For Whom the Belle Toils: Americana’s Chaste Love Affair with the Drag Queen

The year is 1995. Universal Pictures’ *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, the story of three New York drag queens who transform a small Nebraska town, closes its first two weekends as the number one film in the United States. *To Wong Foo* promises to be an even bigger success than 1994’s drag smash, *The Adventures of Pricilla, Queen of the Desert*. With telling ease the film’s three leading “ladies”—Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo—take their place alongside their co-star and queen of queens RuPaul in the promenade of fictional and actual drag queens strutting their way through the decade’s movie theaters, Broadway stages, television screens, radio stations, advertising campaigns, talk shows, benefit concerts, and best-seller lists.¹

The permeation of U.S. popular culture of the 1990s by the figure of the drag queen was interpreted by both liberal and conservative factions as evidence of the general public’s increasing acceptance of homosexuality. At that moment in U.S. cultural history, the drag queen played the role of homosexual informant, a gay ambassador believed to provide her straight audiences with access to, and information about, the newly visible “culture” of homosexuality. The straight public saw her, like other informant figures in contemporary U.S. culture, both as an observing subject and as an object of observation—a metonymic extension of homosexual culture who, by virtue of her manipulation of “that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation” (Butler, “Imitation” 28) and her underlying identity as a gay man, could serve as an exemplary embodiment and interpreter of homosexual difference.

The question that naturally comes to mind is, why? Why the sudden popularity and heterosexual appropriation of the drag queen, historically one of “homosexuality’s” most abjected representatives? Were drag queens simply the latest homo-chic novelty being poached by “hipster heterosexuals” (Kamp 78)? Or, had the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic and the commitment of lesbian and gay

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¹ A fascination with drag was not unique to mainstream popular culture. In the early 1990s drag (and cross-dressing in general) were receiving significant attention on a number of academic, political, and cultural fronts. For more on this see Alex Evans’s “How Homo Can Hollywood Be? Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo* to *Brokeback Mountain*.”
activists to a political agenda of visibility finally managed to establish homosexuality as a legitimate subject position? Not surprisingly, the most accurate answer is neither and both. The rise of the gay, male drag queen as a mediator and an embodiment of the relationships between heterosexual and homosexual communities in the United States in the 1990s cannot be adequately explained by either capitalistic appropriation or growing tolerance. Instead, the drag queen’s increased visibility and co-optation into the role of homosexual informant is best viewed as a multiply-determined and multiply-functioning phenomenon, occurring at a cultural moment in which, I argue, “the general public” was being forced to renegotiate its relationships with a “homosexual community” whose sexual difference had been newly configured as a visible, cultural difference by the representational struggles occasioned by the epidemic of AIDS.

In a society for which, as Eve Sedgwick describes, “‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ [are] conceptually inseparable from one another—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion” (*Epistemology* 73), any interaction with the figure of a homosexual informant raises pivotal epistemological and ontological questions: what type of “information” was exchanged in the transactions between the dominant culture and the drag queen? What were the perceived implications for the recipients of this information, given that its acquisition is constructed not only as a loss of ignorance, but also the loss of innocence? Conversely, what agency was available for any individual co-opted into the role of homosexual informant? Did the drag queen’s increased visibility indicate a destabilization of the hegemony of heterosexuality, or did it serve as evidence of the regime’s powers of recuperation?

Certainly, the assumptions regarding relations of identity, difference, and knowledge that organized mainstream U.S. culture’s use of drag queens as informant figures are not specific to the cultural arena of sexuality. The belief that select individuals can stand in for entire groups of people, and the presumption on the part of informees that all otherness can be comprehended using concepts and categories from their own world views permeate all cultural interactions structured by the trope of the informant/informee relationship. What is brought to the foreground, however, in the particular instance of heterosexual Americana’s co-optation of the figure of the drag queen in the 1990s, are the ways in which informant figures can be used by the dominant culture to disavow experiences and discourses not reconcilable with its “pre-existing representational and epistemological allegiances” (Richards 107).  

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2 For more on the informant/informee paradigm, see Weatherston’s “‘The True Words of Real People’: Documenting the Myth of the Real in Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los
As Marjorie Garber observes in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, through its use of drag queens as a means of negotiating a relationship with a group it historically abjectified, “it is as though the hegemonic cultural imaginary is saying to itself: if there is a difference (between gay and straight) we want to be able to see it, and if we see a difference (a man in women’s clothes) we want to be able to interpret it. In both cases the conflation is fueled by a desire to *tell the difference*, to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one’s own position in question” (130, takes in original). It is in relieving what Garber calls “the twin anxieties of visibility and difference,” that the figure of the drag queen as homosexual informant proved instrumental to the dominant culture. Before the 1990s, the drag queen was largely repudiated for her association with homosexuality; by the 1990s, I am arguing, that association became the source of her increased prominence.

Ultimately, I contend, an examination of the popularity of gay male drag queens within a context of the informant/informee relationship reveals that the cultural fantasy of increased acceptance of homosexual difference represented by the U.S. dominant culture’s apparent endorsement of drag queens in the 1990s was primarily an effort to avoid that difference by resignifying sexual orientations that subvert heteronormativity as visible, and therefore police-able, “performances” of gender-bending. Rather than making known previously repressed experiences, the figure of the drag queen as homosexual informant was, in fact, being used to reinforce dominant representations of sexual difference.

In my analysis of this phenomenon, I use the 1995 film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* as a means of illustrating the types of cultural and representational negotiations I assert were being mediated by means of the figure of the drag queen. Before turning to the film, however, it is necessary to understand why mainstream U.S. culture’s need for homosexual informants arose in the first place, and under what circumstances the general public gravitated towards drag queens as one of their informants of choice. It is necessary to return to the advent of the epidemic of AIDS.

II

In *Inventing AIDS*, cultural critic Cindy Patton asserts that it was “a devastating historical accident that HIV was first noticed among well-cared for gay men” (128). The devastation to which Patton refers occurred because, having entered public awareness as a “gay disease,” AIDS immediately became sub-

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Angeles, 1992”; “The Creative Deformation that is Plot: Arturo Islas, Cultural Authenticity, and Ethno/biography”; and “When Sleeping Dictionaries Awaken: The Re/turn of the Native Woman Informant.”
ject to “the peculiar relations of the gay community to the surrounding society which has always favored resounding silence as the most effective means of gay repression” (Denneny 38). Despite the gay liberation movements of the 1950s through the 1970s, for the vast majority of heterosexual U.S. citizens in the early 1980s homosexuality remained a love that should not speak its name. Similarly, the “homosexual” was still perceived as belonging to the domain of abject others against which the dominant culture defined itself, and thus to represent a socially unintelligible and unfeasible subject position (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* xi). The fact, therefore, that individuals occupying this abject, socially unintelligible subject position were dying at an inexplicable rate for an unknown reason was viewed by the dominant culture at best with indifference and at worst with the conviction that AIDS represented a divine retribution against a population intrinsically unworthy of existence. Traditional agencies of public health such as the federal government, the medical establishment, and local and national media virtually ignored the epidemic in its beginning stages.

Faced with this multi-fronted conspiracy of silence and disavowal, AIDS activists began to engage in a number of *representational* strategies intended to break through the cultural denial of the grievous injuries being wrought by the epidemic. The first strategy, most often associated with organizations like ACT UP (the “AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power,” founded in 1987), and encapsulated by the formulation “Silence = Death,” involved the persistent and public confrontation of individuals and organizations deemed responsible for the AIDS crisis. Activists staged group “die-ins” and demonstrations on Wall Street, at the White House, on the steps of health insurance companies, and in public museums and churches with the intention of raising public and media awareness of the public policies that were denying medical treatment and legal protection to people with AIDS, and shocking the so-called “general public” out of its complacency and into direct action.

At the same time, however, that groups like ACT UP were engaging in public, theatrical expressions of political rage (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 233), other AIDS activists, seeking private monies to compensate for the lack of federal funding, were attempting to “repackage” AIDS and PWAs into something less distasteful and, therefore, more easily supported by the U.S. public (Harris 223). In order to overcome the belief that homosexual men with AIDS somehow deserved to become ill and die because of their own irresponsible and perverse sexual practices, these AIDS activists began generating what Daniel Harris calls a “countericonography” of the person with AIDS as an innocent, suffering victim of a tragic disease (224-5).

One of the most effective ways AIDS activists were able to sell AIDS as an acceptable social cause was by turning for help to Hollywood. Frequently, that help took the form of celebrity-hosted fashion shows, rock concerts, and
star-studded AIDS benefits. It was through media coverage of these celebrity benefits that many U.S. citizens received their first look at “real” drag queens, who often provided the entertainment at such fund raisers, a situation which led to a strange conflation in the public mind of glamour drag, homosexuality, AIDS, and Hollywood philanthropy.

The radical nature of both the strategies of public confrontation and of countericonography is only apparent when one remembers that before the AIDS epidemic representations of homosexuality in the dominant cultural realm were often highly coded, and thus ostensibly invisible to, or at least capable of being ignored by, the general public. As D.A. Miller notes, “homosexuality offered not just the most prominent—it offered the only subject matter whose representation in U.S. mass culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied” (123).

Thus, the cultural strategies employed by AIDS activists in order to break through the public denial of the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic can be interpreted as their blatant refusal to continue to be relegated to the realm of cultural illegibility or connotation. Their direct interventions into the dominant culture’s apparatus of sexual representation were made with the intention of generating alternate and empowering definitions, or, denotations of homosexuality and AIDS. The end result of these interventions was that “homosexuality” became newly and undeniably visible within the United States’ cultural consciousness as a distinctly representational phenomenon.3

This is not to say, however, that the newly prominent culture of homosexuality was sweepingly embraced. The increased visibility of homosexuality occasioned by the representational struggles of the AIDS epidemic was accompanied by a proportional increase in overt homophobia and violent hate crimes. In response, some of the organizations and communities galvanized by the epidemic shifted their focus from AIDS itself to combating the outbreaks of public homophobia the epidemic seemed to have sanctioned. Queer Nation, 4

3 Another example of the representational nature of the struggles taking place over homosexuality at this time can be seen in the 1993 “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” policy. Under this policy, an individual could no longer be discharged from service in the American armed forces simply for being bisexual or homosexual—if they remained closeted. However, if a service member engaged in homosexual acts or undeniably demonstrated his or her “propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts” (e.g., by declaring one’s self gay, referring to one’s same sex partner, marrying or attempting to marry someone of the same sex, etc.) he or she could still be discharged (10 U.S.C. § 654). As then Attorney General Janet Reno emphasized in a July 19, 1993 memorandum to President Clinton, the policy drew a new distinction between “status” and “conduct” and adopted a new position that an “unmanifested orientation” could no longer be grounds for removal from service. In this ironically performative model of homosexuality, the punishable offenses were those of disclosure, rather than identity.
originally an off-shoot of the New York chapter of ACT UP, for example, organized same-sex “kiss-ins” and engaged in displays of drag and other forms of gender bending in public spaces that were traditionally coded as strictly heterosexual such as shopping malls. On other fronts, gays, lesbians, and queers sought to gain protection from homophobic violence and discrimination by legally establishing homosexuals as a minority group worthy of the same civil rights protections as other minorities. This approach was often met with widespread and vocal resistance by religious and conservative groups.

What is interesting to note about the legal struggles pitting lesbian, gay, and queer civil rights activists against religious and conservative groups is that, like the representational struggles associated with AIDS, these battles were most accurately understood as contests over “the grammar of identity construction” (Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” 148). Instead of arguing over the right of homosexuals to exist, homosexual and anti-homosexual agendas alike shared in a representational struggle over the public meaning of “homosexuality.” Sexual orientation had become a distinctly semiological battleground.

The cultural “flip-side” of the New Right’s backlash against homosexuality’s increased visibility was a widespread appropriation and commodification of the “signs” of homosexual difference by the dominant/heterosexual culture. This took place on two levels, the first of which was the increased circulation of what were seen as cultural signifiers of “gayness” and “lesbianism” within U.S. mass culture. This was the period in which lesbian chic became all the rage, inspiring Vogue magazine to declare lesbians “the hula-hoops of the 1990s.” Both lesbian and gay characters began making regular appearances on television sit-coms and night time dramas such as Roseanne, Melrose Place, and L.A. Law, while the so-called emblems of the urban “gay lifestyle” such as Doc Martins and house music lost their underground status and proliferated to the point of cultural saturation. The early 1990s was also the period in which drag queens became visible not only at homosexually-coded events such as AIDS benefits and lesbian and gay pride parades, but also in mainstream advertising campaigns and fashion, and in Broadway shows and mainstream films.

Because homosexual difference was being reconfigured as a visible, representational, and cultural difference, it had become available to a western habit of commodifying cultural otherness that stretches from the collection of “primitive” artifacts by colonizers to the proliferation of ethnic restaurants (hooks 33). Gays, lesbians, and queers came to be defined specifically by, and as a set of visible, representational codes capable of both destabilizing and being recuperated by the dominant culture. Equally importantly, an individual’s apparent fluency in the codes and signs of homosexuality—evaluated separately from his or her sexual orientation—became equated with his or her possession of authentic knowledge of homosexual difference.

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This situation led to a second type of commodification: the appropriation of homosexual/queer identity itself, or, the rise of the “queer straight.” Some individuals who sexually self-identified as heterosexuals, publicly and politically passed as “queer” by adopting the clothing styles of urban gays and lesbians, attending ACT UP and Queer Nation rallies, and “carefully maneuver[ing] their rhetoric toward ambiguities of desire and display, leaving aside questions of the private” (Powers 75). While homo-chic had been around “[a]s long as there has been an alternative gay culture from which straight people could poach things,” (Kamp 78) what was new about this particular version was the poaching of homosexual identity and authority themselves.

For some queer straights, the taking on of a queer public persona represented a genuine affiliation with and commitment to sexually unoppressive culture and politics; with others, however, it carried echoes of the “white Negro” phenomenon of the 1950s, “when bohemians thought they’d conquered racism by identifying African Americans as more virile and expressive of their noble savagery.” The lesbian and gay chic of the 1990s, Powers asserts, mirrored this reverse racism by “ascrib[ing] tempting attributes such as hot sexuality, tragic courage, and devastating wit to homosexuals—traits that have been historically linked to inferiority and exclusion” (77).

This, then, was the cultural and political context in which the rise of the drag queen as a homosexual informant must be understood, a context in which homosexual difference was being reduced to and renegotiated as a visible, representational difference; in which a newly coalesced culture of homosexuality was gaining acceptance and being commodified in some cultural arenas; and in which many homosexuals themselves were experiencing a backlash of political and legal opposition from those groups and individuals who wanted to return them to a state of abject invisibility. The movement of homosexuality out of the realm of ontological dispute and into the arena of representational negotiation represented a qualitatively new stage in the definitional struggles over homosexuality. It also represented a new stage in the general public’s relationship to homosexual difference. And when, as an identity group, homosexuals became for the majority of the U.S. general public unavoidable, that public reached for the paradigm with which it negotiates its relations with all minority groups: the figure of the informant.

III

In order better to illustrate the types of negotiations and anxieties I assert were underlying the dominant culture’s construction of the drag queen as a homosexual informant, I now want to turn to the 1995 film To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar. Written by Douglas Carter Beane, produced by Stephen Spielberg, and directed by Beeban Kidron, To Wong Foo follows its
three drag queen protagonists as they travel from New York City to Hollywood in order to compete for the title “Drag Queen of America.” When their 1967 convertible Cadillac breaks down in the middle of Nebraska, Vida Boheme (Patrick Swayze), Noxeema Jackson (Wesley Snipes), and “drag princess” Chi-Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo) find themselves stranded for the weekend in Snydersville, population 200—a town as gray and miserable as any found in the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Through a combination of feminine consciousness-raising and flashy accessories, the trio overcome adversity, transform the lives of Snydersville’s inhabitants, and finish off their journey with Chi-Chi being crowned Miss Drag Queen U.S.A. by the film’s patron saint, Julie Newmar.

At first blush, a film which showcased heterosexual actors and is better described as a fairy tale than as a documentary might seem an odd means through which to discuss the dominant culture’s use of drag queens to negotiate homosexual difference. However, two characteristics of the film make it a uniquely appropriate vehicle for such an examination. The first is *To Wong Foo*’s presentation and mainstream audiences’ acceptance of Swayze’s, Snipes’s, and Leguizamo’s characters as openly-gay drag queens rather than as heterosexual male characters dressing as women [as was the case in films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), or *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993)]. The second characteristic is the film’s removal of “drag” and the complex relationships between drag and homosexuality from any material, political, or social context. Combined, these features permit the type of collective fantasies and fears being projected by the U.S. dominant culture onto the figure of the drag queen in the 1990s to be read all the more clearly.4

In this sense, to recall Cindy Patton, *To Wong Foo* is most usefully read as an entry into the contest over the grammar and meaning of the signifier “homosexual” that was taking (and continues to take) place in mainstream U.S. culture. Through its on-going premise of teaching heterosexual viewers the codes of homosexual difference, *To Wong Foo* replaces what Amy Robinson calls “the uncertain pleasures of one relation to the ‘real’” (in this case, the materiality of sexual acts) with the erotic pleasures of “decoding” (61) the signs of

4 *To Wong Foo*’s phantasmagorical depictions of relations of homosexuality, heterosexuality, and gender (and of race, class, and religion) have been the subject of a number of critical analyses. In “Drag Queen as Angel: Transformation and Transcendence in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*” (1996) Joyce Hammond looks at the film’s depiction of the drag queen as “angelic messenger, guardian, and miracle worker” (106). Mary Kirk’s “Kind of a Drag: Gender, Race, and Ambivalence in *The Birdcage* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!*” (2004) and Kathryn Kane’s “Passing as Queer and Racing toward Whiteness: *To Wong Foo, Thanks But No Thanks*” (2005) focus on the film’s reinscriptions of racial as well sexual and gendered hierarchies. Alex Evans’s “How Homo Can Hollywood Be?: Remaking Queer Authenticity from *To Wong Foo* to *Brokeback Mountain*” (2009) examines the film from the contradictory perspectives of gay subcultural spectatorship.
homosexuality. This substitution of semiology for the materiality of sexual acts, and gender performance for the performativity of sexual identity, combined with the film’s reproduction of the dominant culture’s use of the figure of the drag queen as an embodiment and interpreter of homosexual difference, results in a definition of homosexuality that conflates sexual otherness with visible and therefore police-able “performances” of gender-bending.\(^5\) What becomes evident in a close analysis of *To Wong Foo* is that this conflation provides the heterosexual viewer with a way seemingly to know and to consume “homosexual difference” while at the same time maintaining the hierarchical separation between heterosexuality and homosexuality such a knowledge might endanger.

This process of conflation, substitution, and consumption of gender-manipulation-as-homosexual-difference begins in the very first frames of the movie, which open with the sound of a male voice crooning in the shower, “It’s a man’s world, it’s a man’s world, but it wouldn’t be nothing without a woman or a girl.” As a well-muscled man steps out into the light and pads into a dark hallway, we see a bare chest, washboard abs, and a somewhat incongruous glimpse (so quick we are likely to miss it) of a hairless underarm. When the man sits down in front of a large mirror, he is revealed to be Patrick Swayze, the familiar star of heterosexual romances such as *Dirty Dancing* (1988) and *Ghost* (1990). The gaze of the camera and viewer align with Swayze’s as we look at him looking at himself in the mirror, heavy-browed and frowning, touching up a few missed shaving spots on his face. He heaves a sigh and then lowers his head to put on a headband. When he lifts his head his expression is completely altered: brows are lifted, a slight smile crosses his lips and, in our first indication we might be in for something other than dirty dancing, he gives the famous line from *Gypsy*, “Ready or not, here comes Mama!”

At this point in the film the viewer is treated to a visually and aurally stunning musical sequence detailing Swayze’s and Snipe’s transformations into “Miss Vida Boheme” and “Miss Noxeema Jackson,” respectively. Cutting back and forth between images of Vida and Noxeema, the camera gives us voyeuristic close-ups of eyes being outlined and lashed, lips being moistly painted, and black stockings being pulled up over well-shaped legs. By showing the viewer Swayze’s and Snipes’s private transformations into Vida and Noxeema, the camera suggests it is revealing the behind-the-scenes machinery enabling male bodies to perform/manufacture female gender: the viewer watches Noxeema pull on the padded fanny girdle and insert the falsies into her red bustier, watches Vida adjust her cleavage, and sees the two pose and practice their gestures and presentation in the mirrors.

Although Swayze and Snipes offer carefully crafted versions of glamour drag,

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\(^5\) For more on *To Wong Foo*’s conflation of sexuality and gender see Kane pars. 27-31.
their well-muscled physiques would make it virtually impossible for either to “pass” as women in real life.\(^6\) However, rather than detracting from their authenticity as drag queens, their overt masculinity paradoxically makes their transformation into “women” seem all the more impressive and serves to increase their authority, as does their joint crowning as New York City’s “Drag Queen(s) of the Year” by a beautiful and sequined RuPaul (a gay, male drag queen familiar to most mainstream audience members) playing the character of last year’s winner, Miss Rachel Tension.\(^7\) RuPaul/Rachel Tension’s campy jokes, sexual innuendos, and pointed appreciation of the men in leather and chains surrounding her reinforce the link in the viewers’ minds between homosexuality and drag.

The movie audience’s supposed tutorial in the codes of homosexuality continues when Vida and Noxeema decide to take Chi-Chi Rodriguez (a less-than-glamorous fellow contestant trying to escape a life of prostitution) with them on their trip to Hollywood. In order to accommodate their increased number, Noxeema and Vida trade in their airline tickets for a used 1967 Cadillac convertible which serves both as transportation and as a type of mobile drag classroom for Chi-Chi and the heterosexual viewer. For, it is by means of Chi-Chi’s apprenticeship that the audience is initiated into the secrets of being a drag queen and surviving as a sexual and gender outsider in a heterosexual world. For example, en route to California Noxeema clarifies for Chi-Chi/the viewer the differences between a transvestite: “when a straight man puts on a dress and gets his sexual kicks,” a transsexual: “when a man is a woman trapped in a man’s body and has a little operation,” and a drag queen: “when a gay man has way too much fashion sense for one gender.”

By resignifying gay drag as a matter of keen fashion sense, To Wong Foo offers a version of homosexuality that is as much a function of style and attitude as it is of acts and orientations, and that is, therefore, a difference that can be absorbed and reproduced. Chi-Chi, we learn, is not a drag queen; her overt sexuality and lack of gender finesse earn her the designation “drag princess.” When Chi-Chi makes a quip about preferring to be a young princess than an old queen, Noxeema rebukes her, “Does everything have to be a joke with you? This

\(^6\) For an illuminating discussion of the ways in which To Wong Foo both elides and reinforces traditional distinctions between drag queens and passing transsexuals, see Kirk 172-4.

\(^7\) Kathryn Kane has labeled “performance[s] of homosexuality” by people who at the same time establish their identities as heterosexuals “queerface,” noting their reliance on the “careful avoidance of enacting same sex sexual contact, lest a performer risk damaging his/her claim to masquerade” (par. 11). Although in her article Kane focuses on Swayze’s and Snipes’s queerface performances, I am more interested in the townspeople’s (and, by means of their proxy, To Wong Foo’s heterosexual viewers’) “performances.”

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is not a masquerade; this is real life! There are steps to becoming a queen!” In fact, it turns there are four steps one must undergo in order to achieve “the outrageous outlook and indomitable spirit” of full-fledged drag queens. Chi-Chi, through her acceptance of her apprentice status, has mastered the first: “let good thoughts be your sword and shield.”

The second step to being a drag queen, “ignoring adversity,” consists mainly of refusing the abject, invisible status and social limitations the dominant culture places on gender and sexual outsiders. Ignoring adversity, however, becomes more difficult for the trio when they encounter the red-necked Sheriff Dullard—“Dollard” if one accepts the sheriff’s insistence upon a misprinted name tag. After pulling the trio over for a missing taillight, Dullard attempts to “get a little sugar” from Vida and, in the resulting scuffle, is knocked unconscious. Fearing they’ve killed him, Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi flee the scene, but not before Vida, in true fairy tale fashion, loses one of her shoes. Sheriff Dullard’s subsequent comic search for the “perverts” that humiliated him allows the film to address a veritable showcase of homophobic assumptions. In order to aid his search, Dullard draws up a list of “places for homos” and proceeds to inspect flower shops, ballet schools, hair salons, antique stores, and “places for brunch.” When he can’t find Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi in any of these stereotypical venues, he attempts to drown his sorrows in a bar, drunkenly describing, in the best manner of repressed homosexual desire, his disgust for “Manly hands touching swirls of chest hair. An occasional whiff of a rugged aftershave. Their low, baritone voices sighing, grunting.”

As a comic character, Sheriff Dullard represents one aspect of a heterosexuality unenlightened about/by homosexual difference; in their dreary, dysfunctional existences, the inhabitants of Snyder’sville represent a range of others. Forced by car trouble to spend the weekend in Snyder’sville, Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi discover most if not all of the town’s citizens are suffering from one or more failings of heterosexuality. Carol Ann (Stockard Channing), the woman who runs the hotel in which they are staying, is regularly beaten by her husband, Virgil (Arliss Howard); Bobby Lee (Jennifer Milmore), one of Carol Ann and Virgil’s daughters is in love with Bobby Ray (Jason London) who doesn’t even know she exists; and Clara (Alice Drummond), who used to help run the town’s movie house but who went crazy when her husband lost the theater and ran off with another woman. Added to a roving gang of teenage boys who harass the townspeople and threaten Chi-Chi with gang-rape, these characters create the image of a town suffering from complete heterosexual dysfunction. The only relatively functional people in Snyder’sville are Beatrice (Blythe Danner) who acts as a small-town informant for the drag queens, and Jimmy Joe (Mike Hodge) an African American gentleman who runs the town cafe whom Beatrice thinks is “the nicest colored man you’d ever want to meet.” But even Beatrice and Jimmy...
Joe are kept separate by a still-existing color line. Nobody, apparently, recognizes the fact that Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi are drag queens; instead the townspeople attribute their peculiarities to the fact that they are “career girls” from New York City. During the queens’ stay, therefore, there is always the background fear that the townspeople will discover that the trio are really “gay men in dresses,” a fear to which Beane puts much comic use.

Until now, the viewer presumably has been learning about the codes of homosexual difference by watching Chi-Chi make her way through the four steps to becoming a full-fledged drag queen. When the trio enters Snydersville, however, it becomes apparent that gaining fluency in what the movie represents as the signs of homosexuality is not contingent upon one being a gay man. Building on the premise begun with the casting of heterosexuals Swayze, Snipes, and Leguizamo as gay male drag queens, the film goes on to affirm that most, if not all heterosexuals—even naïve, small-town heterosexuals such as the inhabitants of Snydersville—can come to know and master the codes of “homosexual culture.” This being the case, it is only logical for the epistemologically superior viewer to assume he or she must also be able to master those codes.

The majority of the rest of To Wong Foo chronicles the healing metamorphoses brought about as the inhabitants of Snydersville seemingly gain the knowledge about homosexual culture and difference for which the drag queens willingly serve as conduits. In addition to more general transformations such as adding the theme of “Red and Wild” to the annual strawberry festival, organizing a “day with the girls” in which the trio gives the townswomen full makeovers, and teaching the gang of teenage boys the proper manners to use when interacting with “ladies,” each of the three drag queens also specially befriends one of the town’s citizens. Noxeema helps Clara, the town crazy woman, come out of her shell by appealing to their shared love of Hollywood actresses of yore. Vida, the most maternal of the trio, develops a special bond with the abused Carol Ann and punches Virgil out when he beats Carol Ann one too many times. Chi-Chi’s relationship to the townspeople appears to be a bit more complicated. Throughout the film she has been portrayed as the most overtly sexual of the three drag queens, using her feminine wiles to gain them admittance to hotels and to get a ride into Snydersville when their car breaks down. Bobby Ray, the young man who picks them up, is instantly smitten with Chi-Chi, telling her she is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen and asking her to accompany him to the Strawberry Social—much to the dismay of Bobby Lee, the local girl who is secretly in love with him. Informed by Vida and Noxeema that dating Bobby Ray is “out of the question,” Chi-Chi asks “Why?” Don’t she and Bobby Ray have a lot in common? “Oh yes,” Noxeema replies “like for starters, the same business between your legs!” “You are deceiving that child,” Vida adds, “That boy does not know which end is up, and you know for a fact that Miss Bobby Lee is in love

Raymond Weatherston
with him!” When Chi-Chi responds with a resounding so-what, Vida snaps, “There are union rules by which we operate, sweetheart!” Drag queen union rules, it is intimated, prohibit gay men from seducing straight boys away from the straight “real girls” who love them.

When Chi-Chi returns to Bobby Ray she tells him, “You know, my whole life I’ve, I’ve always wanted someone who would understand how I felt inside; someone who would hold me for always. Then you showed up. You are it. You make me feel like the most perfect girl.” “I don’t have to do that,” Bobby Ray shyly replies, “you are the perfect girl . . . you’re beautiful, you’ve got class . . . you’d never lie to me, you know, you’d never keep a secret from me.” “If you really loved someone,” Chi-Chi asks, “you could keep one big secret from them, verdad?” “No,” asserts Bobby Ray, “I really feel that if you love somebody with all your heart, then you could never keep a secret from them.” “You could never even sit on one little teeny lie?” Chi-Chi asks hopefully. “No,” he repeats, “no matter how big or how small.” The size and nature of Chi-Chi’s “lie” is left ambiguous: is it the fact that she is a biological male, that “she” has a penis? Is it that she is a drag queen? Or is it that she is gay? Regardless, in good informant fashion, Chi-Chi decides she cannot tell a lie, and returns Bobby Ray to Bobby Lee. For this “generous” act she is congratulated by Vida and Noxeema for successfully completing step three of becoming a drag queen: “Abiding by the rules of love.”

Later that night, after her own make-over, a newly-glamorous Bobby Lee captures Bobby Ray’s heart at the pre-Strawberry Festival dance. As the couple begins waltzing to the strains of Johnny Mathis’s “Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me,” they are joined by the other citizens of Snydersville who pair off with the agreeable symmetry of a Shakespearian marriage plot: African American Jimmy Joe approaches the Anglo Beatrice saying, “Miss Beatrice, I’ve been waiting twenty-three years to ask this: may I have this dance?”; the teenage thugs, transformed into well-mannered escorts, twirl the women of the town in graceful glides around the open-air dance floor. Under the benevolent gaze of the three queens who stare down dreamily on the scene from the hotel balcony, heterosexuals and heterosexuality are restored to their healthy, omnipotent state. “You know pumpkins,” Vida coos to Noxeema and Chi-Chi, “sometimes it just takes a fairy.”

The film’s depiction of heterosexual dysfunction being “cured” by means of contact with and participation in homosexual difference continues the next day when Carol Ann, having taken courage from Vida’s thrashing of the abusive Virgil, attempts to fix the queens’ Cadillac. Turning to Vida, Carol Ann tells her, “You know, I wouldn’t be lying, if were to say that I was I am really going to miss you. I mean, I think it’s really important for a woman to have lady-friends.” Hesitantly Vida replies, “Oh, Carol Ann, if we’re going to be friends, there really is something I should tell you——” “Adam’s apple?” Carol Ann interrupts. “What?” sputters Vida. “Adam’s apple,” Carol Ann continues, “women don’t have Adam’s
apples; only men have Adam’s apples. On the first night that you came to town I noticed you had yourself an Adam’s apple.” “Then, then you know?” asks Vida incredulously. “I know,” Carol Ann answers slowly, “that I’m very fortunate to have myself a lady friend who just happens to have an Adam’s apple.” At this point, the drag queens’ car roars to life, as if in approval of this moment of truth in Carol Ann and Vida’s relationship.

Like Noxeema’s definition of a drag queen as a gay man with too much fashion sense for one gender, Carol Ann’s encapsulation of Vida’s identity as gay male cross dresser in the visible gender sign of an “Adam’s apple” effectively resignifies that identity as a function of gender-bending that is immediately recognizable to any individual who “knows the code.” Similarly, by describing Vida as “a lady friend who just happens to have an Adam’s apple” Carol Ann skirts a long tradition of relationships between heterosexual women and homosexual men in favor of a relationship with Vida that can be described in heteronormative terms. Paradoxically, the moment of “truth” in Vida and Carol Ann’s relationship is the same moment in the movie in which homosexuality re-submerges as the love that cannot speak its name.

In scenes like this which conflate sexual and gender outsiderhood, To Wong Foo constructs a version of homosexual difference that is securely recognizable by heterosexuals in its visible otherness, and in which heterosexuals can participate without threatening the hierarchical and binary separation between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The alarming implications of this resignification of homosexuality and conflation of sexual and gender otherness become clear in the movie’s climactic confrontation between Sheriff Dullard and the three drag queens. Having been tipped off regarding the drag queens’ whereabouts by Carol Ann’s husband, Virgil, Sheriff Dullard pulls into Snydersville just as the townspeople and drag queens are putting the finishing touches on their outfits for the Strawberry festival. Lights flashing and loudspeaker blaring, the sheriff begins circling the town, bellowing, “I know them drag queens is here, I’m not leaving this town without them. None of you good people need get involved.” As the sheriff continues his tirade, the camera cuts to the confused faces of the townspeople and frightened countenances of Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi. “Now all I want is them drag queens,” he shouts, “Don’t protect these freaks! I know they’re hiding here—these weirdos coming in here, these boys in dresses—corrupting you with their way of life, changing the way things have always been. I really don’t think that’s what you want!” Brandishing the high-heeled pump Vida dropped behind, he threatens, “Whoever belongs to this shoe, come forward now!”

At that moment, a tall figure in a scarlet wedding gown and long, red veil strides out of the hotel and begins making its way across the dusty street towards the sheriff. In the background, the film’s score, which has been building
to a fevered pitch of anxiety, crescendos just as Virgil comes screeching up in his pickup truck and the armed Sheriff reaches the figure. Slowly, the figure lifts up the long, red veil to reveal the dramatically made-up face of Carol Ann. “I believe that shoe is mine,” she drawls. Confused, the sheriff stammers, “You’re not the one!” Virgil echoes his disbelief, “She’s not the one!” “Back off, Virgil,” Carol Ann snaps, then turning back the Sheriff, she proudly asserts, “I am a drag queen.” Furious, the Sheriff tries to regain control of the situation: “Now I know there’s drag queens in this town, and I ain’t leaving until they get out here!” In response, the tiny Clara strides up to the sheriff and asks him, “Can I have my shoe, please?” “You’re a drag queen?” Sheriff Dullard asks incredulously. “Nothing this pretty could be real,” she glibly tosses back. One by one the citizens of Snydersville gang up on the Sheriff taunting him: “Want to touch my boa?” “I’m a drag queen, too,” “I guess that makes me a drag king,” “What are you so afraid of?” until their voices blend into a sassy snap chorus that drives him stammering and sputtering away. By means of the towns peoples’ united reproduction of Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi’s “outrageous outlook and indomitable spirit,” To Wong Foo portrays them as having mastered the codes of homosexual culture, and thus as having gained the attributes of “hot sexuality, tragic courage, and devastating wit” that enable them to triumph over Sheriff Dullard and save Vida, Noxeema, and Chi-Chi from homophobic peril.

Or, rather, is it the drag queens who have saved them—and the film’s heterosexual viewers—from the perils of homosexuality? Despite the celebratory tone of To Wong Foo and of the mainstream public’s fascination with drag, it raises some very troubling questions: If homosexual identity is defined primarily as a set of representational codes—codes which conflate sexual and gender otherness and that anyone can “perform”—what happens to the materiality of sex, desire, and oppression? If Patrick Swayze, or the heterosexual viewer of To Wong Foo, or any “open-minded” straight person can come to master and reproduce the codes of homosexual difference, does not this render homosexual subjects themselves frighteningly unnecessary? And how can this be seen as a subversion of the dominant, heteronormative model of sexuality in which heterosexuality is the original and homosexuality some faulty derivative? Rather than making known previously repressed experiences, was the figure of the drag queen as a homosexual informant not, in fact, being used by the dominant culture as a means to avoid knowledge of those very experiences?

Writing with Michael Moon about the late drag film star Divine, Eve Sedgwick observes that one of the most striking aspects of the 1990s popular and academic cross-dressing mania of which To Wong Foo is a part is this very type of fetishistic “erasure” of the connection between drag and homosexuality:
I think they [critics] think they are talking about homosexuality. After all, “everyone already knows” that cross-dressing usually at least alludes to homosexuality; “everyone already knows” that the surplus charge of recognition, laughter, glamour, heightened sexiness around this topic comes from its unspecified proximity to an exciting and furiously stigmatized social field. Critics may well feel that the rubric “cross-dressing” gives them, too, a way of tapping into this shared knowingness without having to name its subject. (221-2)

Although Sedgwick was referring specifically to gender theorists, her comments, I assert, are equally applicable to mainstream U.S. culture in the late 1990s. It is the unspecified, and therefore malleable, “proximity” of drag and homosexuality that allowed the same general public that was willing to consume the energies and cultural and political signs of the newly visible identity group of homosexuality, to determinedly avoid the historical, material, and sexual specificities of that pluralistic identity as well as the complexity of the relationships between homosexuality and drag. In effect, it allowed them—in the most ironic sense of the term—to “stonewall” against the threat to heteronormativity that the increased visibility of homosexuality brought about by the AIDS epidemic represented. The figure of the drag queen as homosexual informant became a means through which knowledge of homosexuality, ultimately, was avoided.

Works Cited


10 USC. Sec 654. 1993.


