative photographic approach that stages actual struggles by Black Americans, rather than documenting them, does not invalidate the image. They remain, after hooks, "true to life," whereby the photographs are still instructive about both the specific events (in this particular case Rosa Parks being arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus) and the iconic and symbolic resonance of Parks as a historical figure. Fleetwood's ascribing to Parks's photograph the label and practice of "the theater of social protest" provides a fitting context for viewing Dunye's work throughout *The Watermelon Woman*, particularly

community. For more see, Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Charles Harris and Photographic Non-iconicity," *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness.*

the ways I would like to view the film as engaging in a camp practice facilitated by a curational methodology. The creativity at the heart of Dunye's curational approach is enterprising and is also the result of theatricality. While Fleetwood contrasts "the theater of social protest" with "raw and authentic documentation," Dunye—just as she did in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and the sequence of curated images of Black actresses—combines the tension between the fabricated and what passes for real and puts these tensions to productive and creative use. Her work shows there is a place for the fictional alongside the historical and puts pressure on the ways that history is made, where the fictional can literally and figuratively live in historiographic harmony. This results in new methods of making histories and, in the case of Dunye I'd argue, new ways of making camp.

Cultivating Realness in A Fake Documentary

In many ways, Dunye's work is right in line with the work of predominantly white lesbian creators this dissertation highlighted thus far, who are responding to representational gaps and archival absences in their 1990s films and zines—where camp has been a tool used to make lesbianism, lesbian cultures, and lesbian communities visible. *The Watermelon Woman*, like all of the films I've covered so far, is highly reflexive and attentive to the filmmaking process. However, Dunye takes this awareness up a notch by incorporating a filmmaking process into the narrative of *The Watermelon Woman*. I want to begin here to triangulate the tensions between cinephilia, archives, notions of realness, and how *The Watermelon Woman* continually makes efforts to legitimize the fake archive Cheryl discovers through the course of her film project. As we saw with the *Fae Richards Photo Archive* and the hand-made curation of images of Black actresses, the fabrication of Richards's life—what we might call her incongruous biography—is not in and of itself camp. Rather, it is the strange mix of efforts and techniques used by Dunye and Leonard to make the fictional plausible that produce the effects of camp. The same can be said for Dunye's work in *The Watermelon Woman*

where a few different strategies are undertaken to legitimize the fictional archival remnants of Fae and use this plausibility to critique the historical truth that necessitates it. *The Watermelon Woman* is a film that is constantly contemplating what it means for things and people to be filmed and how the filming of things contributes to documentary qualities of truthfulness and the feeling of authentic realness—ones that the film constantly challenges and exploits in what I'll argue constitutes its camp.

One of *The Watermelon Woman*'s first engagements with these reflexive and cinephilic concerns occurs during Cheryl's first direct address to the camera.[67] This long take not only lays out how the filmed image of the "watermelon woman" from *Plantation Memories* is driving Cheryl's project but also shows Dunye's strategic work with the long take, where the lack of editing sets up expectations for the film-within-a-film to be a documentary along with all of the expectations of realness the genre traditionally turns on. This take begins with the camera slowly panning over a desk with office supplies, photocopies, and old newspapers strewn about. A slight tilt down reveals the cassette tape box sitting on the edge of the desk. These camera movements are attempts by Dunye to nestle Cheryl's search within depictions of materiality. Dunye shows us an object-oriented approach to the research and investigation that Cheryl is undertaking, and it is an approach that I see

[67] For the duration of this chapter I will distinguish between "Dunye," the director of *The Watermelon Woman* and "Cheryl," *The Watermelon Woman*'s protagonist and the director of the (fictional) documentary *The Biography of the Watermelon Woman: Fae Richards/Faith Richardson*. I do this because I see Dunye's roles as director and actress as separate but often playfully put in tension as part of the reflexivity that I will assert contributes to the film's camp. For a different and interesting take on Dunye and Cheryl see Mark Winokur's essay, where he writes, ""Cheryl/Dunye"describes the process of an identity formation that evades white patriarchal Hollywood formulations of black femininity and in so doing provides representations that will paradoxically generate audience anxiety in the creation of ambiguities to which audiences of Hollywood films —even of many avantgarde lesbian films (those films, for example, that provide the certainty offered by etiologies of lesbianism) —are unaccustomed. The confusion about the identity of Cheryl/Dunye is the necessary precondition for other textual ambiguities: audience identifications with particular characters, the collapse of history into fiction, and the inability to identify against whom irony is directed. Ambiguity about who is behind/in front of the camera fits into the libidinal economy of the negative oedipal complex because it erases the distinctions between wanting and wanting to be like, desiring and identifying, body and voice." For more see Mark Winokur, "Body and Soul: Identifying (with) the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*." Michael Bennett, and Vanessa D. Dickerson, eds. *Recovering the Black Female Body : Self-Representations by African American Women*. Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 249-250.

as part of the film's miming realness or playing with the authenticity of Cheryl's search. Cheryl even takes care to document her offices supplies, which imply her research activities, putting emphasis on the research process rather than the fruits of that labor. The camera continues to pan left until it pauses and zooms out to reframe a makeshift set with the top of a chair in the foreground and the beginnings of a link-analysis board, with the odd sticky note attached, thumbtacked to the wall behind the chair. A few seconds later, Cheryl's footsteps can be heard walking off-screen before she enters frame from the right, sits down, and mics up. These camera movements at the beginning of the take seem almost extravagant, seemingly abandoning the tight narrative-driven shots on 16mm that have comprised all but two of the film's sequences thus far. There is also an aesthetic change from 16mm to video that contributes to the "raw," unfiltered, and unfolding nature of this sequence.

Cheryl walks into frame, and she begins to describe herself as "working on being a filmmaker" and how she is having trouble settling on a subject for her film project. Cheryl does know that her film must center on black women because their "stories have never been told." After explaining how an interest in black women in film led her to use her job working in a video rental store to procure 1930s and 1940s melodramas featuring black stars like Hattie McDaniel, Cheryl says to the camera:

> In some of the films, black actresses aren't even listed in the credits. And I was just totally shocked by that. So in this one film that came into the store, *Plantation Memories*, I saw the most beautiful black mammy named Elsie. And I just had to show this. So, watch.

Cheryl then turns on the television, gets up from the chair and moves back behind the camera in order to make the adjustments needed to reframe the shot from her set to the television. Her camera then captures a scene from *Plantation Memories* where Elsie, epitomizing the role of "mammy" figure

as it circulated on-screen, comforts the white daughter of the plantation owner. After the scene plays, Cheryl zooms the camera out and pans slightly right so that part of the television and her set are visible. She walks back into frame, sits down and then turns the television off.

By having Cheryl present her ideas to the camera, rather than relying on montage and voice-over like much of the rest of the film does, Dunye gives the sense that we are watching ideas form and an investigation unfold in front of the camera—a sense that is compounded by the use of the long-take here. Rather than the editing that does come into play later as Cheryl interviews people in the film, Cheryl's first direct address to the camera takes on the role of a confessional. We see the character hesitate to call herself a filmmaker, admit to problems coming up with a focus for the film, and explain that her search for the identity of the "watermelon woman" is driving the direction of her project. Cheryl also is very clear that she is drawn to the "watermelon woman's" character "because of something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves is serious… is interesting,"—even going so far as to say that "girlfriend has it going on."[68] The slow movement over objects at the beginning of the shot, Cheryl's walk between the camera and her set, and the time she takes to mic up are all methodical and deliberate ways of establishing *The Watermelon Woman*'s attention to reflexivity and the authenticity that it seems to produce for Cheryl's documentary, which comprises the film-within-the-film.

In her examination of Dunye's manipulation of documentary techniques and creation of history, Laura L. Sullivan notes that the success of Dunye's film relies upon the expert ways in which

[68] In her article "Queering the Mammy: New Queer Cinema's version of an American institution in Cheryl' Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*," Clitha Mason argues that Dunye challenges representations of the "mammy" figure in her film. Mason writes "Through Fae's non-stereotypically thin body, Cheryl's desire for Fae, the fluidity of Fae's gender performance, and the suggestion that one person could be both mammy and jezebel, Dunye represents and fully embraces Fae as a black lesbian—a complex, desirable, sexual being—*and* a mammy."(59) Additionally, Mason connects this reckoning with the reflexivity of Dunye's film, whereby "as a film about filmmaking, *The Watermelon Woman* offers an explicit critique of an industry that marginalizes Black women and queers of color, both in terms of their stories told and the roles available to actors" (54). For more see Clitha Mason, "Queering the Mammy: New Queer Cinema's version of an American institution in Cheryl' Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*."

she cultivates and mitigates this tension within her fake documentary—to the point that the Internet Movie Database lists Dunye's film as "Documentary" (455). For Sullivan, Dunye's success in maintaining the illusion of documentary within *The Watermelon Woman* while also "deconstructing and satirizing documentary form throughout the film" comes from her replication of documentary techniques in ways that "leads viewers not to question its verisimilitude" (455). One strategy that Dunye masterfully employs to call attention to the film's play with documentary techniques is to reflexively insist on the un-neutral, "made" qualities of nearly every film that aims to document. The city of Philadelphia serves as an anchor to realness for Dunye's film, with different Philadelphia neighborhoods, streets, and locations peppering *The Watermelon Woman*. From the film's second scene until its closing, it is clear that both the historical and contemporary (late 1990s) footage of Philadelphia is crucial to *The Watermelon Woman's* tactic of anchoring the fictional story of Fae Richards in the rich historical context of Philadelphia that helps facilitate the camp that Dunye crafts.

An example of this would be the second scene from *The Watermelon Woman*, which is comprised of eight shots of b-roll taken from the passenger side of a car moving through mostly non-descript Philadelphia streets. The sequence occurs narratively as Cheryl and her friend and business partner Tamera are driving back to Philadelphia after filming a wedding reception in Bryn Mawr. The friends' off-screen conversation provides the sound for the sequence. The first shot of the sequence is shot out of the front of a sedan windshield. Trolley guide-cables and power lines crisscross the upper third of the frame. The camera tracks forward as the car travels, moving past parked cars that dot the street. As the shot ends, the camera pans right to shoot out of the passenger-side window to the side of a warehouse. After the first shot ends, Cheryl asks what Tamera is shooting, and it is at this moment that spectators become aware that what we are seeing is Tamera's camerawork:

Cheryl: What are you shooting anyway? First you are arguing with me now, then you are shooting

Tamera: It's urban realism. C'mon … Won't this be a nice contrast? So these people will really know on their day of sacred matrimony—

Cheryl: People don't want you to put this mess in their video, Tamera.

Tamera: Well, honey, they're paying me. And this is my impression of their wedding…So how is your video going?

Cheryl: I…I'm gonna use the equipment tonight if that's possible...What are you shooting?

Tamera: Come one, Cheryl, this is the really good stuff. This is like urban poverty. It's very raw. It's very 'in,' very new.

Cheryl: I just don't believe it

T: Look I'm tired of you and your project. The watermelon woman? Who the hell is she?

Cheryl: Turn off the camera

Tamera: Who cares?

Cheryl: I don't want this stuff to be on film.

This scene establishes the importance of *The Watermelon Woman*'s incorporation of footage of the outside, but more importantly links this footage of Philadelphia to ideas of "realism," a certain "raw" quality that lends a verisimilar authenticity to the footage. As a counterpoint to the previous scenes in which Cheryl and Tamera are wrangling and posing the wedding party and guests at an interracial couple's high-end wedding, Tamera offers the footage of Philadelphia streets as a "contrast" or what is "really" going on this "day of sacred matrimony." Though Tamera couches these statements by initially acknowledging that the footage she is shooting of the Ben Franklin bridge, row houses shot

from an elevated roadway, warehouses, children playing on a playground, shopping centers, and traffic jams is "her impression," the end of the scene shows her still interested in what she is shooting for the ways it can be seen to document something authentically real—thoughts that Cheryl doesn't share. Cheryl is quick to dismiss Tamera's claims about the footage, first calling it a "mess," and then asserting that she doesn't "believe" Tamera's second attempt to convince her. While it is easy to see this scene as nothing more than further establishing the bantering humor and kind of friendship that Cheryl and Tamera have, I want to situate this scene as helping to establish the tension between shots of Philadelphia, its history, and a documentary realness *The Watermelon Woman* ultimately leverages to create its camp.

As the film moves to Philadelphia's Center City and Cheryl begins shooting her interviews with people on the street asking them if they have any knowledge about the "watermelon woman," six shots of Cheryl standing on the corner of a busy intersection under construction are woven amongst the interviews. All six shots are variations of the first, which is a long shot that captures Cheryl as she walks beside a construction zone complete with safety cones and barrels in the foreground while a single-story storefront and the row houses that are behind and beside it comprise the background of the shot. Cheryl's attention is focused on the storefront and row houses, and she looks as if she is conceptualizing a shot as she makes a frame with her hands. The sequence alternates between shots of Cheryl conceptualizing and interviews with people on the street about the "watermelon woman." Though these shots of Cheryl have no running commentary taking up the theme of realness, I want to think about them as marking a strategy of the film and the way it reflexively triangulates the act of filmmaking amongst the poles of creation and documentary and film's contested relationship to realness—and the place that the "outside" plays in that. To put it another way, I aim to demonstrate how Dunye's treatment of interior spaces of archives in *The Watermelon Woman* reflects the narrative obstacles that Cheryl faces as she undertakes her search, for

which the film offers exterior shots as a corrective—one ultimately tied to the film's use of and elision of notions of "the real" as they converge within the film's camp practices.

Archive Trouble

Given the obstacles that Cheryl faces as she moves through different archives to find information about the life of Fae Richards, it is only fitting that the institutions that Cheryl visits in her search bear the brunt of *The Watermelon Woman*'s narrative and formal discontent. Dunye's treatment of the interiors that Cheryl negotiates in her pursuit of information about the "watermelon woman" conveys not only the difficulty of her search, but, additionally, the ways in which some lives—particularly the lives of Black actresses working in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s—don't leave traces or are not documented in institutional archives and community archives.

One of the first treatments of archives occurs early in the film when Cheryl travels to her mother's home in the Wynnefield neighborhood of Philadelphia. Cheryl explains that she chooses her mother, Irene, to be the first person she contacted not only because she thought her mother was an avid moviegoer during the "watermelon woman's" acting career, but because "she's a collector of sorts." As a series of nine canted long shots down the length of Irene's basement capture Cheryl in the midst of, what she calls, her mother's "collection" (FIGURE 15).

Figure 15: Irene's "Collection."

As she unsuccessfully and frustratingly looks through Irene's possessions, Cheryl corrects herself:

> A better word for her is a collector of junk. She never throws anything away. She keeps things 'filed' away in the basement. As you can see her filing system needs updating. I mean, look at it all. Old books, boxes of clothing, my dance costumes, my brother's Star Trek models, her dead mother and brother's stuff. She even has boxes of the most remarkable props from when she used to go to the movies back then. You know, picture cards, magazines. I just can't find them is the problem.

The darkness of the basement is only slightly broken up by a single light fixture and the pink walls, which break up the brown moldings and bookshelves. Boxes are piled upon furniture and other boxes, high enough so that Cheryl must wade through the 'junk'—it nearly reaches her waist. The mise-en-scène of these shots and the literal and narrative obstacles it poses for Cheryl's search for information about the "watermelon woman" is further emphasized by the canted angle of the camera that pervades the series of shots. The off-kilter deviation from the standard shot, where the camera is leveled or parallel to the horizon, gives a figurative sense of disorder compounded by the cluttered, disorganized state of Irene's basement. As Cheryl faces the right of the frame in the fifth

shot of this sequence and bends over to examine something that catches her eye, the cant of the camera makes it look as if Irene's collection of stacked boxes threatens to collapse onto her. In what is Cheryl's first visit to a space that she hopes will be hospitable to her search for information about the "watermelon woman," Dunye communicates exactly the opposite feeling through the mise-en-scène and canted angle of the sequence.

Later in the film Cheryl and Tamara venture to the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia to see Lee Edwards's (actors name) collection of memorabilia from Black race films. This is a scene that Cheryl says is filmed by Tamera and consists of shots of Edwards's movie posters, his explaining to Cheryl about the Black-owned and operated theaters in Philadelphia (The Royal, The Standard, and the Dunbar), and Edwards rummaging through his collection to try and find information that would help Cheryl. While Dunye opts for handheld camera movements rather than the static camera that was crucial to the tone that Cheryl and Dunye develop during the shots of Irene's collection, the camera movement during this sequence both documents the wealth of material artifacts that Edwards has collected and conveys a certain disorientation. For example, as Edwards talks Cheryl and Tamera through the movie posters that line his staircase like *Gone Harlem* (Franklyn 1938), J*uke Joint* (Williams 1947), *Dark Manhattan* (Fraser, Cooper 1937), and *The Bull-Dogger* (Norman 1921), the camera circulates between Edwards talking to Cheryl and quick tilts down each movie poster that Edwards mentions—making it hard to see the posters in their entirety. Though Edwards's collection is a far cry from Irene's 'filing system' that Cheryl bemoans, and the space of Edwards's home is better lit than Irene's basement, it is soon apparent that Cheryl will have to take her search for information about the "watermelon woman" elsewhere. For example, when Edwards shows Cheryl and Tamera his "little office" with a "Films Dept." sign affixed to the door, the shot is filmed from the hallway and focuses on Edwards as he quickly flips through files after Cheryl's inquiries about the "watermelon woman" and Martha Page—a white woman director in

whose films the "watermelon woman" starred. After coming up empty-handed, Edwards quips that "women are not my specialty," providing Tamera the opportunity that she needs for an easy joke about Edwards's being a gay man. The time Cheryl spends at Edwards's archive illustrates the ways that knowledge about the "watermelon woman" is hard to come by, even for someone who collects, exhibits, and lectures about race films. Though providing a more focused and (at least a little) more organized collection than the one in Irene's basement, the sequence at Lee Edwards's home also shows how interior spaces, particularly those that house archives, are filmed in ways to formally register the shortcomings of these places in yielding information pertinent to Cheryl's inquiry.

Given that the collections of Irene and Edwards come up short in their ability to shed light on the life of the "watermelon woman," despite their reflecting a youth spent attending Black cast films and going to Black clubs in the 1930s and 1940s and an enthusiasm for studying and collecting memorabilia linked to Black films of the same time, one cannot feel optimistic about Cheryl's chances of finding much in her search to re-discover the identity of the "watermelon woman" within larger archives, where Black lives are already marginalized. After all, these institutions are structured by the same racism responsible for the practice of de-crediting and the erasure of many Black actresses working in the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood.

Without a doubt, the biggest institutional failure depicted in *The Watermelon Woman* occurs when Cheryl visits the public library. Dunye continues to evoke the failures of the institution through the film's mise-en-scène. As her search for more clues concerning the identity of the "watermelon woman" continues, Cheryl finds herself in yet another basement. Although the public library's basement is better organized than her mother's collection, it still leaves a lot to be desired. The scenes at the library begin with a long shot down the basement stacks (FIGURE 16).

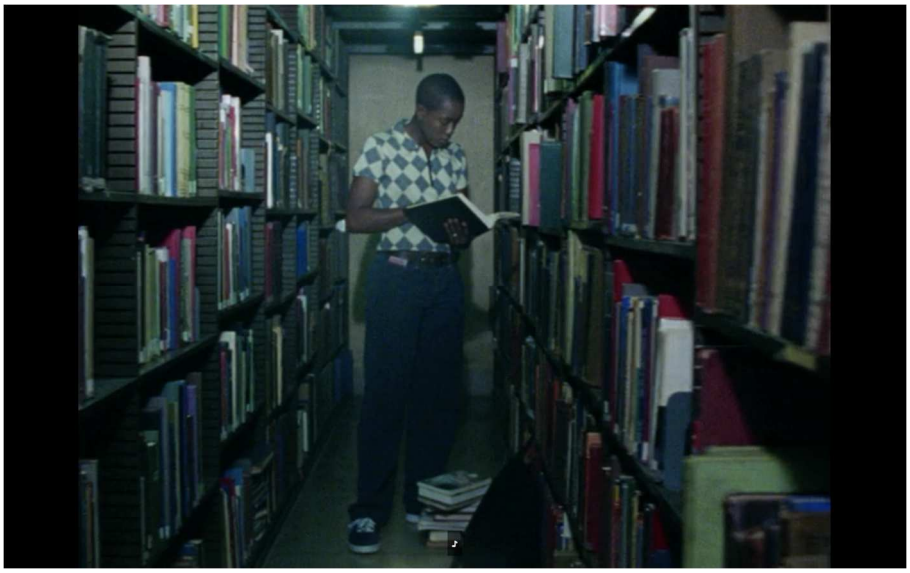

Figure 16: Cheryl in Library Basement.

There is one nearly-inadequate fixture whose faint light combines with the metal of the stacks to give an oversaturated, faintly green tint to the basement. These dull colors are only broken up by the pop of red books that peak out through industrial drab as the camera tracks left over several stacks. While the setting of this sequence does provide an opportune atmosphere for Tamera as she startles Cheryl while the latter pours through books, it is quickly apparent that the library's basement has proven fruitful for Cheryl's search. After Tamera complains about the sizable pile of books at Cheryl's feet—and about the need for Cheryl to hurry up so that Tamera can meet her girlfriend, Stacy, for dinner—Cheryl replies that a trip to the library's reference desk showed her that the library's most promising titles were reference-only books on Black women in film. This presents a barrier to access as the reference book cannot be checked out, and this barrier to access is compounded by the erasure of the name of the actress credited with playing the "watermelon woman." Given that Cheryl has not yet been able to find the actual name of the actress, she explains, "It's not like I can ask for information about the watermelon woman."

As with other scenes in the interior spaces of community archives, the film conveys the failures and resistance of some archives to account for the lives of people of color, much less

LGBTQ folks of color. This is a strategy that continues as Cheryl and Tamera trudge upstairs to the circulation desk. The sequence begins with a long shot that foregrounds a librarian (David Rakoff) behind the circulation desk and Cheryl and Tamera waiting on the other side of the desk. The area that contains the circulation desk opens out to the background of the shot, which contains tables and workspaces that are open to the second floor. Both floors' perimeters are filled with stacks. The library's lighting and space is a definite upgrade from its basement, but it still betrays the film's situating of interior spaces as ultimately antagonistic to Cheryl's pursuit of information about the "watermelon woman"—and, I argue, shows the importance of the film's exterior shots of Philadelphia, which offer a theoretical outside to the archive that mirrors Dunye's creative approach to the fabrication of history.

After this opening long shot, the sequence transitions into a series of shot-reverse-shot techniques and over-the-shoulder-shots to convey the frustrating encounter that Cheryl has with the librarian. After Cheryl's first statement about her research into the life of the "watermelon woman" is met with a quick computer query and a recommendation to check the reference library (where Cheryl has already been), Cheryl offers up the name of Martha Page, the white director in whose films the "watermelon woman" starred. The librarian responds with more reference section recommendations. As Tamera grows more impatient about being late to meet her girlfriend and the librarian's refusal to listen to both of their attempts to explain that they've already looked at those sections of the library, the librarian finally searches for both Page and the "watermelon woman," though he meets Cheryl's query with a clarification laden with skepticism: "The Watermelon Woman?" As the librarian enters the information into the computer, the pattern of shot-reverse-shot that has comprised the exchange between the librarian and Cheryl and Tamera is broken up by a return to the long shot that opened the sequence—where the cavernous open space looms in the background of the circulation desk (FIGURE 17).

Figure 17: Library Circulation Desk.

Dunye's filming of this space renders it hollow in order to gesture toward the failure of the library to elucidate the life of the "watermelon woman." The open space of the library punctuates what will be yet another dead end in Cheryl's search and serves as an indictment of this archive. This move undermines the library's literal and symbolic resonance as a site of knowledge, history, and information and shows its failure to account for the histories of marginalized communities.

While Dunye shows, through formal and narrative means, the ways that many archives are inhospitable to Cheryl's goal to identify Fae Richards, I want to focus on what I see as Dunye's counterpoint to archival inadequacies and their impact on Black histories. Dunye offers a literal and figurative outside interwoven throughout *The Watermelon Woman*. What I mean by this is that the film creatively undermines or outthinks notions of archives, history, memory, fiction and reality, and one means that Dunye relies on is the depiction of exterior locations.

Dunye's Curational Quirks

One of the effects of the curational practice that serves as a scaffold for all of the complexities Dunye is layering within *The Watermelon Woman* is that efforts to write about the film must, as I have done, disarticulate patterns that achieve the effects they do through the way Dunye poetically jumbles them. To put it another way, the linear work of writing about the film patterns

risks either forsaking or greatly simplifying the richness of relations between the parts of Dunye's film. The impulse to make sense of the film also has the consequence of potentially overlooking the parts of the film that might, relatively, make the least sense in regard to the whole(s). However, I want to end my discussion of camp within *The Watermelon Woman* by giving some attention to two quirky scenes. The quirkiness I am locating in these two scenes is evocative of the strange merging of tenses and indexical play that I located in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, where Dunye develops plausibility and the real-seeming within a fictional archive. These two scenes allow us to see that this penchant for play is transferred from print media to film. This play brings together the strategies that Dunye uses to legitimize her archive through a cultivation of realism, while also critiquing both conventions of documentary film and the conditions and structures that necessitate her creation.

The first scene is a shot that is often remarked upon for its randomness,[69] what appears to be its irrelevance to the film as a whole (and this crucially includes Cheryl's film project). The shot begins with a long shot of the Philadelphia skyline. The camera pans slightly to the right as Cheryl enters the frame from off-screen right. The shot is reframed so that Cheryl is centered as she stands at a slight angle with her hands behind her back. The camera then tilts up and pans slightly to the left to preemptively accommodate Cheryl as she jumps on a bench or elevated platform, making her appear taller than the skyline in the shot's background. Cheryl looks to the camera and smiles then takes a step backward and waves at the camera (FIGURE 18).

[69] See George Derk, "Inverting Hollywood from the outside in: the films within Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*;" see also Mark Winokur, Body and Soul: Identifying (with) the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye's Watermelon Woman;" see also Thelma Willis Foote "Hoax of the Lost Ancestor: Cheryl Dunye's The Watermelon Woman."

Figure 18: Cheryl against the Philadelphia skyline.

Figure 19: Tamera enters frame to join Cheryl against the skyline.

Cheryl next looks off-screen to the right and motions for someone to come forward and join her. Tamera enters from the right of frame (FIGURE 19), places her hand on Cheryl's hand to help steady herself, and then gets on the platform with Cheryl. The two women attempt to high-five several times with limited success. Tamera hams up a look of discouragement at their lack of coordination, slumping her shoulders and casting her head down. She continues to hold this position for a few moments before extending her right hand across her body to Cheryl. After Cheryl shakes her hand, Tamera abruptly starts dancing. Cheryl joins her and the two women dance until the shot ends (FIGURE 20).

Figure 20: Cheryl and Tamera dance against the Philadelphia skyline.

There are many things about this shot that make it more compelling to me than it might appear at first glance. For one thing, the fact that this material is shot on video rather than the 16mm film stock aligns it with the other footage spread throughout the film that is associated with Cheryl's filming of material related to her documentary project about the "watermelon woman." Yet, when Cheryl presents her film, *The Biography of the Watermelon Woman: Faye Richards/Faith Richardson*, neither the material of Cheryl conceptualizing the shot near the construction zone or her posing and dancing with Tamera in front of the Philadelphia skyline are present in that film. I've also shown evidence that explains that the interior spaces that Cheryl visits in her search for information about Richards are not neutral—they all convey, through the style in which they are filmed as well as certain disorienting, off-kilter, or hollow nature to the mise-en-scène, their failures to provide Cheryl with the details she needs for her film. Rather than see the footage of Philadelphia as just developing

the setting of the film(s) or as a detour of Dunye's into the realm of the non sequitur, I read this footage as Dunye's development of a literal and theoretical "outside," one that works as a corrective to the failures of archives to account for the lives of Black actresses working in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s and the lives of Black woman and Black communities more generally. This is an "outside" that gestures toward the failures of these archives and seeks a means around them. The film engages with a real place, and takes these moments not only to showcase the city not only as a backdrop to Black histories of film in 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, but to highlight the role the city plays in the production of *The Watermelon Woman* itself in its contemporary moment of the 1990s. While Philadelphia is clearly important because it provides some historical texture to the created life of Fae Richards, Dunye is not keen to let this realness or authenticity be without calling attention to the assumptions and mediation that go hand in hand with making history and making historical films.

Cheryl and Tamera's skyline shot is one example of how Dunye routinely draws upon the simplest of shots, and the ways these shots are associated with the trappings of documentary and notions of realness, that subtly mark the *The Watermelon Woman* as appearing to be what it is: a fictional narrative in which one of the characters is making a fictional documentary about a created life. Though hardly somber like Cheryl's hand-made montage that I mentioned earlier—where the different photo-materialities belie the difference between real lives and the imagined life of Fae Richards—there is more to the skyline shot than meets the eye. For instance, who is filming it? Thus far within the film, the video shots have been of Cheryl recording herself, Cheryl recording others, and Tamera recording Cheryl. Unlike the 16mm footage which comprises the film's overarching narrative, where the camera is engaged in its traditional, unobserved, and unacknowledged role recording fictional narrative, video footage in *The Watermelon Woman* establishes an altogether different relationship between the camera and what it records due to its association with a realness cultivated by documentary genres and the way this video footage literally chronicles the making of a

fake documentary film by Cheryl, with the assistance of Tamera. I think that part of the reason that the skyline shot is thought of as non sequitur is due to the ways that this implied narrative of Cheryl making a film and Tamera helping her do it is fractured. If Cheryl is present in front of the camera, Tamera must be filming—as we see her do at Lee Edwards's home, in the car ride home from the wedding at the beginning of the film (the b-roll), and even at the wedding itself (as we see Cheryl setting up family groupings for the wedding). Yet, when Cheryl motions Tamera from not just off-screen but from a position that is not behind the camera, I view this moment as the film's subtle but hardly concealed wink and nod to its play with documentary convention. This play is instrumental to the wry camp that underpins the film's engagement with reality and techniques that chronicle reality in an effort to ultimately underscore not only how documentary writ large is always constructed also but that documentary evidence is not always available for some communities due to the problematic ways history has been chronicled. These exterior shots of a real American city in a fictional and highly reflexive documentary lay this foundation for *The Watermelon Woman*'s fictional treatment of history in which creating history and real-seeming lives are sometimes the only ways to mark the histories and lived experiences that are unaccounted for in traditional archives. This critical edge of the "outside" that Dunye hones in her film simultaneously shows the need for alternative modes of history making, while decentering and complicating what makes a history—and what makes a history "real."

In what I'd like to think of as a theoretical bookend to Dunye's montage of real and fictional Black actresses, there is a short sequence that exemplifies the course Dunye insists on charting between the "outside" in her film as a corrective to archival shortcomings, how documentary ascribes a realness to events, and the role of the archive in documenting and authenticating history. The sequence begins following the shots at Lee Edwards's home recorded by Tamera—after Cheryl chastises her for her snide remark. A zoomed-in long shot of the frontispiece of the Royal Theater

on Philadelphia's South Street marks the beginning of a new sequence and new location, as a dialogue between Lee Edwards and Cheryl discussing the history of South Street for Black film and theatergoers of the 1920s and 1930s provides asynchronous sound (FIGURE 21).

Figure 21: The Royal frontispiece.

The camera zooms out to an extreme long shot of the Royal's exterior where the old grandeur of etched stone is contrasted by the disordered, tagged, and boarded-up state of the building's lower half. The reframe to extreme long shot also captures Tamera slouched against the building where her annoyance at being there registers in her body position even as her facial expressions are not discernable because of the video quality and focal length. The camera then zooms in slightly until Tamera is in long-shot, and it's at this time that Tamera becomes aware that the camera is recording her. She raises her hand in protest and starts talking to the camera operator. The next shot records Tamera as she lowers her hand and angrily walks toward the left frame, up South Street, in protest (FIGURE 22). A match-on-action helps transition these shots of Tamera walking up South Street to

archival footage Dunye uses in her film—where Black film-and theatergoers of the twentieth century's first half are also walking out of the camera's frame to the left (FIGURE 23).

Figure 22: Tamera walking up South Street with the street-art-tagged Royal in the background.

Figure 23: Tamera's walk up South Street gives way to archival footage of 1930s and 1940s film and theatergoers walking up South Street through Dunye's match-on-action.

Six shots of archival footage and photographs of South Street's night life follow. A photograph up South Street from the Depression Era gives way to Cheryl's videoed long shot up the same street many decades later. After the establishing long shot, the camera zooms into the historical marker at the original site of the Standard Theater. The camera pans right and tilts down until Tamera is captured in medium-close-up. As in the beginning of the sequence, Tamera is muttering to herself and shaking her head in irritation. The shot zooms out from her until she is in long-shot walking toward the camera. The camera zooms out from her until she is in long-shot and walking up the street toward it. The next shot, showing an enterprising pigeon flitting around a parking lot in search of food, then transitions into another sequence of archival materials.

This sequence continues the film's playful and meaningful juggling of who is actually filming Cheryl's documentary. Given that Tamera is filming the video footage in the previous sequence at Lee Edwards's home and is implied to have filmed other footage for Cheryl, it is almost startling to see her slouched against the building. Yet this slight disorientation calls attention to Dunye's toggling between camera gazes, where the beginning of the sequence presents itself as cultivating

what Bill Nichols calls the "relative autonomy" that location photography can achieve in traditional documentary practices (183). After all, as Nichols explains, documentary's traditionally realist style "grounds the text in the historical world. It is a mark of authenticity, testifying to the camera, and hence the filmmaker, having 'been there' and thus providing the warrant for our own 'being there,' viewing the historical world through the transparent amber of indexical images and realist style" (181). While the beginning of the sequence in front of the Royal cultivates the objectivity and transparency so critical to realist documentary style, in the end we end up somewhere else—namely needling Tamera. Tamera's role in these scenes has been examined by Thelma Willis Foote in her essay "Hoax of the Lost Ancestor: Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*." In her work with this sequence, and while reflecting on Tamera's role throughout the project (including the b-roll footage in the film's second scene that I've highlighted above), Foote writes:

> Conspicuously, some frames include images of Tamara. Of course, the professional protocols of objective documentary filmmaking require Cheryl to expunge images of her friend, who is also the only member of her part-time film crew, from the finished version of her film. Nonetheless, by incorporating images of late twentieth-century South Street into her work, Cheryl acknowledges that Tamara's filmmaking philosophy has left a meaningful impression. Allowing Cheryl and Tamara to find common ground in a shared documentary impulse to record the bleak urban reality of their hometown on film, Dunye's mock-documentary calls attention to the interactive, collaborative facet of documentary filmmaking and to the intersubjective bond of collective identity that working in that mode of documentary representation reinforces.

Foote sees in this footage a reconciliation of points-of-view between the two friends regarding documentary realness, where Tamera's image—which, objectively speaking, should not be present—

appearing in the footage Cheryl is shooting is a send-up to Cheryl's coming around to seeing the value of recording "the bleak urban reality" of contemporary South Street. Though I do think that Tamera's role throughout the film(s) and the relation that is established between her and her outlook on what counts as real or authentic are very much germane to this sequence, I disagree with Foote when it comes to this South Street sequence as being about "a shared documentary impulse" or the "collaborative facet of documentary," or "the intersubjective bond of collective identity." My hesitation is not related to the value of these ideas or their place in documentary, but rather their application in this particular sequence. That Tamera was certain about the authenticity of the "raw" "urban poverty" b-roll of tagged buildings at the film's start is correct, as was Cheryl's opposition to this form of reality—as both Foote and I understand it. However, the reconciliatory nature that Foote contributes to this sequence is not reflective of my view of the film as the irreconcilable tension between Cheryl and Tamera continues throughout the opening shot that Foote and I describe. I see this theoretical disagreement between the two as far from resolved in this sequence. For one thing, the irony of Tamera contesting her presence being filmed despite the actuality and candidness that undergirds her place on South Street in the 1990s should not be lost on anyone, given her proclivity for realness. I also don't think the irony is lost on Cheryl, who—to me—clearly and repeatedly turns the camera on her irritated friend who wants no part of it. This move is reflective of not only the narrative tension between the two friends, which goes unresolved, but the tension that Dunye fashions between the objective gaze the footage opens with and the way Tamera's presence collapses that objectivity. What I mean by this is that Dunye transmutes the gaze of the camera from one of objectivity (196)[70] cultivated through Cheryl's role as a documentary film

[70] Nichols defines objectivity in a multi-pronged approach. He writes, "Objectivity has at least three meanings that bear on the discussion of documentary representation: (1) An objective view of the world is distinct from the perception and sensibility of characters or social actors. The objective view is a third-person view rather than a first-person one. It corresponds to something like a normal of commonsensical but also omnipresent perspective. (2) An objective view is free of personal bias, self-interest, or self-seeking representations. Whether first or third person, it conveys

author to, by the sequence's end, one that exchanges that distance for the attachment between Cheryl as character and Tamera as character. Though still clearly documenting, the strict objective fidelity of the original shot is abandoned in order to (very successfully) grind Tamera's gears. Similarly to the scenes that appear to document what exists "outside" institutions, this sequence is also a case in which there is more play than what might first appear. This attachment between Tamera and Cheryl spills over, compromising the objectivity and neutrality that anchored the sequence originally—anchoring the scene in the diegesis.

Just as in the footage I described of Cheryl conceptualizing shots near the construction zone and the shot of Tamera and Cheryl against the skyline, images of Philadelphia are used by Dunye to authenticate the fictional search for information by linking the life of Fae Richards to the rich history of Philadelphia as a center for Black life and culture. However, during this particular sequence Dunye plays with the stability of Philadelphia as image by first having it appear as historical evidence to accompany Cheryl and Edwards's asynchronous sound before disorienting viewers with timelapse-esque zooms. These zooms mark different points of convergence, where the specter of old Philadelphia meets the modern-day street art but also where the documentary gaze and point-of-view of a fictional character converge. In their review of the film, Phyllis J. Jackson and Darrell Moore contend that Dunye "exploits and undermines the power and authority granted to seemingly objective or neutral visual documents" (502). While I agree with their assessment of what Dunye is doing, I want to emphasize how this negotiation of documentary technique and Dunye's curational methodology also create relations between past and present. To put it another way, just as the past gives way to the present as Cheryl zooms out, this sequence also demonstrates how Cheryl's present

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disinterestedness. (3) An objective view leaves audience members free to make their own determination about the validity of an argument and to take up their own position in regard to it. Objectivity means letting the viewer decide on the basis of a fair presentation of facts … We may say the view does not "belong" to a character and does not convey his or her particular sensibility, but the view may be more or less indicative of the authoring agent's perspective." See, Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*.

can have a dialogue with the past. This toggling between present and past also reflects how Dunye matches Tamera's walk up South Street with the match-on-action of South Street theatergoers moving similarly decades prior. The move between fictional footage of a historical place and archival footage sets up a relation that allows the film to make a point of its own about the necessity for connections between the real, what is taken as history, and the real-seeming.

Curation is crucial to understanding the density of relations allowed within this sequence. One move, both playful and wry, thinks about the happenstance of history or how something "historical" might only exist due to the presence of means to document or record it—or, like Tamera, who is or is not willing to be entered into the historical record. This supports the critique Dunye's film levels at traditional notions of history that see it as the final word or the whole picture. If anything, this sequence perpetuates the limits of history as always partial but also emphasizing the ways it can be manipulated—and generative.

This generative potential is often necessary for communities whose histories are not documented. Implicit in having Tamera's walk up South Street abut archival footage is the film's conceit concerning who or what is worthy of being called history. While Tamera's walk up South Street connects present with past, her visage as butch/lesbian/stud walking up South Street puts a Sapphic spin on the archival footage where two women and a man walk up South Street. This allows Dunye to facilitate connections to South Street not just with Black life but with speculative Black lesbian histories missing from archival records. Tamera's presence, however unwilling, casts the idea of lesbianism forward into the archival footage where it is not present. I read the curation of footage that brings Tamera's image and movements into dialogue with the archival footage Dunye collected as proffering the footage of Tamera as historical in some way—or more provocatively and campily posing the question of why *shouldn't* these images of Tamera be historical. At the same time, the Black lesbian specificity of Tamera's character is juxtaposed against the unknown, unmarked, and

presumably normative sexualities of those people who appear in the archival footage, marking the ways Black lesbians in particular are often outside of history.

Curation stages the conceptual space for these different potentialities and readings to germinate as well as the ability for these different readings to exist simultaneously. It allows room for ambiguity and fosters connections between its elements without supposing hierarchies or value. This is especially important for Dunye's work within *The Watermelon Woman*, which camps concepts like history through its creation of a historical life. This camp is facilitated through the fabrication of elements that are real-seeming and by the reliance on the indexicality and anchoring presence of Philadelphia. This curation facilitates a dialogue that denotes history's neglect through play and manipulation of historical records and documentary techniques that creation cannot accomplish on its own. I think it's clear from the scenes I've discussed that Dunye approaches this nexus of issues with camp play and humor, while also managing to never lose sight of why things sometimes must endeavor to appear to be what they cannot be in actuality.

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Chapter 4

"Who do they think I am—Judy Garland?": Vaginal Créme Davis and Her Camp (R)evolutions

Judy Garland she is not. In fact, if one were able to picture an antithesis to Garland and her hallowed place within camp cultural mythologies, Vaginal Davis would fit the bill—she says as much in the quote that serves as the title of this chapter. Contained in this quote is the "read"-cum-animosity that comprises Davis's early work but also what I would like to frame as a point of differentiation between her distinctive brand of camp and the legacy camp of the pre-Stonewall period that preceded it. Ultimately, through an examination of Davis's zines, films, and art exhibits, this chapter will argue that Davis's trailblazing camp intervention is premised on calling out and critiquing the ways in which people of color are not attributed the same status as human that white people are. It will chart the evolution of Davis's camp from its roots and success in self-promotion to a shift in scope beyond her own artistic efforts, where her work opens out to encompass the art and lives of sex radicals and her explicitly racialized work with contested humanity expands to include the gendered and sexual margins of society. Before I begin to center Davis as an integral, and often overlooked part of camp's post-Stonewall history by underscoring the literal and figurative deviance of her camp, I want to first pick up where Davis leaves off—by marking several points of divergence between Garland's status as, specifically, a pre-Stonewall camp icon and Davis's role as a camp provocateur of the late 20th century and beyond.

It is easy to see the ways that Davis, a 6'6" black gender-queer woman "hatched" from L.A's South Central neighborhood in 1969,[71] would dwarf Garland, a 4'11" white woman born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, in 1922 to a family of vaudeville performers. Davis was born just a few months before Garland's death, and her art and relationship to camp are much different from that of

[71] In interviews, Davis frequently makes overtures toward her upbringing in Los Angeles where she was "born and braised" a "doyenne of intersexed outsider art." These quotes are from a 2015 interview with ArtDaily.com published on November 21, 2015 about an exhibit of Davis's sculptures ran at the INVISIBLE-EXPORT's gallery in New York.

Garland, who was a a patron saint to pre-Stonewall gays. Jack Babuscio, writing of camp cinema and its icons, suggests that Garland was so beloved by her gay male fans due to her personal struggles and the ways that these struggles inflected her performances during her post-MGM era:

> Garland's popularity owes much to the fact that she is always, more intensely, herself. Allied to this is the fact that many of us seem able to equate our own strongly felt sense of oppression, past or present, with the suffering/loneliness/misfortunes of the star both on and off the screen. Something in Garland's personality allows for an empathy that colours one's whole response to the performance…Garland took roles disconcertingly close to her real-life situation and personality that the autobiographical connections actually appeared to take their toll on her physical appearance from one scene to the next. Such performances as these solidified the impression, already formed in the minds of her most ardent admirers, of an integrity arising directly out of her great personal misfortunes. (126)

Garland's intensity, whether in her propensity to keep trudging on despite the well-chronicled challenges in her life or the quality of emotion ascribed to her performances by her fans, is also outlined in Richard Dyer's work on the gay (and camp) icon.[72] Dyer's work was partially based on written correspondence he received from gay fans of Garland. And despite this difference in methodologies between Babuscio and Dyer, they both arrive at similar conclusions about the significance Garland held with gays. Like Babuscio, Dyer describes an "emotional intensity" associated with Garland by her gay male fans (142):

[72] Dyer links Garland to features of the gay sensibility (her ordinariness—the disparity between the image and the imputed real person), androgyny (her status as a gender in-between), and her expression of camp attitudes (her way of handling the values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalization, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and the respectable). See Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," p. 152, 165, 176.

> The kind of emotion Garland expressed is somewhat differently described by the gay writings, but on two points they all agree—that it was always strong emotion, and that it is really felt by the star herself and shared with the audience…Although these are qualities that might be attributed to many stars, it is the particular register of intense, authentic feeling that is of importance here, a combination of strength and suffering, and precisely the one in the face of the other. (145)

Dyer ends his chapter with thoughts that integrate his personal feelings concerning Garland with the impact that her performances had on communities of gay men. Judy Garland, he writes, "may get us inside how gay men have lived their experience and situation, have made sense of out of them. We feel that sense in the intangible and the ineffable—the warmth of the voice, the wryness of the humour, the edgy vigor of the stance—but they mean a lot because they are made expressive of what it has been to be gay in the past half century" (191).

Both Dyer and Babuscio connect Garland's position within gay male culture to an intensity of emotion that resonated as reflective of Garland's inner turmoil. Babuscio, in particular, describes this integrity for suffering that manifested physically and emotionally and was compounded by the roles that Garland took, which seemed evocative of her lived experience. The label of camp being attributed to Garland is interesting, in and of itself, given what Dyer describes as her ordinariness. Yet, this ordinariness was crucial to the empathy communities of gay males mustered. The degree of Garland's suffering seems directly connected to her appeal for, especially, pre-Stonewall gay males. It is a suffering so profound, appearing so authentic, that it was capable not only of being shared with her audiences but also, as Dyer says, of being transposed into the different narratives of suffering for her gay fans.

That one's suffering might be useful for others is one of the more interesting aspects of camp as a cultural, aesthetic, and communal practice. But I think reflecting a bit more about the

particulars of this community will get us closer to our goal of elucidating Davis's joke about Garland and the way that joke distances Davis from Garland—a distance that is also reflected in how race impacts their different relationships to camp.

Race and camp are not often brought into conversation with each other. In a move quite atypical for camp scholarship, Dyer does foreground the framing of his chapter on Garland with a paragraph that demonstrates the ways that camp, through history and in many different contexts, has largely been assumed to be white—just as it has largely been assumed to reflect the experience and culture of gay males. In his elaboration on just exactly what kind of experience is generalized in camp culture, Dyer writes:

> The relevant male gay culture is further particularized by being urban (indeed usually metropolitan) and white. This does not mean that small-town, provincial and non-white gay men could not share it, but that it was produced in the developing urban gay male ghettoes (New York, London, San Francisco, Amsterdam, Sydney, etc.) and fostered in forms (drag shows, bars) and publications largely controlled by whites. Urban white gay men set the pace for this culture, and in the period under consideration largely defined it as gay male culture itself. (138).

I want to posit the inherent whiteness of camp and how its relationships to the excessive, the exaggerated, notions of objecthood, etc. have a much different impact and resonance for communities of color, whose subjects are often marked, by default, as excessive and spectacular. The implicit whiteness of camp and the novelty of white people as spectacle or whiteness objectified is rarely questioned. Yet, I think it is clear that, when this implicit whiteness is removed, the register changes. Take two of Susan Sontag's camp "Notes," for example: that camp "is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" and "Camp sees everything in quotation marks (280). It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp,' not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive camp in objects

and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role." These notes' impact on camp scholarship is so undebated that they are rendered important but unremarkable. I'd like to preface the work of this chapter of thinking through camp's complicated relationship to race by asking if there is an implied whiteness to "everything" in quotation marks? Or— if we view camp as an aesthetic that is invested in the performance of people as objects—if to view a person of color as object provides the same novelty that camp thrives on?[73] At the very least, objectification in camp is predicated on the power to quote that is bound up in the presumption of a humanity that speaks—calling a lamp a "lamp," a woman a "woman." Part of the work this chapter will do is to think about how this loss of a certain subjectivity and camp objecthood might impact people of color. It will demonstrate how camp can be implicated, through its love of turning people into roles and subjects into objects, in how humanity is doled out in complicated, uneven, and racist ways to people of color. This chapter will further argue that Davis uses camp to implicate both the cultural practice and its (and her) audience in her critique of these notions of humanity, the human, and the not-quite-human as they are ascribed to people of color from within a cultural practice and aesthetic mode that, by-default, trades on the objectness of humans as roles.

[73] Just to put a finer point on the ways our camp scholarship takes on new and complicated tenors when we cannot take the presumption of a white subject or actor for granted—In his introduction to the most expansive camp anthology to date, Fabio Cleto outlines what he sees as the process of "campification" using Sontag's "metaphor of life as theater" as a basis. He writes, "Depth-anchored subjectivity is dissolved and replaced by the mask as paradoxical essence, or depthless foundation of subjectivity as actor (in itself, non-existent without an audience) on the world as stage. And as an object of a camp decoding, the actor exists only through its in(de)finite performing roles, the ideal sum of which correspond to his own performance 'identity,' personality being equal to a co-existence of *personae* on the stage of Being. Camp thus presupposes a *collective, ritual*, and *performative* existence, in which it is the object itself to be set on a stage, being, in the process of campification, *subjected* (by the theatricalisation of its ruinous modes of production) and transvested. The subject is, in that very same process, objectified into a prop, a piece of theatrical furniture, a pure mask, dressing up with *other* intentions, or with an irreducible ambiguity of intentions, than its own declared ones. And both camp object and subject are made into a *situation*, a theatrical setting and scene, by taking part in the same role play in which the actors constantly refer to an extemporized 'script,' and to an audience … in front of which both camp object and subject perform." At the very least, the way that a subject transforms into a performance of objecthood assumes that one's race would have no bearing on this process of campification. However, this same process of dissolving "depth anchored subjectivity" for the mask of "subjectivity as actor" might be understood as violent (and lacking the traditional novelty associated with this practice) for people of color because of the ways their bodies are racialized and a compromised notion of humanity is ascribed to them. For more see, Fabio Cleto, "Introduction," *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, P. 24.

Accordingly, if we return to the quote I mentioned earlier, we can see a few possible critiques that Davis is aiming at Garland the person, Garland the camp icon, and also the gay community. When Davis rhetorically asks, "Who do they think I am—Judy Garland?" it is incredibly clear from the ways that Garland is nearly synonymous with pre-Stonewall gay male culture that Davis is critiquing both the state of Garland's life, which is, of course, directly linked to the place of honor she is accorded within gay male culture, and how Garland's life and suffering were mythologized and celebrated by gays of that generation. For this reader, there is both an animosity and contempt, not quite for Garland's suffering, but for the ways that this suffering is lauded by "they." Implicit in Davis's snipe are the ways that "they" would never care about Davis's life or her suffering—that perhaps the ordinariness of a petite white woman from Minnesota might draw more empathy than "the original 6'6" Militant Babylonion Trash Gargantuess" (4).

In this light Davis's quote works as a performance of rejection directed at Garland's iconicity and the folks that gave her that status. Vaginal Davis will not be a martyr, "they" or anyone else's. I want to claim this quote by Davis as a disidentifactory statement, after the great work of José Esteban Muñoz. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz writes of disidentification as a strategy and artistic practice used by creators of color to simultaneously distance and jumble dominant paradigms. Muñoz writes:

> The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

I want to mark Davis's quote about Garland as a part of this process that Muñoz details. After all, Davis's quote both calls attention to the process of Garland's enshrinement and underscores just how Garland's whiteness, her ordinariness, her girl-next-door charm, is responsible for that. And, crucially, Davis uses her language and the distance it cultivates to reject the associations of pre-Stonewall camp while calling attention to how her positionality as a black gender-queer woman would seemingly exclude her from the empathy Garland garnered through her suffering. Davis's indignation and antagonism for Garland's enshrinement is also bound up in a distain for Garland's victimhood and its representability. Davis rails against the privilege of this use, and the linguistic terrorism that I argue comprises her early work exploits the portability of language to confound her own representation while gesturing toward the racist representational load women of color must contend with.

This chapter will show that, no matter what form of media Davis was working in, her early paper and video zines and video works call attention to structural, institutional, and cultural racism as it operated in her contemporary moment of the late 1980s—and continues in our own current moment—and how this racism is partly predicated on a juxtaposition of the ascription of humanity to certain largely white populations and the way that same humanity is denied to communities of color. The lack of humanity is both an argument and the framework for Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, where Weheliye offers a critique of biopolitics and notions of bare life and turns to the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter in order to demonstrate that a system that works to position people of color as inhuman or less human, along with persistent racial violence, undergirds modernity.[74] My

[74] What makes Wynter's work such a departure from other methods is how her work "summons neurobiology not in order to take refuge in a prelapsarian field anterior to the registers of culture and ideology, but to provide a transdisciplinary global approach to the study of human life that explains how sociogenic phenomena, particularly race, become anchored in the ontogenic flesh…Wynter does not focus on the origins and adaptive evolution of race itself, but rather on how sociogenic principles are anchored in the human neurochemical system, thus counteracting

chapter will bring Weheliye's and Wynter's work to bear on Davis's camp in order to underscore how Davis routinely calls attention to the stereotypes and caricatures that coalesce around the bodies of women of color as well as how Davis dynamizes these racist images for her creations.

Davis mobilizes the forces that would seek to exclude her or invalidate her existence as less than human or unthinkable through camp and a variety of different media, including zines, videos, and art installations. Throughout her career, and in spite of the highly ephemeral media she works with, Davis has managed to call out hypocrisy, master the art of self-promotion, and bring her community and audience along for the ride. Though a curational flair and practice that consistently undergirds Davis's work, her approach changes through the decades. Where Davis's early art is successful/intelligible because her self-performance provides the centripetal force and inward inflection that holds the varied content of her zines together, her later work is characterized by a centrifugal projection of her own performance and energy outward to illuminate the work of her community of punks and freaks.[75] Her politics and the art that communicates it are always attuned to the sometimes silent and sometimes deafening exclusions and injustices perpetuated by dominant forces on minority and outsider communities. True to Muñoz's theory of artistic practice that she helped inspire, Davis dissects, appropriates, and critiques in order to render both herself and her community visible. And, this chapter will argue, perhaps one of the great heresies in camp's 70-year history is that her position as the queen of post-Stonewall camp has not been affirmed. Long live the queen.

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sociobiological explanation of race, which retrospectively project racial categories onto an evolutionary screen. That is to say, Wynter interrogates the ontogenic functioning of race—the ways it serves as a physiologically resonant nominal and conceptual pseudonym for the specific genre of the human: Man—and not its role in human phylogeny." See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the* p. 27.

[75] Though I use the concept of centrifugal and centripetal force quite differently, the idea behind my usage is indebted to Edward Dimendberg's evocation of these terms to describe the different relationship to spaces and flows of population as depicted in films noir. For more see, Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*.

Evil Taco: An Unauthorized Biography

When it comes to camp, the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are hard to distinguish, and part of the enchantment of camp is how its effects are driven by the collapsing of boundaries between the human and the inhuman. For me, traditional formulations of camp are predicated on the unacknowledged privilege in that alchemy. Davis's early work with camp makes trenchant use of the conceptual distance between camp "object" and outright objectification to underscore how Black woman often bear the racist representational weight that muddies traditional boundaries between subject and object that are crucial to camp.

As the references to the notes of Susan Sontag in my introduction imply, language, quoting, and speaking are often overlooked aspects of traditional notions of camp that support one's move between subject and object while maintaining a humanness as object. And interestingly enough, voicing and speaking are also linked to liberalism's preoccupation with suffering and justice in Asma Abbas's *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics*—and are also crucial for understanding the linguistic terrorism that pervades Davis's camp in *Evil Taco: An Unauthorized Biography (Everything You've Always Wanted To Know About Vaginal Crème Davis…But Were Too Tired To Ask* (hereafter referred to as *Evil Taco*). Abbas's conception of suffering links it to the economies of property and injury as they function within liberalism (10). Abbas writes that modern political thought is wedded to "the question of suffering," and, in order for one's suffering to register within liberalism, it must be given presence:

> Every performance of justice requires a performance of suffering. Such enactments, whether sufferers represent themselves or are represented by others, are the struggles to make suffering matter that are at once political, ethical, and aesthetic…Collaborations between liberal politics, ethics, and aesthetics, edify presence exemplified by voice—speaking for oneself or others, ultimately of one's

> suffering, instrumental to a prescribed end—as an indisputable element of a liberal democracy and index of one's inclusion in it. (10-11)

Abbas's linking of justice to the ability to present or represent one's suffering is instructive for understanding how this chapter explains how Vaginal Davis's camp deviates from the era of pre-Stonewall camp that preceded it. In addition to implying the legal arena of representation, where one might be represented by an attorney, Abbas's work looks at the part that aesthetics and art can play in representing suffering and advancing different political causes. While Abbas's focus is not on camp, camp's relationship not only to suffering but to other affects like loss, grief, and shame is crucial to its importance within gay male culture. It is also interesting to think about how Garland's life, death, and status as the preeminent camp icon of pre-Stonewall camp had its own part to play in mobilizing the political push for gay and lesbian rights. Though the battle for both justice and individual rights for LBGTQ people is still ongoing, Garland's life, death, and her status as camp icon, in no small part because of how the struggles and suffering she exhibited spoke to—or gave voice to—the struggles associated with gay male life, mark an interesting nexus where camp, the melancholy aspects of pre-Stonewall gay life, and the means to represent it all converge at the dawn of the gay rights movement.

Davis's work throughout her career is hostile to what became the mainstreaming and prioritizing of the LGBTQ rights movement around individual liberties like the right to marry and adopt. Her art not only attempts to distance itself from the movement but eschews the desire to be like the rest of society by promoting its difference in provocative and inflammatory ways. Davis's early zine *Evil Taco* errs on the side of objectification rather than objecthood as it demonstrates that the recourse to suffering and its representation is not always available for all subjects and marginalized communities who have their humanity derided and contested (Weheliye 11). Davis accomplishes this through a linguistic terrorism and genre play that relies on practices like "reading,"

manipulation of language and its meanings, appropriation, and even outright stealing. Davis is an expert practitioner of "reading," what Tavia Nyong'o defines in the introduction to *Afrofabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* as "the black queer vernacular sense of 'throwing shade' by magnifying and parodying certain flaws and idiosyncrasies in an opponent or rival" (30). "Reading" is an important facet of Davis's work, one that carries over from her paper zines to her video versions of those zines. It is also instructive of the objectifying approach she takes in much of her early zine work where flaws are exploited to level critique. While "reading" typically takes the form of insulting a person to their face, Davis's "reading" takes the form of using the flaws she sees against the person or institution she is disparaging. Celebrities often bear the brunt of Davis's "reading," but—especially within *Evil Taco: An Unauthorized Biography*—Davis often criticized print media culture and its different genres by using their own practices against them. In her eliding of the "tell-all" genre, Davis relies on the relation between the different elements of her zine to obstruct the genre's promise to represent or expose. At moments when Davis does make more explicit efforts to represent herself, she manipulates language associations and print media forms to pervert camp's propensity for objecthood to outright objectify herself. This calls attention to the impact that race might have in complicating camp's relationship to objecthood due to the ways the racialized subject-turned-object starts the transition from subject to object with a derided and contested humanity.

From cover to cover, *Evil Taco* is a zine that curates different media formats and tropes, relying on media culture's various forms of structuring and conveying importance in order to facilitate Davis's delivery of content that is shallow and self-promotional by design. Davis routinely perverts genre conventions and expectations, establishing premises that she has no intention of realizing. For example, *Evil Taco*'s subtitle of "an unauthorized biography" might give one the impression that time spent with this zine would give some details about Davis's life, spill some tea/gossip, etc. Yet, like several other forms, strategies, and techniques that this chapter will parse,

Davis is simply resilient and defiant in her manipulation of expectations. As with much of her work, you cannot judge it by its cover. The cover's grainy photo of Davis (Figure 15) and even the yellowy-green hue of the heavier paper it's xeroxed on all contribute to a tell-all genre of writing

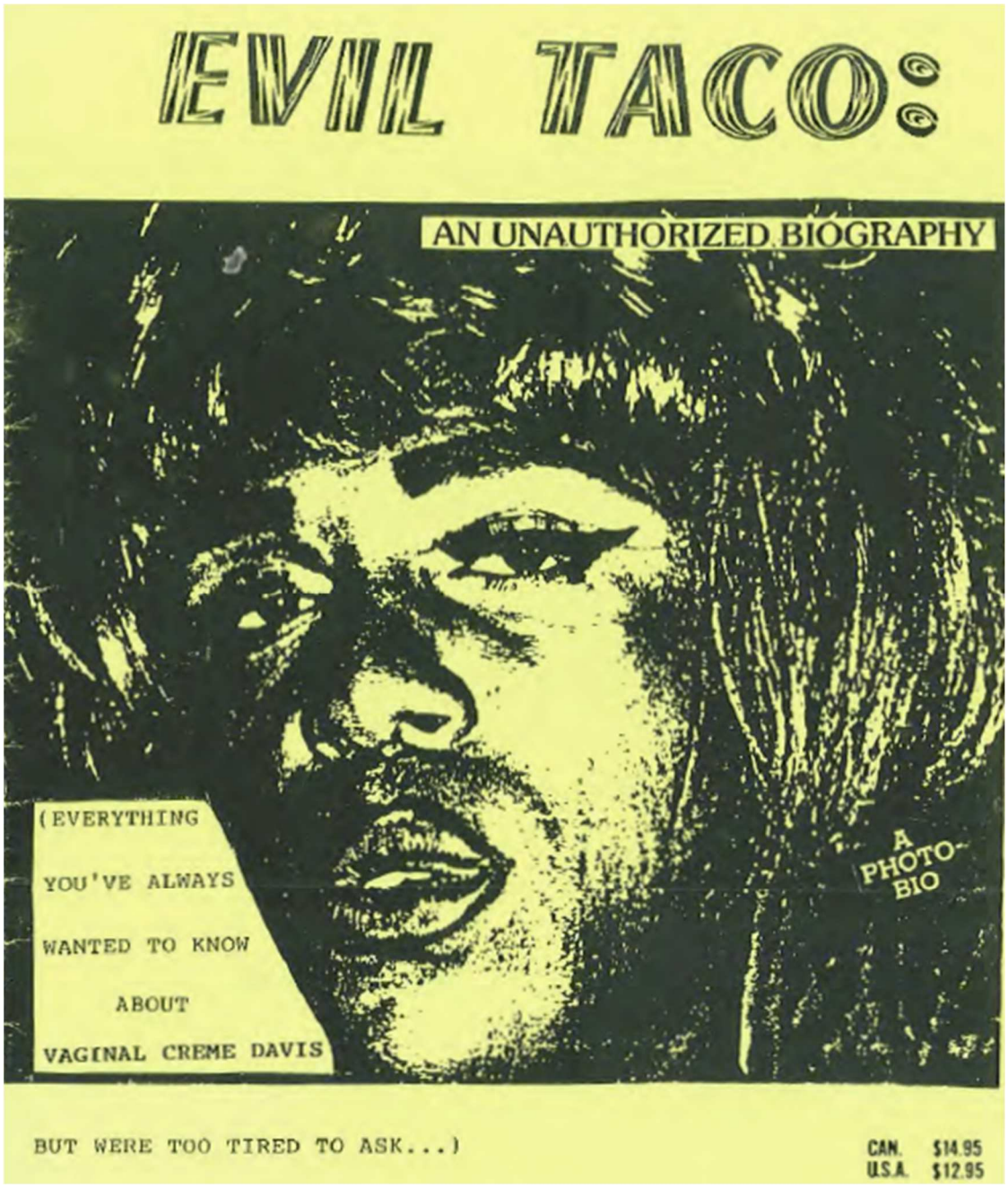

Figure 24: *Evil Taco*'s Front Cover.

about celebrity along the lines of Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*. Davis places herself as both subject and object of *Evil Taco*, toggling between a written performance of herself, a promotion of her various other musical and zine works, and a fabrication of both acclaim and praise for her work—or an outright stealing of someone else's.

Davis's *Evil Taco* is art made from a combination of her own writing and appropriated elements from other print media. It is crystal clear that Davis is aware of the effect of her layering of contexts, where she cultivates a certain mystique about herself, her life, her work. The best of *Evil Taco*'s camp is derived from the tension between Davis's words, photos, and images, and the print journalism culture she frequently draws from. However, as vibrantly spectacular as this is, it is often further spectacularized by Davis's recontextualization of newspaper headlines and print culture's design elements. One of the best examples of this impulse is the quote from which this chapter's title is derived—where Davis is quoted as saying, "Who do they think I am, Judy Garland?" This quote is taken from within the zine's largest piece of content, a faux exposé entitled, "Vaginal Crème Davis: The Woman Behind the Mystique." The quote's contents are contained in a crude pull quote, an element of print media design that takes a high-octane phrase from a story and uses it to pique reader interest. Readers intrigued by Davis's non-comparison between herself and Judy Garland might be drawn into the exposé by the quote, but this is a pull quote that leads nowhere—it refers to no part of "Vaginal Crème Davis: The Woman Behind the Mystique" or any other part of *Evil Taco*. In what I assert as her signature camp style, Davis exploits the pull quote's literal and often figurative promise of depth as a formal and affective device by making it non referential. It exists in its intelligibility and referential opacity as demonstrative of both her distinctive technique of self-performance and the way that this performance is scaffolded by the form and content of her curation, where cohesion, narrative, and depth are continually forsaken for their opposites. All roads

through the zine lead to Vaginal Davis, but this is a self-performance rendered intelligible only through the relationship between the various contents and elements the zine barely contains.

Davis continues her perversion of different media elements on the second page of *Evil Taco*, which is dominated by a photograph of Davis holding the foot of someone who is sitting out of camera to the right. She smiles and looks down at the foot she holds (Figure 16).

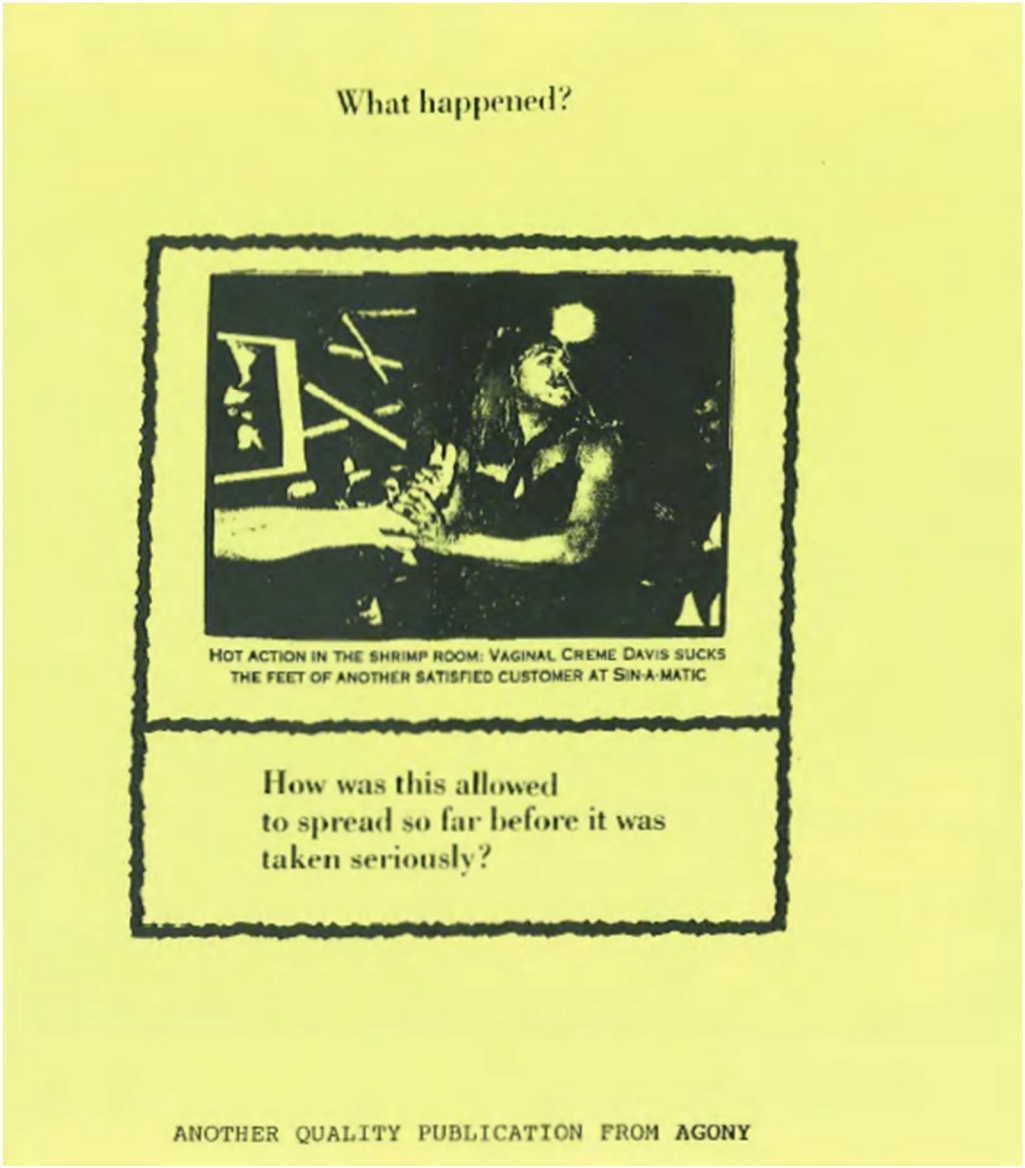

Figure 25: Davis recontextualizes headlines from news media in order to objectify herself as "this," with all of the negative connections that the bottom headline implies.

The caption of the photograph explains that Davis is "sucking the feet of another satisfied customer at Sin-a-matic." Below the photograph and caption is the newspaper headline "How was this allowed to spread so far before it was taken seriously?" Davis chooses a headline that, though aimed to convey the ways that "this" was not respected or worth noting before it "spread so far," through its vagueness (the ways we might or might not know what "this" is) makes for a humorous juxtaposition with the image of Davis pre-shrimp.[76] The vagueness of "this" also has a double valence in its lack of specificity. What I mean by this is we do not know whether the "this" is referring to the sexual practice of shrimping or objectifying Davis. While the dehumanizing impact of "this" is problematic, in no small part because of Davis's position as a black woman and the ways that black women are and have been historically objectified and sexualized, the effect of the headline and the ways it can be read to objectify Davis are not only an effect that she is aware of but a complement to the ways that *Evil Taco* is at once performing and cultivating a persona and making explicit overtures toward the function of structural racism and the role it plays in portraying people of color as less than human (Weheliye 74).[77] To put it another way, this headline-photo clash is just one of the ways in which Davis re-enforces her play with persona, its shallowness. This is crucial to the mystique that Davis develops in the unauthorized biography of herself, where readers will ultimately leave not knowing the details of her life, any sordid stories, or gossip, but with a sense of Davis as artifice.

[76] Shrimping is a sexual act where toes are sucked to elicit sexual pleasure. In 1993, Davis also created a zine that was entitled *Shrimp,* which Davis describes on her website as "the magazine for sucking bigger and better feet." For more see, http://www.vaginaldavis.com/new.shtml.

[77] Separately, in her discussion of Wynter's work, Katherine McKittrick explains that the "figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presentably value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systemically excise the world's most marginalized. See, Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: Being as Human Praxis*, p. 9.

While not the actual centerpiece of this 12-page zine, an interview with Davis entitled "Vaginal Créme Davis: The Woman Behind the Mystique" comprises the majority of the zine's material. The content of this interview, as well as its layout—which features small headshots of Davis centered in the middle of each page—contribute to a literal self-centered motif that is both right at home in the unauthorized biography genre and more complicated than first meets the eye. It is the interview that is not one within the un-authorized biography that is not a biography. The information we get is sparse, shallow, and also exactly what is intended in Davis's play with camp. Readers of this interview are quick to notice that it does not, in fact, do much to eclipse any mystique. Instead, the interview might be said to reinforce that mystique and its relation to Davis's play with surface that is crucial to the camp she creates. A crude text box across the top of the page notes that the interview took place at "Miss Davis's skyline-view penthouse high above Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles" as Davis "sips champagne on a white bearskin rug next to the Jacuzzi on her balcony." The reporter mentions that the catalyst for the interview is none other than Davis slipping "into a rare pensive mood," where she "begins to reveal all to the diligent young reporter from Agony." Davis tends to preface and organize much of her zine work around the tantalizing promise of depth. This is a depth that is highly stylized and fawned over but ultimately rendered playfully shallow. Although the scope of the interview is quite sprawling,[78] I am primarily interested in how Davis relies on different means of placing herself within a high-end celebrity culture while also clearly demeaning certain celebrities within it—yet without demeaning herself. This can be seen toward the end of the article where the reporter, after describing the extensive work that Davis has done within the music and zine realms, states that she has had "no less than seventy-eight (at last

[78] Over the course of the interview Davis relates to the reporter her dislike of driving, how she lost her car in a Century City parking structure, some eccentric details about her apartment, how she has little white queens to do her cooking, cleaning, and errands, how the original punk scene in L.A. in the late 1970s and early 1980s was made up of "fags," and her many artistic endeavors via her involvement in several bands and zines.

count) marriage proposals from rock stars, international celebrities, and other 'glitterati." This bit of information included in the interview connects Davis to those who are rich and famous and lining up around the block to marry her. Yet this is immediately followed by Davis explaining that she is "too much of a lady to reveal to the public those whom I've been forced to reject. After all, it's not their fault that they are constantly falling in love with me." *Evil Taco* is capitalizing on a certain magnetism that comes with one's association or relative proximity (read: six degrees of Kevin Bacon) to Hollywood and celebrity culture. Davis attaches herself to this narrative: that one can ascertain value or cachet by the gravitational pull of 78 rich and famous broken hearts in Davis's orbit. Between the lines of Davis's coy reluctance to provide specifics on who these proposals came from and whose she accepted is the force of rejection.

It might seem odd to dwell on what might charitably be called Davis's embellishment of her proximity to Hollywood and celebrity culture and what might otherwise be called fabrication. But I think it's worth noting that, when considering how Davis is constructing her persona, the issue is not so much the truth of what is or what is not being said. Rather, what I've attempted to describe is Davis's move to cultivate *some* relation to star culture. Yet, it is also a relation that is cast on her terms, where she is in a position of power. Her power doesn't come from her association with this culture. Instead her power comes from her ability to establish a relation while ultimately denigrating those who are part of the star culture. "Reading" is crucial to all of Davis's engagement with celebrity culture. It is always on her terms. And she is well-aware that this relation she is establishing in no way makes her an insider. Her presence, as it is written and performed in *Evil Taco*, feigns flirtation with celebrity culture but only as a means to shore up her place outside of it.

Davis's "reading" of celebrity culture and how it contributes to her performance of herself in the work of her zines comes to a head within "Vaginal Créme Davis: The Woman Behind the Mystique" amidst the interviewer's description of her penthouse apartment, particularly an inquiry

about a "jewel-encrusted titanium mountain bike in the corner of her exercise room." In response to the reporter's observation of the bike, Davis replies, "Oh that little thing—I got it as a kind of a joke. You know, one of those funny little presents? Anyway, it was a gift from Aaron Spelling. Wait a minute—Don't print that! Marky Mark gets so jealous if he finds out I get presents from other men!" Like the first example, this is a similar instance of Davis hinting at a relationship that places her adjacent to American star culture before turning the tables, so to speak, before "reading" it to filth. With this second example, it is clear to see Davis's continued feigned coyness and self-consciousness that evolves from "being too much of a lady" to say whose marriage proposals she has and has not accepted to explicitly telling the reporter "Don't print that!" after disclosing a connection to/relationship with famed American television producer Aaron Spelling. Even Davis's interdiction is meant to highlight the juiciness of her connection to Aaron Spelling, one that is flaunted as a feigned concern for what might first be construed as privacy actually links Davis to Mark Wahlberg. While the nature of Davis's relationship with Spelling is left unspecified, aside from an implied familiarity that allows for "joke[s]" and "funny little presents," Davis concludes the reporter's inquiry into the bedazzled mountain bike by additionally linking herself to a possessive Marky Mark. This move from Spelling to Marky Mark turns on the ways Davis frames her connection to Mark as an intimate one. This works to simultaneously contextualize Mark within the queer punk scene of the 1980s, an affiliation quite at odds with Wahlberg's bad boy hip-hop image of the era, and invite the implication that the 60+-year-old Spelling might be getting sloppy seconds as Davis's "other" man. Ultimately, it is Wahlberg who bears the brunt of this "read."

This penchant of Davis's to evoke celebrity culture and connections to it might be thought of as the setup to a joke that renders it as shallow as Davis performs it. But despite the affinities that may seem present or evident, in the end Davis has her way with a celebrity culture that she makes work for her. The genius of *Evil Taco* is that Davis seems as if she could* be right at home amongst

the Hollywood culture she so often casts as rich, talented, self-serving, and shallow. Yet, ultimately, that culture is better served as the butt of her jokes and as a means of reenforcing her place and the place of her punk community as outsiders. I would like to position Davis's use of celebrity culture in this zine as prefiguring the evolution her work will take in the 1990s when her art—though still self-referential and promotional—takes a turn toward documenting both her scene and her community.

There is really only one way *Evil Taco* could end. After having perused an "unauthorized biography" that is neither unauthorized nor a biography, it is only fitting that Davis ends *Evil Taco* with critical acclaim that is (also) not hers. Should one turn to the back cover of *Evil Taco*, three blurbs seemingly praising Davis's work are visible (Figure 17).

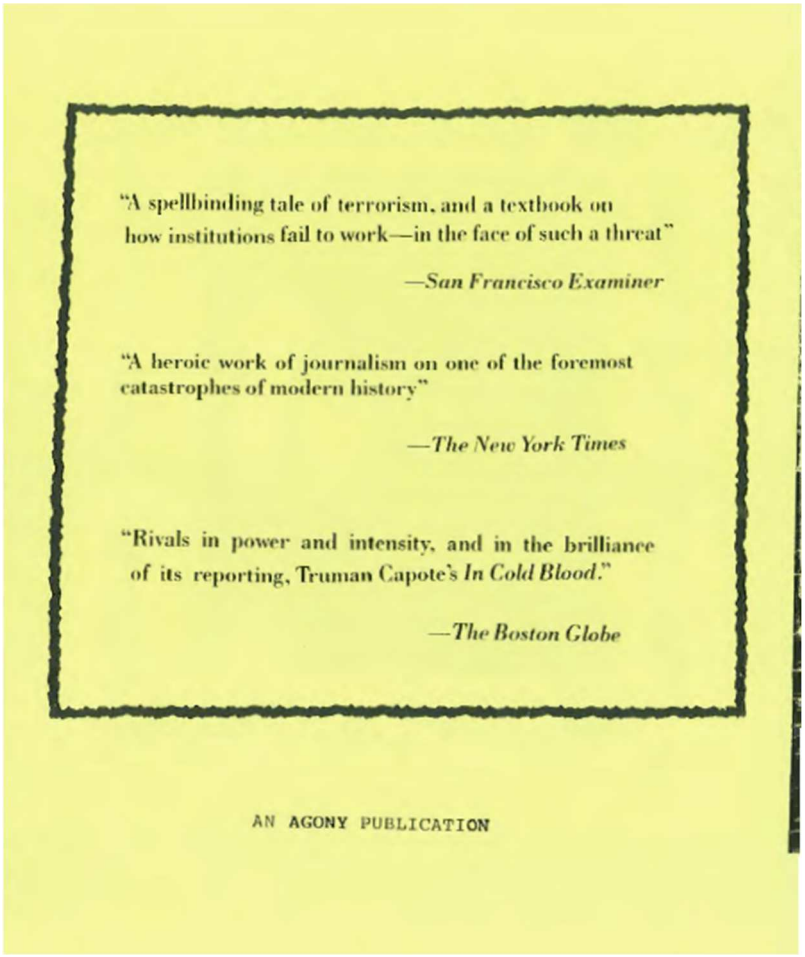

Figure 26: The appropriated praise from Evil Taco's back cover.

The San Francisco Examiner praises *Evil Taco* as "A spellbinding tale of terrorism, and a textbook on how institutions fail to work—in the face of such a threat." *The New York Times* proclaims that *Evil Taco* is "A heroic work of journalism on one of the foremost catastrophes of modern history." And, not to be outdone, *The Boston Globe* puts Davis's work in the company of literary legends when it says that *Evil Taco* "Rivals in power and intensity, and in the brilliance of its reporting, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*." When I say that the disconnect between the nouns (and situating phrases) that these newspapers use in their praise of *Evil Taco* and the actual contents of Davis's "unauthorized biography" is quite large, I mean no disrespect to Davis's work. In fact, I only mean to say that—for this reader—*Evil Taco* did not in any way, shape, or form bring to mind a "spellbinding tale of terrorism," a "textbook on how institutions fail to work," a "heroic work of journalism" or reporting that "Rivals in power and intensity" the work of Truman Capote. Nor was it intended to. While one could read Davis as attempting to elevate the perception of her work, this is shortsighted—she's already done that[79] (Figure 18). This occurs immediately following the conclusion of the interview where, across from a text box featuring brief synopses of the short films and music videos that Davis stars in, fabricated quotes from Paul Morrisey, John Waters, and David Lynch praise Davis's short film *That Fertile Feeling* (Castro 1989).

I'd like to focus less on the fabrication of this praise, as fabrication and truth are not relevant to Davis's work in *Evil Taco*, or the evolution of her work with camp that this chapter is charting. Rather, I bring up the fake praise contained in the quotes attributed to Morrisey, Waters, and Lynch

[79] What follows are the quotes attributed to Morissey, Waters, Lynch, and *Interview* Magazine.

"I wish had directed this."
- Paul Morrisey

"Hilarious, erotic and zany, Vaginal and Fertile are superstars of the absurd."
- John Waters

"Too good to be true!"
- David Lynch

"Underground filmmaking at its best."
- Interview Magazine


"that fertile feeling"

That Fertile Feeling-1988, Producer Keith Holland Directed by Quasi O'Shea with Vaginal Davis, Fertile La Toyah Jackson and Johnny Dark. Miss Vaginal Creme Davis declares that, "There is no difference between masculine and feminine: its all commercial hype." She proves this in the high camp low-budget parody situated in Hollywood ding-bat apartments and back streets. Fertile and Vaginal handle birthing, driving and watching porno with equal elan.

It All Started in Black-1987, Producer Keith Holland Directed by Quasi O'Shea with Vaginal Davis and Gomorrah Wednesday. Vaginal Davis stars in this tour de force on the black experience. The sex scenes are hilarious.

No Money, No Honey-1990, Producer Keith Holland Directed by Quasi O'Shea with Glen Meadmore, Vaginal Davis, Father Larry, Harry Hay and Dora. Music video from the Glen Meadmore lp Squawbread. Filmed on location at the notorious hustler hangout Oki Dogs.

Lovin in My Oven-1988, Producer Keith Holland Directed by Quasi O'Shea with Glen Meadmore. The first music video from Glen Meadmore's debut lp Chicken & Biscuits.

No Controlas-1989 Producer [illegible] Holland Directed by Quasi O'Shea featuring the Latin American sensation Cholita, (the female equivalent of Menudo). Cholita, the spin-off of the Afro Sisters, (like X has the Knitters) are a parody of hispanic pop rock groups. This their first music video stars Vaginal Davis as Graciela, Fertile as Concepciones, punk rock legend Alice Bag as Lupita and Annette Vargas as Maria Smith. [illegible]

Send $12.00 cash includes postage and handling for any one of the above award winning underground videos to Amoeba Records 5337 La Cresta Court LA, CA., 90038-4001. Not available in any store.

"I wish I had directed this"
-Paul Morrisey

"Hilarious, erotic and zany. Vaginal & Fertile are superstars of the absurd."
-John Waters

"too good to be true."
-David Lynch

"underground filmmaking at its best"
-Interview Magazine

Figure 27: Fabricated praise for That Fertile Feeling (1989).

in order to differentiate it from the appropriated praise that comprises the back cover of *Evil Taco*. The difference in typeface clearly marks the quotes from Morrisey, Waters, and Lynch as congruent with the style of typewritten aesthetics used throughout *Evil Taco*. On the back cover, however, the font is different, more professional, and the layout is more finessed than any typewriter would allow. To put it another way, the production value of the blurbs on the back page is an aesthetic disconnect that complements the disconnect between the content of the blurbs and the content of *Evil Taco*; it is clear that the blurbs on the back cover were taken from somewhere else and meant to look that way.[80]

I've belabored this point of distinguishing between Davis's use of fabricated praise and appropriated praise because I want to assert that there is more that can be said about Davis's

[80] Not to put too fine a point on it, but I would almost go as far to say that Davis Xeroxed the back cover of the source text and made that the back cover of *Evil Taco*.

appropriative practices and how they impact her camp. Even without the readers of her zine knowing the source text of these blurbs that grace *Evil Taco*'s back cover, Davis means for her readers to pick up on this gap between *Evil Taco* and the referents of the blurbs that are on its back cover. This disparity is refracted through a few different registers that are worth outlining here. First, as in the practice of "reading" celebrity culture that is taken up in *Evil Taco*, there is a similar form of denigration taking place here with Davis's appropriation of the blurbs. By transposing these blurbs away from the original context and their original referents, Davis is calling attention to an inherent vagueness characteristic of a certain form of writing that must give an impression and convey the importance of a work in a sentence. This righteous vagueness clearly allows the reviewer or reviewing organization to talk about the book without giving away anything to potential readers. But the vagueness also allows Davis to exploit the portability of these claims. Again, it is not just about lifting the content. Davis is implicating the larger practice and process of review and acclaim as it circulates in print culture.

More importantly, Davis is associating herself as performed in the "unauthorized biography" with terms like "terrorism." I think this works differently from the forms of relation and distancing that Davis uses in her "reading" of celebrity culture in her work. By choosing *these* blurbs, Davis is asserting *Evil Taco*'s (given the work's status as an "unauthorized biography") and her textual performance of self's proximity to "terrorism," where the zine/she is a literal product of "how institutions fail to work" amidst such a terrorist "threat" that amounts to "one of the foremost catastrophes" of modern history. As on the second page of the zine, where Davis chooses a headline that is ambiguous in its objectification which results in a reading of her as being objectified, the use of blurbs on the back cover of Evil Taco links Davis's work and her persona to nouns that don't espouse any type of relation to personhood as such. In her appropriation of, specifically, the critical praise that is ensconced in a larger implication about the impact of institutional failures, Davis is

"reading" the manner in which print media is one of those institutions that fails but also implying what might be understood as links between Black womanhood/Black personhood and the nonhuman. This link between Black personhood and the in/subhuman is the work of what Sylvia Wynter deems "the Western bourgeoisie's liberal monohumanist self-narrating descriptive statement" that, following slavery:

> called for all peoples of black African descent to reoccupy the transumptively inherited Man1's symbolic *death role*…This is a figure barely evolved and wholly subhuman that is Other to the fully evolved, thereby only True Human Self and its genre-specific mode of *symbolic life* that is optimally incarnated in the Western bourgeois liberal monohumanist *homo oeconomicus*. The former, wholly subhuman, together with its black race, is *dysgenically* deselected to be *racially inferior* cum deficient in intelligence (IQ), in *symbolic death* terms; the latter wholly evolved is, therefore, together with its white race, eugenically selected to be racially superior, proficient in intelligence (in *symbolic life* terms). (47)

The connection that Davis makes between herself and these terms like "disaster," "terrorism," and "catastrophes" conjoins the metaphorical negativity of these words with the narration that casts Black personhood in the symbolic death role of the "wholly subhuman." However, it is also interesting to think about how these words and their associations are stolen, lifted by Davis—literally xeroxed and transposed to serve as the back cover of *Evil Taco*. While I think it is clear that Davis is yoking her performance of personhood to the inhuman, this move to appropriate the praise and use it for her own work does show a complete disregard for certain notions of property and ownership that function as a facet of the economics that Wynter links to the narrative subtending the "Western bourgeois liberal monohumanist *homo oeconomicus*." By linking her work and her persona to highly inflammatory language concerning a systemic disaster with far-reaching immediate

and historical implications, Davis can be seen as opening up a space of critique where she is aligning herself with loaded nouns devoid of human relation in order to call attention to how her status as human, given her positionality as a Black queer woman, is already viewed as compromised.

All of this is evident to the reader of the back cover of *Evil Taco*, regardless of the ability to know what text the blurbs were originally referring to. However, I want to consider how knowing what source text Davis appropriated lets us see its impact on her camp. This source text is none other than Randy Shilt's *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*, published in 1987. This was a book that chronicled the spread of the HIV virus and its impact on different communities.[81] Though knowing the blurb's source-text exponentially magnifies the disparity that contributes to the camp effect Davis is clearly aiming for, there are two subtler and related implications. Throughout *Evil Taco*, Davis has used play and manipulation of genre paired with her biting wit and "reading" of celebrities in order to create her camp. Implied in Davis's use of the blurbs praising Shilt's work is a similar "read" of media culture—which while shoveling heaps of praise for Shilt's work, might be seen as one of the institutional failures that contributed to the government's slow response to the epidemic. Similarly, through her appropriation of Shilt's critical praise, Davis could be seen as articulating an allegiance to and her position within the least normative (in the best sense of this word) LGBTQ climate of the 1980s. This can be seen as the climax of her efforts to stage the textual performance of herself as that of an outsider who will show just as much affection for any normative, popular, cultural institution so that she can make it the butt of her joke.

While one could feasibly look at Davis's manufacture and appropriation of critical praise for her work as a plea for the value of her work, such a reading does not do justice to the play with

[81] One criticism of the text is that it largely confines itself to the impact of HIV on members of the gay community while communities of color receive less attention in the book.

façade that epitomizes *Evil Taco*. Davis will have the praise, even if she has to steal it—and even the lofty and righteous words documenting a global epidemic can be copied and made to suit her self-promotion. Her textual persona in its adept shallowness is the only object capable of filling the gaps in referents and contexts, of rising in the place of vague hollowness, untimely interest, and unoriginality. Ultimately, *Evil Taco* is Davis's "read" on print media culture where Davis's textual performance of herself calls attention to print media's own textual performances through collapsing its genres and appropriating its words. And, in a way only she can, Davis "reads" print media and also calls its bluff.

Most importantly, however, the back cover of *Evil Taco* demonstrates how Davis's textual performance of herself is unequivocal in its intentionality, its steadfastness, and its unrelenting refusal of reverence. The appropriation of praise for Shilt's work exemplifies Davis's textual performance of herself as both antagonistic and provocative, showing that she can masterfully cultivate camp humor from even the most gut-wrenching periods in LGBTQ history. Camp opens up a space for Davis to exploit while also underscoring how racialization[82] already works to dehumanize people of color. By claiming a relation between the textual performance of herself and the "terrorism" and "catastrophes" associated with HIV in 1980s America, Davis can push camp's limit to make a gross exaggeration just … gross. Yet, as Weheliye and Wynter attest, this is not a novel relation but rather one reflecting the structural dehumanizing violence already functioning within racializing assemblages.

[82] Weheliye defines racialization in a discussion of Hortense Spillers's notion of hieroglyphics of the flesh. He writes, "Despite having no real basis in biochemistry, the hieroglyphics of the flesh requires grounding in the biological sphere so as to facilitate—even as it conceals and because it masks—the political, economic, social, and cultural disciplining (semiosis of procedure) of the Homo sapiens species into assemblages of the human, the not-quite human, and nonhuman." See, Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human p. 43*.

I'd like to read Davis's staging the proximity between her textual performance of self and concepts like "catastrophes" and "terrorism" in light of similar adjectives used to describe her work. Davis is the focus of Muñoz's fourth chapter in *Disidentifications*,[83] where Muñoz takes up Davis's punk rock songs and drag performance to show how Davis's use of "humor and parody function as disidentificatory strategies whose effect on the dominant public sphere is that of a counterpublic terrorism." This creates "an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric" (100). Connected to this is Muñoz's labeling of Davis's musical and drag performance as terrorist drag:

> Davis's drag, this reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy, can be best understood as *terrorist drag*—terrorist in that she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality. It is also an aesthetic terrorism: Davis uses ground-level guerrilla representational strategies to portray some of the nation's most salient and popular fantasies. The fantasies she acts out involve cultural anxieties surrounding miscegenation, communities of color, and the queer body. Her dress does not attempt to index outmoded ideals of female glamour. She instead dresses like white supremacist militiamen and black welfare queen hookers. In other words, her drag mimesis is not concerned with the masquerade of womanliness but instead with conjuring the nation's most dangerous citizens. She is quite literally in 'terrorist drag.' (108)

[83] Disidentification, Muñoz's key critical term, is defined as "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" by people of color. There are many commonalities between Muñoz's disidentification and the strategies of camp that are undertaken by the camp creators my project examines. While I do not want to collapse these terms, I will go as far to say that disidentification as Muñoz conceives of it seems like a vital first step in the process of camp creation for people of color. Muñoz writes, "The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" p. 31.

Muñoz settles on the word "terrorist" to mark both the antagonism of Davis's performances—how they are predicated upon the racist fears and stereotypes ascribed to Black women by white racists—and the form and method of her drag, which Muñoz locates in the "ground-level guerrilla representational strategies" she employs in her performances. Clearly implied in Muñoz's phrasing is the effect Davis's performances pack despite a lack of resources. But, crucially, Muñoz is also identifying Davis's distinct riff on drag, traditionally consumed and understood as camp.

We have only to look back at Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, one of the earliest works on camp as a cultural phenomenon, to chart the ways that drag is conceptualized as a form of camp (3). Yet, the drag that is chronicled in Newton's ethnography is not interested in impersonation, "the masquerade of womanliness," and "outmoded ideals of female glamour." Davis's drag instead is a tale of two terrorists. Her performance of the white supremacist militiaman serves to present an agent and ideal of racial purity that thrives on intimidation and acts of terror to support its racist vision. And within the logic of Davis's drag, her performance of Black womanhood epitomizes the white nationalist's nightmare of "black welfare queen hookers" and the ways that Black womanhood is reduced to stereotypes of sexualization, promiscuity, and reproducibility—the greatest threat to the white nationalist agenda.[84] Performing Black womanhood as drag—a practice that (traditionally) at its core renders the performed body as surface primed to transmit femininity as its message and object—shows Davis's awareness of how Black womanhood is always already objectified. I think we can see a comparable impulse in Davis's zine work in *Evil Taco* where the fusion of Davis's textual performance of herself and the referents she appropriates is

[84] bell hooks in her essay "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood" traces these stereotypes to the place of the Black woman as "sexually depraved, immoral, and loose," within the slave system. hooks writes "White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal that cannot be raped." For more see, bell hooks, "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*,) p. 52.

used to call attention to the ways Black womanhood is perceived as both threat and caricature. Muñoz's dissection of her performance work as "terrorist" in its depiction of the white supremacist terrorist and the welfare queen figured as terrorist, along with Davis's move in appropriating the back cover of Shilt's work, shows that Davis's work is not only interested in foregrounding a notion of Black woman as personifying the role of the terrorist for the demonstrably racist culture of the 1980s United States. Rather, Davis's work in *Evil Taco* takes this relationality a step further, dispensing with the role of terrorist agent and humanity altogether to align her own textual performance of Black womanhood with the "terrorism," "catastrophe," and "disaster" evoked to describe the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Perhaps the difference between the "terrorist" drag that is attributed to her by Muñoz and the "terrorism" she claims through her appropriative work on the back cover of *Evil Taco* might personify the subtle difference between her zine work and her drag. Both "terrorist" and "terrorism" are linked to violence, intimidation and control that are deployed to pursue political aims, and, as Muñoz's work and my discussion of *Evil Taco*'s back cover make clear, Davis's camp is direct and provocative in its engagement with social and political inequality. However, I think the definition of "terrorism" foregrounds a crucial dimension of Davis's work that hints at the crux of a methodology that runs not only throughout Davis's career as zine creator and drag performer but spans the breadth of her forty-year (and counting!) career. In contrast to "terrorist," which the OED defines as "A person who uses violent and intimidating methods in the pursuit of political aims; *esp.* a member of a clandestine or expatriate organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects," "terrorism" is defined by the OED as "*The unofficial or unauthorized use* of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims; (originally) such practices used by a government or ruling group (frequently through paramilitary or informal armed groups) in order to maintain its control over a population; (now usually) such practices used by a clandestine or

expatriate organization as a means of furthering its aims" (emphasis added). The latter's centering of use, and particularly use that is not sanctioned, is crucial to understanding Davis's creative approach in all of her varied artistic endeavors she has undertaken over the course of her career. I don't want this work to serve as a corrective to Muñoz's scholarship, as I think his account is both sound and convincing, and I focus on a different aspect of Davis's work. Rather, I emphasize this distinction of his "terrorist" impact of Davis's drag in order to locate my own work's infatuation with the linguistic and artistic "terrorism" that buttresses Davis's distinctive form of camp as it plumbs the depths of racist thought and structure for usable forms in her zines, films, and her curational practice—where the pejorative is perverted into the creatively, and queerly, (re)productive.

Fertile La Toyah

Davis's camp is predicated on a manipulation of surface and distance. Ironically, she arrived at her approach to her most famous zine—and arguably her most famous work—through what Davis has described as both sexual isolation she experienced as well as an additional desire to cultivate distance between herself as a creator and the interlocutor who would serve as the zine's literal and figurative centerpiece, Fertile La Toyah Jackson.[85] Davis explains how the *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* came to fruition in an extensive interview conducted by Video Data Bank in 2013:

> When I started doing the zine it was out of sexual frustration, basically. I would just put my thoughts into this persona of Fertile La Toyah Jackson. At first, I wanted to call the magazine *Vaginal Davis*, but then I wanted a distance from me. So the

[85] There are two misconceptions that often accompany *Fertile LaToyah Jackson Magazine*, and they are related. The zine's title is often misspelled as "La Toya" rather than Davis's "LaToyah." This misspelling is linked to the prominence of La Toya Jackson and the presumption that Davis's Fertile La Toyah is somehow "reading" or spoofing the celebrity. In actuality, Davis has explained in many different interviews that her inspiration was the Israeli actress Tovah Felcher rather than "the untalented sister of the Jackson clan." See, "Vaginal Davis: An Interview," Video Data Bank.

> magazine was written in the voice of this Fertile La Toyah Jackson, who had an opinion about everything and her just mouthing off all of her opinions. (47:44)

Though there is a political undercurrent in her early work, Davis's efforts to represent Fertile La Toyah reflect more direct political agenda by Davis as she continued to work in a style of compilation and assembly.

In 1982 *That Fertile Feeling* (Holland and O'Shea) brought both Davis and her zine's title character to film, alongside each other. Shot on Super 8 and with "the romantic squalor of no budget," *That Fertile Feeling* stands apart from much of Davis's zine work in that the film is singular in its drive, in which the just-over-nine-minute film depicts the impressive labor of Fertile La Toyah Jackson as she delivers eleventuplets.[86] In a 2017 performative lecture given at GenderFest Athens, Davis explains that her nonexistent production budget was a financial reality, but a reality that nurtured her artistic expression which found both its direction and audience in L.A.'s 1980s punk scene. Davis explains how her "work was built on punk, its homoeroticism, its counterculture position, its largescale queerness—being an outside art expression," as well as how she and her peers were sick of how punk culture was being co-opted and made subservient "to the status quo" (16:58). To her this flew in the face of her own artistic ethos as an "anti-corporate artist" (17:25).

Davis situates her work as occupying a queerness fueled by anger and frustration at the "hardcore punk and post punk scene's homophobia, misogyny, and sexual conventionality." Yet, the assumption that gay and lesbian culture and politics might have served as a haven for her is highly mistaken. For Davis, "the mainstream gay world in the 1980s was already becoming more bourgeois and assimilationist," and that, to her, was more distressing than the state of the punk scene (16:32). I've lingered here on the context that Davis provides for her work because Davis's work within *That Fertile Feeling*—but also, I contend, the trajectory of her career—can be seen as carving out a place

[86] See GenderFest Athens, "Vaginal Davis: Terrorist Drag Performative Lecture."

for an intersectional queer radicality that is the product of camp, assembled from influences at the nexus of punk and queer cultures while also giving these cultures two enthusiastic, if proverbial, middle fingers.

In light of the complexity that I've asserted is tied to Davis's zine work— a collage of created and appropriated content that, due to her textual performances and authorial voice, are made to exist as her artistic creation, one that would not exist without her penchant to curate—it is easy to read *That Fertile Feeling*, the no-budget, narrative short film, as bizarre but straightforward. This is a mistake. *That Fertile Feeling* is instructive on just how Davis is turning more traditional conceptions of camp film and, separately, a politics of still-emerging queerness on their respective heads.

For starters, *That Fertile Feeling* is a film about Black womanhood, which is mostly absent from the traditional conceptions of camp and queer politics of the 1980s. And while the tenor of this film knowingly oscillates between the humorous and the ridiculous, it just as knowingly calls attention to institutional pressures and cultural stereotypes that circulate around Black women and Black mothers in particular. Consequently, the film opens with Davis calling attention to Fertile's (Greg Hernandez) Black womanhood and impending motherhood. This begins with shots of Davis and Fertile outside under a patio that are intercut with the film's opening credits. While in the midst of eating something undeterminable, Davis says, "Fertile, you are always pregnant. What's the story with you, girl?" Fertile, costumed in a large black afro wig, a black "Resist to Exist" anti-apartheid shirt, a black skirt and tights, and pink plastic sunglasses, replies "I just have one baby at a time." This dynamic continues with Davis replies, "I've never seen you when you weren't pregnant." In her high-pitched but soft-spoken voice, Fertile sighs, "That's because I've had a hard life, honey." Two shots later, the ladies have moved inside to Fertile's living room to watch some porn. Davis and Fertile are foregrounded as they laugh uncontrollably at the porn they are watching. Davis, between

laughs, jokes, "You act like you've never seen people doing it on a movie before," to which Fertile responds, "Never on my TV, honey." The women cackle at the figurative and literal possibilities contained in Fertile's joke before Davis smiles and says, "Well, you've never had a VCR before. Now you can afford it. You are a rich black girl."

From the film's opening shots, Davis makes repeated overtures about Fertile's pregnancy and specifically her status as a pregnant Black woman. This demonstrates how Davis is more than aware of the stereotypes regarding the sexual promiscuity of Black women. These stereotypes are outlined by several prominent scholars including Hortense S. Spillers and Cathy Cohen. Cohen's influential essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", in an effort to advocate for more expansive notions of non-normativity as well as to call for coalitional politics, describes the perpetuation of stereotypes concerning women of color. She writes "often black and Latina women are portrayed as unable to control their sexual impulses and their reproductive decisions, unable to raise their children with the right moral fiber, unable to find 'gainful' employment to support themselves and their 'illegitimate children,' and of course unable to manage 'effectively' the minimal assistance provided by the state" (457-58). Davis is reworking these stereotypes in her characterization of Fertile La Toyah Jackson, though it is not to recuperate them. If we think about her work between referents in *Evil Taco*, where the gap in referents between the appropriated praise for *And The Band Played On* and the contents of her zine allowed her to inhabit that space, the opposite appears to be at work in *That Fertile Feeling*. Davis is collapsing the differences between these cultural stereotypes and Fertile, as we can see by the film's first few scenes where Fertile's Blackness, the multiple children she's had, and her current status as an unmarried expectant mother are emphasized. Though the acting is exaggerated, the film's opening shows that Davis is playing Fertile straight, so to speak—that she is aligning her characterization of Fertile with many of the stereotypes that are associated with Black women and Black mothers.

All of the excitement, from the porno and the fits of laughter that it brought on, is punctuated by an abrupt silence before Fertile turns to Davis and explains that her water broke. Davis, though spending much of the film commenting on Fertile's pregnancy, is incredulous at this turn of events and repeatedly asks, "What water?" The shot then moves from the traditional medium shot that has comprised most of the film thus far to a medium close-up of Fertile as she says—just successfully smothering a laugh— "My placenta water," before zooming back out so that Davis is in medium shot. After the zoom Davis, with even greater incredulousness than before, repeats, "Your placenta water?," inspiring some doubt as to whether or not she knows that this is officially marking the beginning of Fertile's labor process.

Yet, the next shot ensures that Davis's questions were more a mixture of disbelief rather than ignorance. Her face is captured in close-up as she erupts in screams. These screams continue throughout the shot, seemingly compensating for the camera's failure to fully capture her movements as she jumps up from the couch and runs in and out of the frame with her arms flailing. Davis's screams and intermittent blurs of movement across the frame almost drown out Fertile's insistence that she be taken to a hospital because she can't give birth to her child within close proximity to the VCR and the porn it holds.

Thus far, this is a film that seems right at home in a certain tradition of camp film in which a bare-bones aesthetic showcases exaggerated performances of hardly glamorized, low-rent femininity (i.e. John Waters). However, in *That Fertile Feeling* we might see Davis as playing thimblerig with our conceptions of camp and excess. What I mean by this is that there certainly are camp excesses that this film takes up like exaggerated performances of femininity by Davis and Fertile, the humor, the compromised quality of image composition, the film's use of juxtaposition, etc. Yet, just when we think that we know which cup covers the ball, exactly how this film works as a work of camp, we realize that what we haven't accounted for is Davis's impeccable sleight of hand—her way of both

finessing and problematizing the racializing excesses always already inscribed on and ascribed to women of color to create her camp.

The two women endure a ride plagued by traffic and Davis's lack of driving experience[87] before they arrive at the hospital, "Clinica De Las Americas." After Fertile and Davis bang on the door, a long shot shows them walking back to Davis's car with only the familiar suitcase in hand and no new bundle of joy. Davis rhetorically asks with annoyance, "I don't understand, why do you always have to be pregnant at the worst times?" Fertile and Davis travel to New Boyfriend's house, where they interrupt a mostly-nude cleaning session as Davis explains, "Fertile is in labor and she has to have the baby here. They wouldn't let her have the baby at the hospital because she doesn't have health insurance." New Boyfriend says that's fine and that Fertile can have the baby in the living room while he continues to clean his apartment. The next few shots oscillate between an over the shoulder shot of Fertile as she lies on the floor of New Boyfriend's living room with a blanket covering the lower half of her body and medium shots of Davis at the feet of Fertile with her hands under the blanket as she prepares to assist Fertile through her labor. There are a lot of Fertile's high-pitched, soft-spoken and nearly-laughing moans as her labor progresses. At one point, Davis reaches over Fertile's body and mops her brow. Finally, in a medium shot from her midwifely position with New Boyfriend continuing to dust his picture frames in the background, Davis raises Fertile's blanket and screams, "Oh, my god! Fertile, push! Push!"

If we think that there's a chance we've somehow drifted into traditional birthing scenes, we are quickly reminded that this is not that type of film. Rather than the expected shot of a close-up of a fluid-drenched child emerging from Fertile, a medium long shot that captures Davis slightly to the

[87] Which is a hoot. Among the best lines is Davis's uncertainty about where the hospital is. She says, "The hospital? I don't know where that is. The only hospital I know is *General Hospital*." Fertile, either not aware of the television soap opera or beyond caring, replies, "Then go to 'General Hospital,' I don't care where you go!" See *That Fertile Feeling*, 4:33.

left of center at the foot of Fertile's prone body. New Boyfriend jumps with excitement, yelling, "Twins! It's going to be twins!" The following close-up of Davis's face, moving in and out of frame while looking under Fertile's blanket, soon makes it apparent that Fertile's labor is just getting started. Davis is amazed when she exclaims, "Oh my gosh, there's more in there! Oh my god, how many babies are you going to have?" The next few shots frame Fertile in various ways as she labors while Davis continues to keep a runny tally of her progeny. As Davis announces the first half-dozen children Fertile births, New Boyfriend, having lost interest, does push-ups in the background of the shot. When the camera returns to a close-up of Davis, the finally tally of Fertile's babies is announced, "Eleven! She's had eleventuplets!" The scene of labor is capped off with a medium shot of Fertile, Davis, and New Boyfriend gathered over a laundry basket partly filled with towels where they, presumably, have gathered Fertile's children. Davis shakes her head in awe and says, "That's incredible," to which Fertile replies, "I'm an incredible woman."

That Fertile Feeling concludes by abruptly shifting from this scene of calm to a close-up of Davis as she says in disbelief, "She just had 11 babies and takes off like that." Two long shots follow of Fertile skateboarding on the street outside her apartment as Davis sticks her head out the window to admonish Fertile for leaving her children. In a tone that borders on being parental, Davis screams, "Oh my god! Fertile La Toyah Jackson, you get off that skateboard." Davis's tone seems to have little effect on Fertile as she continues to skate in a nearby parking lot while Davis's voice-over continues to scold her for appearing to abandon her new children: "You just had eleventuplets. You shouldn't be on that skateboard, you should be with those children."

That Fertile Feeling, like much of Davis's work with camp, orbits in varying degrees of obviousness—some elements seem content to linger subtly in the film's background and others, well, plummet to earth. This can be seen in the film's handling of the issue of health insurance which Davis's character's reaction frames as an inconvenience—that she's had to drive all the way to the

hospital that won't even see Fertile. The spectacle of Fertile's multiple births, in the middle of New Boyfriend's living room, is both ridiculous and nearly outlandish enough to distract from the precarity and danger that might otherwise affect expectant mothers without access to healthcare. Much like what we saw Davis doing with the back cover of *Evil Taco,* Davis's camp is predicated on her putting pressure on camp's traditional relation to excess—how the Black body, and particularly the Black womanly body, is already marked as excessive and implicated in stereotypical assumptions about excessive promiscuity and reproducibility. *That Fertile Feeling* brings together these complicated social and cultural registers that work to spectacularize and mark the Black body in excessive ways while also—somehow—flirting with how mundane and expected this type of excess is as it is perpetuated, legislated, and reflected upon by structures of racism. We see this in the film's opening, where Davis evokes not only Fertile's current pregnancy but her past pregnancies in matter-of-fact tones. Yet, what begins as the film's jokes about Fertile representing the racist stereotype of the always pregnant Black woman shifts to inflect Fertile's Black womanhood with extra-human valences. The sheer number of Fertile's births is one example—not to mention the connotations that surround Fertile's children being gathered in a laundry basket the way one might gather a litter of puppies or kittens. Fertile's eleventuplets are even in excess of the number of children able to be carried by a woman notwithstanding the advances in insemination technologies. Davis settles on a number that is beyond human capacity and comprehension and does so in order to flaunt how the inhuman coalesces around Fertile La Toyah Jackson. Davis cultivates a slew of ascribed excesses to emphasize how Black women and Black mothers are subjected to this dichotomy that normalizes the racializing forces that mark and stereotype them as excessive.

While I've argued that Davis makes a similar move with her work in *Evil Taco*, *That Fertile Feeling* moves beyond staging this tension toward a terroristic, unauthorized use of representational violence. This coalesces in the figure of the Black freak, which Davis has stated in several different

interviews is vital to her sense of self, her artistic work, and her politics. L. H. Stallings takes up the figure of the Black freak in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Stallings situates the Black freak's associations with sexual explicitness along other sites of Black cultural resistance from white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy. Though Stallings roots the discussion of Black funk freakery in nineteenth century Black subjects, I see overlap between the resistance Stallings locates in this figure and Davis's own conception, where both demonstrate how the freak works as "an affirmation of difference rather than a biological negation of difference" (34). Both Stallings and Davis see potential for freakiness and freakery as they pertain to the sexualities of Black womanhood. In her lecture at GenderFest, Davis charts the development of the Black freak as separate from histories of the freak that coalesce around the development of psychology during the twentieth century and how the figure of the freak has found representation in mainstream film. What remains unaddressed, she explains, is "the notion of freakiness expressed in race." She continues:

> What is black American freakiness? Is it a spook? A ghostly or dark phantom figure? Can it be tamed and nurtured? Is it bred from the shards of colonialism? And if not, how does the freak come out into the world in the first place? As one of Fertile La Toyah Jackson's eleventuplets, perhaps [in trying to] answer the question 'where does the black freak come from?' we acknowledge that black American expression has been poisoned and fertilized by stereotypes. The freak is a comic take on these stereotypes—on black eccentricity—weirdness as an act of resistance. As an artist, I've happily claimed ownership of my freakiness. I believe in it. Do you?[88]

Davis situates Black American freakiness as a representational strategy that is a byproduct of the racist stereotypes, so that it—like Fertile La Toyah—is both evocative of these stereotypes and

[88] See GenderFest Athens, "Vaginal Davis: Terrorist Drag Performative Lecture." published June 9, 2017.

distinct from them. Implied in her conception of the Black freak, and what might make it a potent political and artistic trope, is the freak's ability to espouse these stereotypes but in a resistant mode.

This resistance that stems from advancing what would otherwise be racist stereotypes, by the slimmest of margins, distinguishes Davis's notion of the freak and the way it manifests itself in her camp from disidentificatory practices theorized by Muñoz. Without a doubt, the freak conveys the "universalizing and exclusionary machinations" that show the stereotypes for what they are—gross generalizations (31). However I see Davis's approach to the freak as not necessarily dependent on the rescrambling or reconstructing that Muñoz posits as essential to his process of disidentification.[89] What distinguishes Davis's engagement with the racist stereotypes is not her identifying with them but her mobilizing these excesses so that they can facilitate artistic and political production. I want to mark this as an evolution of Davis's work from *Evil Taco*, where she is simply staging the ways that stereotypes and the less than human coalesce around Black women and their bodies, to the theory of representation that she locates in the Black freak. Most importantly, and vital to understanding the evolving stakes of Davis's political and artistic work, this figure is a queer one. I think we can see this queerness in Fertile's extrahuman birthing capacity but also in her resilience—the way that she "finally gets up and does what any self-respecting Afro-punk would do. She goes skateboarding." Davis theorizes the Black birthing freak mom as simultaneously animated by pejorative stereotypes and involved in a perversion of them that leads to some artistic potential, something queer. Fertile La Toyah, as she is both produced by and theorized by Davis, comes to espouse the power, resilience and sexual radicality of the Black freak while living up to Davis's prescription of her "as the ultimate queer birthing freak mom."

[89] I'd again reiterate that an initial dissatisfaction and disidentification with an offensive portrayal of one's positionality or community is right in line with Muñoz. It is in his conception of the artistic process of disidentification that I want to distinguish from the work that Davis is doing with the trope of the Black freak. This is not a writ large critique of Muñoz's work or Muñoz's work with Davis's drag performances. Rather, I just see Davis's conception of the freak as working differently from how Muñoz describes the disidentifcatory process.

While camp in *Evil Taco* facilitates Davis's navigation of distance to gesture toward how racializing forces and structures continually put pressure on the distinction between Black personhood and the inhuman, in *That Fertile Feeling* the figure of the Black freak is wrought from the distillation and compression of stereotypes that Davis's camp enacts. Yet, the associations and attributions of an inhuman or extrahuman excess to Black women unite Davis's efforts on *Evil Taco*'s back cover and throughout *That Fertile Feeling*. To put it another way, Davis is calling attention to how structural, institutional, and cultural racism as it operated in her contemporary moment of the late 1980s—and continues in our own current moment—is partly predicated on a juxtaposition between the ascription of humanity to certain largely white populations and the way that same humanity is denied to communities of color.

Davis's cultivation of the Black freak can be linked to the work Weheliye does in the latter part of his book to point toward the efforts of persons ascribed a deficient form of humanity by racializing structures that narrate political and economic thought to resist the reduction of the "subjectivity of the oppressed to bare life" (126). Davis's work throughout her different methods of camp has forsaken the work of authenticity for the radical political potential of "dwelling in the monstrosity of the flesh" (126). The Black freak is not an appeal to legitimize the suffering or an attempt to develop or improve the dominant notions of humanity that exclude her. Instead, Davis tends and expands the contours of the inhumanity rooted and propelled by racism and its stereotypes to accommodate the whims and desires of the Black freak.

In it is the idea that artistic potential can be coaxed or—after Davis—"nurtured" into a representation that epitomizes how that queerness can reflect an intersectional and more coalitional politics. This speaks to the notion of radicality attributed to the potential of queerness as it is explained by Cohen in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." I see Cohen's work in dialogue with the work of Weheliye and Wynter, though her emphasis is reimagining a queer political and

coalitional politics. Central to Cohen's, Weheliye's and Wynter's approaches is the compromised humanity—and accordingly a compromised relation to the rights and privileges associated with citizenship—ascribed to people of color.[90] Cohen's aim, however, is to chart the historical and contemporary policies that have inhibited, prohibited, and policed the sexuality of Black women and men, and how the ascription of deviant sexuality was vital to the efforts of the state to control it. Cohen writes that there have been "numerous ways that sexuality and sexual deviance from the prescribed norm has been used to demonize and to oppress various segments of the population, even some classified under the label 'heterosexual'" (457). She continues:

> It is not the nonheterosexist behavior of these black men and women that is under fire, but rather the perceived nonnormative sexual behavior and family structures of these individuals, whom many queer activists—without regard to the impact of race, class, or gender— would designate as part of the heterosexist establishment or those mighty 'straights, they hate. (457)[91]

Cohen calls for a coalitional politics that reaches across identity categories and dichotomies between straight and queer because, as she demonstrates, there are many ways in which people of color have not been able to access the traditional, full privileges of heterosexuality. I see Davis's evocation of Fertile La Toyah as a queer Black freak mom as directly addressing the spectacular stereotypes that have accrued around Black women's sexuality in particular, as well highlighting the nonormativity

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[90] While I've cited Wynter and the relation she charts between the end of slavery and the ways people of color were relegated to "symbolic death," this symbolic death is also compounded not just by skin pigmentation but the operation of "substitute monohumanist religion of Darwin's neo Malthusian biocosmogony," where "the *incarnation of symbolic life*, will law-likely be that of the ruling class bourgeoisie as the *naturally selected (eugenic) master of Malthusian natural scarcity*." Symbolic death is "having been naturally dysselected and mastered by Malthusian natural scarcity: as are the globally homogenized dysgenic non-breadwinning jobless poor/the pauper/ homeless/the welfare queens. Poverty itself, therefore, is the 'significant ill' signifier of *ultimate symbolic death* and, consequently, capital accumulation, and therefore *symbolic life* signifies and narrates a plan of salvation that will cure the dysselected significant ill!" For more see, Sylvia Wynter and Katerine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, P. 37.

[91] The material Cohen quotes is from a notorious essay/manifesto document handed out at the 1990 New York City Pride parade entitled "Queers Read This: I Hate Straights."

often conferred on or associated with women of color due to these ascriptions. Through the figure of the Black freak, she is able to make a form of queerness work for her—in ways that attest to and mobilize the excesses and nonnormativities linked to Black womanhood and motherhood but also illustrate how queerness can find fertile ground in certain representations of Black motherhood.

Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Zines

In the early 1990s, Davis's character made her move from zine to video when Davis produced three issues of *The Fertile Latoyah Jackson Video Magazine*.[92] The zine's premiere video version still captures the centripetal nature of Davis's zines—which, though titled after the character played by Greg Hernandez, still derive their vision and force from Davis's performance of herself and her involvement in L.A.'s punk scene. But the change in medium also allows Davis to experiment with different entertainment genres like the television news program, the news magazine format, and even short comedy skits. Davis and her collaborators find ways to take their camera to L.A. streets and sites, chronicling the folks and (self-proclaimed) freaks they find there.

The first issue of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* leans heavily into the television/television news magazine format. After the opening credits, Davis continues her use and critique of different media forms and genres as this sequence opens—with television personalities bearing the brunt of her caricature. The sequence begins, for example, with close-ups of Davis practicing her best overenthusiastic, stiff, and rehearsed "Hello"(s). The multiple takes are stacked on top of each other, bringing attention to television news's hokey artificialness that parades itself as natural while sounding anything but—especially through Davis's stylized, over-emphasized, and durationally lengthy pronunciation of all the vowel sounds. Once the takes are over, the camera

[92] The move to the new medium, however, did not combat the ephemerality that frequently accompanies many of the media that Davis works within. These videos are very rare, which is why this section will have to be limited to the first two issues.

frames Davis in medium-long shot as she sits at a low-rent anchor desk set. With a silver-painted backdrop behind her adorned with a framed picture of a clown, Davis sits at her news desk, which she nearly dwarfs. She picks up her notes from her desk, where they are sitting next to a tape dispenser, stapler, and black telephone, and begins reading from her script:

> Hello. I'm Vaginal Davis, the editor and publisher of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*. Has Fertile changed? No. She's the same woman she's always been. When Fertile has something to say, she says it. It is my job as editor to make Fertile's voice heard loud and clear in all of its many shapes and sizes—for Black women and all people of color everywhere. Thank you.

In this scripted opening, we can see Davis addressing how/whether the shift in medium might change *Fertile La Toyah Jackson*. We can also see how Davis has aligned the video zine's tone and political mission of addressing specifically the voices of women of color. Davis's attribution of variety to Fertile's voice, "its many shapes and sizes," speaks to the idea that there might be a little of Fertile in all the readers of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*—that Fertile is a voice meant to speak through the loudest and most intractable means about what matters in Fertile's world. There is a plurality that is laced throughout Davis's remarks that hints at her aim for *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* to speak to and about more than just Fertile.

Davis's characterization of herself as editor, for me, is intriguing and central to understanding her relationship to her art and what I want to call her curational methodology. The change in medium is crucial for understanding this. For instance, as publisher of a zine, Davis had a tangible relationship to the materiality of the zine—it was fashioned by her (even if some of the content was not of her own making). However, with the change to video, Davis's relationship to the zine project had to change at the material level. Though she was still present and performed in the video zine's bits and sketches, Davis did not film the material that comprises the video zine herself.

Nor did she edit it. As she has stated in various interviews, she pulled the video zine off by relying on her connections to L.A.'s punk world and people she met. I point this out not to demean Davis's involvement or to minimize her role in the zine's production. Though unable to physically film or edit, Davis was clearly the conceptual mastermind behind her work. It is her artistic vision and curation that facilitates it that unites what might otherwise be an unsuccessful experiment in rendering zine-y-ness onto video. It is also worth noting that the different relationship to materiality evident in Davis's curational practice also reflects the way the video zine curates and is attentive to the work of other artists. Similar to the relationship to curation that I've outlined with Cheryl Dunye's work with *The Watermelon Woman*, Davis is firmly embedded in the culture she is working within—as both artist and curator.

The first issue of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* shows not only how Davis is transmuting the best qualities of her paper zine to video but also how video became a platform for capturing the punk and queer scenes of L.A. in the early 1990s. As seen in *Evil Taco,* the first issue of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* is anchored by Davis's self-performance in various skits and gags. At one point in the video zine, she greets the camera from the doorway of her one-room apartment in the nude, before inviting it, the person filming, and us inside for her trademark "read" of celebrity culture. Davis even falls back on a few of her favorite celebrity fixations, regaling viewers with an account of a dalliance outside an L.A. theater where Marky Mark strips naked in a fountain and masturbates to her image.

Perhaps the biggest irony of the *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* experiment is that Davis's title character takes a backseat. Other than narrating between segments and delivering opening and closing monologues, the character of Fertile is not present in the video magazine that is named after her, though in the first video zine, Fertile's opening and closing segments do approximate Davis's goal of advocating for the voices and lives of people of color—and specifically

women of color—more explicitly than in other parts of the zine's inaugural issue. Fertile's opening monologue titled "What Makes Fertile Mad?" addresses the topic of racism, and white people who deny their racism bear the brunt of Fertile's ire. After bemoaning the ignorance of platitudes like "we are all alike on the inside," Fertile replies, "Fuck that shit," before continuing, "You are born white and that means you are a racist. I wasn't born white and I'm a racist. And I'm going to die a racist. But at least I know. And until you do, you are doomed." Fertile's opening monologue is bookended with an equally fiery closing monologue which beings with her holding a shotgun:

> Here we are at the end of our endeavor, the *Fertile La Toyah Jackson* video. We hope you enjoyed it. But I don't give a damn because I'll be seeing you anyway once the revolution starts. I will be at your doorstep—Me, Fertile La Toyah Jackson, with my armies of beautiful, beautiful colored people—to tear your white, blue-eyed, devil asses apart. I will be there when the revolution starts with my machine guns.

Throughout both monologues the juxtaposition that exists between the high "coos" of Fertile's voice and the violence of the rhetoric she is espousing is comical. In a manner similar to Fertile's performance in *That Fertile Feeling*, there are moments—particularly in the first monologue—where the performer might just give in to laughter that is barely concealed. Additionally, in the second monologue Fertile devolves into her threats only after saying that she hopes that viewers "enjoyed" the video zine's inaugural issue. What follows Fertile's opening lines marks not only a departure in the (figurative) tenor of her statements, but also a less veiled continuation of Davis's work in *That Fertile Feeling*, where the perceived threat of Black womanhood personified by Fertile's caricature gives way to a performance of the threat posed by "armies" of machine-gun-toting people of color. More importantly, however, is the way that Fertile, via Davis, does not cast this threat to a generalized notion of whiteness or white people. To an even greater extent than in the "What Makes Fertile Mad?" opening monologue, in the monologue that ends *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video*

Magazine #1, Fertile is stating her intention to violently collapse the distance between viewer and media object. This is far-fetched and outrageous, which is part of its camp. It also clearly demonstrates how Davis is eroding avenues for even her own white viewers to shrug off the ways that they are equally implicated in structures of racialization—though they more often than not see benefits and privileges from this in ways that people of color do not. In spite of Fertile's ridiculous falsetto and her holding of a shotgun rather than her promised machine gun, it's moments like these monologues that show Davis's uncompromising will to provoke and implicate her audience. This implication is sometimes present in other forms in her paper zines, but it takes on a much different resonance in video. White viewers might be implicated by these words if they encountered them in their typewritten expressiveness in one of Davis's zines, but they also would not be literally in the line of fire as they are in the final moments of the video zine where Fertile swings the shotgun around and aims it at the camera. Here, in the last few seconds of the zine, Davis utilizes the iconic ending gesture of *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter 1903) but imbues the image with new complication and complexities by having a woman of color aim her shotgun at us.

Though the inaugural issue of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* continued to find new ways of representing the hallmarks of Davis's paper zine, the first issue also was able to chart new ground, providing Davis a platform not only to collaborate with other artists in the L.A. area but to document how people lived and worked at the sexual and legal margins of the city. Given Davis's proclivity for "reading" that was well established in *Evil Taco* and carried through to the video version of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine*, it might be conceivable that the sketched titled "Street Walker Fashion" might place sex workers and the clothes they wear as the butt of Davis's jokes. However, this is not the case. After all, as Fertile remarks during her segue to this segment of the video zine, "Here at *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*, some of our best friends are pre-op and post-op transsexuals." In this segment of the zine, Davis approaches a variety of sex workers on

their way to work or as they attempt to find work and ask them about their clothing choices. Some of these women are a bit shy and/or hesitant at first, with one woman in particular seeming to mistake Davis for part of an actual television news crew when she replies, "I'll have to plead the fifth on everything." Yet, after it is clear that Davis is interested in her clothing and where she shops, the woman proudly states that her outfit is from Playmates, a Hollywood Boulevard clothing shop—one of the shops, along with Contempo Causal and Max Shields, which many of the women interviewed for the segment frequent. One of the more outgoing interviewees named Raquel is approached by Davis and Brown as she is getting out of her car. After several questions about where she shops and her beauty regimen, Davis comments on the interior of her car which is completely covered with leopard fur material. Raquel proudly beams that she did it herself and that interior design is a hobby of hers. She has contemplated going to school for it but can't quite make a decision. When asked to describe her style, Raquel explains that it is "carefree, wow!, exciting, alluring."

The "Street Walker Fashion" segment certainly has its naïvely camp moments, like the fact that the women interviewed all seem to shop at the same three stores. But, very importantly, Davis leaves her "reading" behind in this sequence and sets about to affirm the beauty and the womanhood of the ladies who speak to her. In a zine that has been, up until this segment, all about the camp juxtaposition and exaggeration that Davis has brought from the xeroxed pages of her paper zine to their different incarnations in the video zine, what makes this segment stand out from the work of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* so far is the compassion Davis exhibits toward the women she interviews and the way that shtick gives way to documentary. Both the title and Fertile's delivery of it frame the segment with a shallowness that, up until this point in the video zine, has come to be expected. What the "Street Walker Fashion" segment does capture is not only a departure from the "reading," the snark, and the shallowness but the humanity with which Davis approaches these women—the compassion of her approach and the affirmations she exudes, calling

the woman beautiful and complimenting their styles. The nature of their womanhood is no contested, whether the women are flaunting the bodies they were born with or the bodies they have literally and physically fashioned.

As *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* moved on from its first issue, it is clear to see the impact the "Street Walker Fashion" segment had on the video zine's development and scope. This segment stands out from much of the rest of the first issue's content where Davis leans into the centripetal nature of her camp and her performances. The "Street Walker Fashion" sequence, while still punctuated by laughs and campy quips, marks a shift in the trajectory of the zine. Of course, the camp "reading" that got Davis her successful zines is not abandoned in its entirety, but the second issue of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* augments this camp with an impulse to document the conditions and hazards of living queerly and radically in the 1990s, the performance art that these times and conditions inspired, and resolute and unfaltering humanity of sexual radicals.

"The Kinky Issue" of *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine* charted new ground not just in terms of the video zine's direction, but also in the scope of the work that Davis had undertaken to this point in her career. In *Evil Taco* Davis used "reading" and manipulation of media forms to gesture toward some of the racist representational hurdles the Black subject might face in camp's transformation from subject to object, namely the ways that Black humanity and connection to the human is often impugned by racist forces and structures. Davis moved from pointing out this uneven ascription of Black humanity in *Evil Taco* to mobilizing these racist motifs and stereotypes for artistic and political production in *That Fertile Feeling*. If Davis could be said to have "tamed or nurtured" the Black freak to espouse the radicality and queerness so important to her work, we see a turn in her video zine art that might also be seen as nurturing and documenting the different forms of queerness orbiting the gendered and sexual margins of her L.A. community. While there are still elements of camp in *Fertile La Toyah Jackson*'s "The Kinky Issue"—including the celebrity "reads"

featured in the segment "What Fertile Sez, People Copy"[93]— Davis and her collaborators ditch much of the skit-focused nature of the first zine and opt to take the camera out into the punk and queer cultures of California, building on their impulse to document in "Street Walker Fashions." The majority of "The Kinky Issue" is content with staging and documenting the different forms of bodies and spectacles that can comprise L.A.'s queer punk subculture. Though Davis does manage to get in on the fun and take part in a lot of what "The Kinky Issue" documents, her zine assumes the form of a chronicle that reserves a space for the lives and art of sexual outsiders.

Many segments within *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine*'s "Kinky Issue" set about to document the communities, lives, and art of the sexually marginalized. This includes footage of the annual Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco where leathermen cruise the street known for its associations with gay and BDSM cultures. In her introduction to the segment, Fertile explains that that the street fair takes place "in San Francisco, Sodom and Gomorra, California," linking the city and its reputation to the presence of these alternative sexual scenes and communities that were able to flourish in the heart of the city's Castro neighborhood. The footage captures loads of leathermen bedecked in their finest along with public acts of kink like flogging and urination. Despite all of the people and action captured on the street level, the camera also captures the more adventurous fairgoers heading up stoops and into the darkness of undoubtedly more hardcore atmospheres.

In addition to documenting the flotsam and jetsam at the Folsom Street Fair, "The Kinky Issue" also focuses on documenting performance art by artists like Kembra Pfahler and Ron Athey. "The Voluptuous Karen Black" segment has Davis interviewing Pfahler, the lead singer for the punk band *Voluptuous Karen Black*, before participating in her performance. As the two women sit on motorcycles, Pfahler describes how she was inspired to create her performances "with a sense of

[93] This particular segment might also be titled the *Beverly Hills 902010* roast as the cast members from the hit TV show provide much of the camp fodder for this sketch.

pageantry and color" after recovering from being mugged. It was during this time that Pfahler watched *The Trilogy of Terror* (Curtis 1975). During the interview, Davis situates Pfahler and her band's art as the cutting edge of the alternative scene in L.A., making a point to distinguish Pfahler's work from posers. Davis explains:

> It's like the people who say they're alternative are not alternative. And if someone really alternative shows up they are like 'Oh my!" because they are not. They are all offended when they see the real thing—what's really alternative. They can't handle it.

With outspoken candor, Davis's dismisses punk and queer pretenders, who she sees as taking style points in their claiming of the alternative label while not walking the walk. Acts like Pfahler and her band stand as part of a community and art that is just as provocative and confrontational as Davis's approaches. The rest of "The Voluptuous Karen Black" segment is comprised of footage of the band's performance.[94] Pfahler begins the set in a black ball gown with long strips of fabric draping off her arms and her body entirely painted blue. For the finale, Pfahler performs a straddle handstand during which the inversion of her dress leaves her blue legs and black thong visible. Davis and the rest of her bandmates take turns putting red, black, and white liquids and freshly cracked eggs between Pfahler's spread legs.

In continuing her work promoting performance art in and around L.A.'s punk scene, "The Kinky Issue" has a long feature on one of Davis's long-time friends, Ron Athey. As Athey begins the process of mummifying[95] Robert Woods of the band *drance*, Davis affirms her friend's status as an artist whose work pushes the physical limits of bodies and the limits of art itself. Davis explains

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[94] This is introduced by the actress Karen Black of the *Trilogy of Terror*. Though she is clearly not aware of the kind of performance art she is introducing, she is a good sport and introduces the band.

[95] Athey's process of mummifying involves wrapping his subject's nude body in plastic wrap and then wrapping the entire body again in duct tape. This usually involves taping over the mouth entirely, and leaving the nostrils uncovered. However, Wood's deviated septum meant that Athey left his mouth uncovered to ensure he could breathe. Woods experiences some mild panic as Athey duct tapes his upper body during the filming. He is able to regain his composure and says once Athey cuts open the wrappings that it was a cathartic and relaxing experience.

that "Mr. Ron Athey is not just some foolish tryhard. He's been doing this for many years. It's not a trend, a new trend, that he suddenly got into." After mummifying and demummifying Woods, Athey dons an arm-length protective barrier and begins to pierce Wood's chest and neck with needles while threading yarn-like material through the needles to make designs. An abrupt cut in the sequence shows Athey removing the needles and Woods asking for a cold towel. Woods is led to a small bedroom down the hallway where he passes out, having undergone Athey's artistic practice without eating that day. As Athey and Davis chat together in the room where the filming has taken place, Athey is not bothered by Wood's fainting, saying, "That is just the nature of the stuff I work with."[96] The rest of the segment cuts between Davis interviewing Athey about his Saint Sebastian performance and footage of Athey during that performance. The footage of the performance attests to the ways that Athey is able to make the body a medium for art. One short sequence shows Athey applying piercings around a subject's mouth before sewing it closed. He then draws blood from the subject's arm and squirts the blood on the sewn-closed mouth. The blood works theatrically during this performance, miming a gore that is not present otherwise. It is clear that Athey is masterful in his knowledge of bodies and their limits and the body's instinctual reaction as it is constrained and manipulated—its skin pierced, its openings filled or closed, its insides put outside. Athey moves to discussing the finale of this performance in which he used his own body as a medium to represent the toll the 1990s had taken on sexually radical communities due to the impact of HIV/AIDS. While footage of the finale of the performance plays, Athey explains that "Every time a close friend dies, I kind of [take], you know, stories—some sort of metaphor. To take the story of a martyr or saint and apply it now…What kind of people are martyred in the 90s? What kind of queers or sex freaks, people who do body modification to themselves. How do they fit into society?" During Athey's

[96] Athey then offers an anecdote of one performance where he accidently cut open a woman's back because he was using unfamiliar tools—in this case a surgical scalpel rather than his customary Exacto knives.

performance he is flogged by a number of people standing in a circle as he repeatedly drops to his knees and gets back up on his feet. He is then hung by the wrists, blood dripping from head wounds from a gruesome facsimile of a crown of thorns as well as the wounds from several foot-long arrows that have been pushed into his body. Close-ups of his thigh capture the feathered ends of the arrows quivering as his body trembles from exertion.

The performance is a gut-wrenchingly grueling display of pain and endurance during which the body under the exertion of pain is put through its measures, taken to its limits. Though Athey is clear that his performance work is inspired by loss, the footage of his performance captures the agonizing vitality of pain and pleasure along with how both of those feelings can be inscribed on the body in its own language of life, captured within this simulacrum of death. While Davis and her work in *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* have made space for marginalized communities and underground sexual cultures, these images of Athey's performance crystalize the importance of affirming the conditions under which racialized subjects and sexual outlaws live—and the structures that enforce the compromised notions of their humanity. In its coverage of the sexual and bodily spectacles, *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine*'s "The Kinky Issue" affirms the humanity, lives, and art of those at the sexual margins of society. The video zine affirms this by ending with Athey's display of humanity critics would deny to him because of his sexual practice.

Just as Vaginal Davis is no Judy Garland, Athey's performance is not about representing or voicing the suffering of day-to-day life as a sexual outsider—which makes his and Davis's work departures from the type of camp connected to pre-Stonewall gays. That Athey's art is not about representing his suffering, voicing injury, or making his situation understandable or relatable to the society that despises his existence might seem hard to understand given the content of his art. However, like Davis's art, Athey's work trades on recontextualizing tropes and motifs so that they reflect the marginality of his position. He is uninterested in making that relatable for a general

audience. Both Davis's and Athey's camp maintains their distance as outsiders, but where Athey's camp relies on the theatricalization and pageantry of extreme bodily practices, Davis's camp relies on her masterful manipulation of forms, aesthetics, design, and genre. This is a camp that has spanned many different media forms and has facilitated the centripetal self-promotional nature of her early work as well as her the more centrifugal nature of her later work, where her focus shifted from self-promotion to documenting the sexual and bodily spectacles that speak to lives and art at the sexual margins of society. Consistent throughout all of the evolutions of her camp is Davis's curational practice.

Platinum Oasis

Davis's involvement in curating the 2001 18-hour, interactive, artistic take-over of LA's infamous Coral Sands Motel[97] might, at first, seem like a departure from her work with *Evil Taco*, *That Fertile Feeling,* and *Fertile La Toya Jackson Video Magazine*. After all, we have left her hands-on, guerilla-style, artistic production for the greener, more reputable pastures of Outfest, a LGBTQ-oriented film festival held every summer in "the city of angels" since 1982.[98] Yet, if one digs into accounts of the fondly-remembered event, known for the range of personalities and licentiousness it brought together, it is easy to see Platinum Oasis as a reflection of Davis's long-standing commitment to promoting her own distinctive brand of queerness. Described by Charles Labelle as equal parts "performance-installation-burlesque-and-body-art extravaganza-cum-marketplace"—where "the

[97] In his coverage of Platinum Oasis 2001, queer filmmaker Bruce LaBruce (who had his own installation in one of the Coral Sand's 40 rooms), describes how the reputation of the LA hotel far proceeded the arrival of Davis's and co-curator Ron Athey's artistic vision. He writes, "The Coral Sands, which may be considered one step above (or perhaps below) a gay bathhouse, already has a reputation as being pretty sexually repulsive: once you've been buzzed in through the front reception area, you may witness be-towelled men wandering from room to room looking for cheap sex in the two-tiered interior while the smell of crack wafts from under closed doors. Naked men of questionable origin loll and gag in the courtyard sauna and pool." See Bruce LaBruce, "Blab: September 2001."

[98] For an overview of 2001 Outfest see Matthew Breen, "Festivals: LA's Coming Out; Outfest 2001 Lets it Show."

emphasis was firmly on goods and services"—Platinum Oasis was the brainchild of Davis and Athey, who were approached by then-Outfest Director Shari Frilot.

Frilot's career as a pioneering curator responsible for fostering many, many avenues for artists of color to show their films after the community's mistreatment by larger film festivals is charted in Roya Rastegar's chapter "A Cosmic Demonstration of Shari Frilot's Curational Practice," which appeared in the acclaimed anthology *Sisters in the Life* edited by Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz. Rastegar writes:

> Frilot's most enduring legacy at Outfest was carving a section specifically for experimental films called Platinum Oasis…In 2001 Platinum Oasis manifested in an all-night, one-time performance and installation exhibition, with the performance artists Ron Athy and Vaginal Davis as the king and queen curators and hosts of the event held at the Coral Sands Motel on Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. Frilot describes her motivations for conceptualizing and organizing the event and how they informed her curational philosophy: 'I wanted to go back to what queer was…[Platinum Oasis] lasted from the afternoon, and went overnight into the next morning—setting up a landscape for devious curiosity with no bounds. We wanted to create this environment, even if it was just for a little moment, where there was … a cornucopia of exploration and adventure alongside sexuality and art. (63)

Frilot, Davis, and Athey were aiming to recenter a space of encounter and interaction that was bound up in a long tradition that undergirds much of Davis's camp production as she says in the opening of the *Advocate*'s coverage of the event: "I like to bring together lowlifes and highlifes" (63). It is this nexus where the high and the low, art and sex, and event and myth meet that drove Davis's and Athey's vision of the installation. Yet, as with Davis's own contextualization of the origins of

her work and artistic practice, the Platinum Oasis event was also a response to a certain political sanitation mainstream notions of queerness had undergone at the millennium. Both Frilot and Athey echo the imperative that resounds throughout Davis's various artistic endeavors and her career, namely that queerness is bound up and inseparable from its most radical expressions. Frilot explains that she wanted the festival centered on "the stylistic innovations of the queer community," and Athey adds that they were aiming to present "a fearless queer culture, where you're not trying to whitewash the factions of queer culture that are self-destructive and nihilistic, hedonistic, and really philosophical (63)."

Descriptions of the event demonstrate the range of artistic and sexual expression that was barely contained in the 40-room motel. Davis is not only praised for her role as one of the event's organizers but for her role as the event's emcee. Sandra Ross, writing for *LA Weekly*, opens her article with an account of Davis as the hostess with the mostest while also providing a glimpse into the range of life experience that was reflected in the attendees of Platinum Oasis:

> Wearing nothing more than some strategically placed silver duct tape, Dr. Vaginal Davis welcomed voyeurs, swingers, freaks, humpy dorks and "sexual repulsives" to Platinum Oasis, an 18-hour performance-art extravaganza, co-curated with Ron Athey for Outfest. Reeking of poppers, Crisco and cheap air freshener, the two-story Coral Sands Motel was the site for Outfest's first performance-art program, and what a spectacularly ambitious debut it was: 40 rooms of multimedia art, installations and poolside performances — plus a whoop-it-up licentiousness that would have done Caligula proud. In fact, the Oasis brought together an assortment of art tarts, ex-cons, leather daddies, college students, ravers, bohos, and even a tourist or two who normally don't rub shoulders, never mind other body parts (some who took advantage of the "playrooms" questioned why no condoms were available).

Other descriptions of Platinum Oasis offered the event as a remedy to the boring state of queer culture and politics. Vincent Lopez writes:

> Boring was the last thing you could accuse Platinum Oasis of being. One walk down a hallway might provide a glimpse of people getting powdered and fitted into adult-sized diapers, a flash of queer filmmaker Bruce La Bruce making patrons a custom "snuff" film, or perhaps a little group of socialites enjoying a little sweetness in Jennifer Doyle's 'Cakes and Kisses' room" … Head down to the pool, and you can catch former actor Ann Magnuson giving an impromptu fashion show as Eminem's mom. Even musician Beck's mother, Bibbe Hansen, was there to show family movies. Queers, anarchists, artists, debutants, and Davis's favorite 'low-lifes' all bonded for a day and night under the stars.

Still other, less-mainstream publications were interested in documenting the gamut of sexual delights and pleasures that were to be found in Platinum Oasis. Charles Labelle writes:

> El Cholo, a beefy bull dyke from East LA sat outside no. 120 waiting for visitors. Inside on the bed were an array of humungous dildos, industrial-size pump-bottles of lubricant, enema bags, paddles, whips, titty-clips, ball-gags, ropes, cellophane, candles and a barbecue butane lighter. There was a nail salon and a massage parlor, a palm reader and psychic, a plushie room where you could get powdered and diapered, a sensory depravation room, an amateur porn room where you could participate or just pose with one of the male models, a mud room, surveillance room, a confessional, a hypnosis room, a 'Tekken Torture Tournament.'

Besides being the event's emcee, Davis had her own room at the inn, an interactive art installation titled "Topping the Bottom," which Bruce LaBruce described as a room in which "boys lie face down on the bed in her room and play with their assholes while people watch from the window."

While its more overt connections to camp are downplayed, though implied, it is easy to see how Platinum Oasis and all of the assortment of sexual flavors and artistic interaction it spawned reflects an attention to the mingling of sex, queerness, and art that spans the breadth of Davis's career. We see the practice of assembly that comprised Davis's work in her prolific career as a zinestress take on different but related significance in Platinum Oasis as the scale of her curational endeavors shifts from appropriative assembly that facilitates her play with media genre and form to bringing together a range of artists and performers to recenter the crucial importance of the sexual and gender margins to an ever-more-assimilated queerness. We can also see an essence of Fertile ensconced in the meeting of bodies and pleasures facilitated by Platinum Oasis where Fertile's excessive reproductivity is exchanged for the gratuitous, hedonistic interactions between creators of art and consumers. Platinum Oasis cultivated a 40-room spectacle where art, style, and aesthetics were the sites of innovation, exhibition, and interaction among its participants. Whether curating the 40-room event or her other projects undertaken over the course of her 40-year career, Davis has found different means of foregrounding the margins of society. Though the forces keeping the structures in place that account for the compromised notions of humanity comprising the lives of racialized subjects and those who live at the gender and sexual margins of society still persist, Davis's work—however small, and however ephemeral—continues to show how inequality can foster resistant art—art that insists on its presence and alterity. While Wynter's genres of the human,[99] which offer an alternative to the world of Man, are still out of reach, Weheliye calls attention to how this form of 'not here' or 'not yet' can "blind us to the sorrow songs, smooth glitches, miniscule

[99] Wynter defines her concept of genres of the human as follows, "We shall therefore need…to relativize the West's hitherto secular liberal monohumanist conception of our being human, its overrepresentation as the being of being human itself. We need to speak instead of our *genres of being human*. Once you redefine being human in hybrid *mythoi* and *bios* terms, and therefore in terms that draw attention to the relativity and original multiplicity of our *genres* of being human, all of a sudden what you begin to recognize is the central role that our discursive *formations*, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human." See, McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: Being as Human Praxis*, p. 31.

movements, shards of hope, scraps of food, and interrupted dreams of freedom that already swarm the ether of Man's legal apparatus, which does not mean that these formations annul the brutal validity of bare life, biopolitics, necropolitics, social death, or racializing assemblages but that Man's juridical machine can never exhaust the plentitude of our world" (131). Though acknowledging that these interruptions can't accomplish the work of undoing that might lead us forward to different narratives of humanity, Weheilye still finds value in efforts undertaken to show the richness of this world. What the scope of Davis's work presents—from her zines, to her films, to her organizing of art programs like (and beyond) Platinum Oasis—is the value of a curational practice, whether it's linked to camp, linked to queerness, or shows the potential for intersection(ality) amongst the two. While her early work called attention to the structures and stereotypes that compromised her humanity, Davis moved to using these same forces to facilitate her artistic production. Her place as an outsider was affirmed in her work through camp as a resistant mode and a method of curation, one that facilitated the efforts her later work undertook to document the multiplicity inherent in the punk community—where she saw real queerness espoused by outsiders and outcasts, the punks, and the freak mothers. Over the course of her career as artist, performer, and curator she's owned her own freakiness, represented the freak, and set the stage (or the mood) for others to get their freak on. Camp as it is tied to the curational methodology that underlies her work has been vital to her success and the longevity which continues to evolve.

Camp icons come and go, and I think it's clear to see that the career of Vaginal Davis has marked a turn in conceptions of camp and its means of communication. Make no mistake, this isn't your mother's (or, your uncle's) camp. Yet, I'd argue that Davis's highly ephemeral but significant camp contributions and strategies make her, unequivocally, Mother Camp.

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