Title

Performing Identity in the Age of Imposture: Articulations of Sexual Difference in U.S.-American Music and Mass Entertainment, 1865—1900

Author

Ace, James R.

Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Performing Identity in the Age of Imposture:
Articulations of Sexual Difference in U.S.-American Music and Mass Entertainment, 1865–1900

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Musicology

by

James R. Ace

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Identity in the Age of Imposture:

Articulations of Sexual Difference in U.S.-American Music

and Mass Entertainment, 1865–1900

by

James R. Ace

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Mitchell Bryan Morris, Chair

The late nineteenth century saw the publication of the first medical texts in western Europe that defined a condition known as *inversion*—a concept that set the precedent for modern categories such as *homosexual* and *transgender*. However, prior to their official medicalization, ideas about race, sex, and sexuality that informed twentieth-century identity constructions were already circulating in mass culture and musical entertainment. This dissertation investigates musical, sonic, and performative means through which gendered and sexual difference were articulated in nineteenth-century U.S.-American culture. I argue that musical and theatrical performance are not merely sites where identities are represented; rather, performance plays a key role in the formation and maintenance of those identities.

Chapter 1 deals with staged impersonation—encompassing racial and ethnic impersonation, as well as female and male impersonation in which both actors and characters are white. By contextualizing impersonation within a) a broader cultural zeitgeist of illusion, hoaxing, and curiosity, b) contemporary racial ideologies, and c) contemporary journalism about cross-dressing people off the stage, I argue that this genre instructed audiences to understand cross-dressing, passing, or otherwise gender nonconforming people to be impersonating something they were not. Chapter 2 examines a repertoire of popular songs that depict Oscar Wilde and the aesthetic movement. Through practice-based musical performance and analysis of physical gestures, I argue that these songs articulated ideas about Wilde's sexual otherness that could not be expressed in print. Chapter 3 looks at the writings and musicking of an individual, Ralph Werther-Jennie June, who identified h/imself as an androgyne, or fairie. I explore musical and performative means through which Werther-June articulates h/is experience of sexual difference, and also navigates through states of extreme abjection. I conclude with a discussion of Todd Haynes' 1998 film, *Velvet Goldmine*, which demonstrates the persisting centrality of performative tropes and techniques such as innuendo, camp, and impersonation to queer expression, representation, and reception in U.S.-American culture—and displays the tendency of prevailing queer narratives to be about both white people and imposture, despite those narratives being built upon racialized rubrics, and cultural work done by people of color.

The dissertation of James R. Ace is approved.

Raymond L. Knapp

Shana L. Redmond

Stephan Pennington

Mitchell Bryan Morris, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the spirit of spectacle and aesthetic excess, my acknowledgments will be lengthy. Thank you first and foremost to my committee: Mitchell Morris, Raymond Knapp, Shana Redmond, and Stephan Pennington. I feel truly honored to have had the opportunity to work with the four of you, and am beyond grateful for all that you have taught and modeled for me in every capacity: as scholars, as educators, and as people. So many of my friends and colleagues at UCLA helped to make this project possible. Erin Fitzpatrick, Hyeonjin Park, and Jordan Hugh Sam provided input that was crucial in shaping this dissertation, and made me laugh at critical junctures. Erin—where does one begin after being in the trenches (almost literally) with someone for so many years? This won't mean much to you, but the line that often comes to mind is: "I'm glad to be with you, Samwise Gamgee. Here, at the end of all things." I am especially indebted to Jordan (my partner in practice-based research!) for coining the phrase "performing identity," which became so central to the way I conceptualized this project as a whole. I would not have made it through without Alex Hallenbeck, Alex Moore, Kerry Brunson, Tom Hanslowe, and Wade Dean, who never fail to put me in good spirits (and often indulge me in talking about Led Zeppelin at great length).

Parts of this research were carried out thanks to funding through UCLA Graduate Division's Graduate Research Mentorship fellowship (2020–21). I was also fortunate to participate in UCLA's Collegium of University Teaching Fellows program (2021–22), through which I had the opportunity to design an undergraduate seminar based on my research, "Sound as Gender Technique: Music and Transsubjectivity." My sincere gratitude goes out to all of my students in that seminar, for offering such thoughtful and creative insights into these materials. I have presented portions of this research, in various stages, at the annual meeting of the American

Musicological Society, the Musical Theater Forum at the Lincoln Center in New York, the AMS: Pacific-Southwest Chapter Meeting, and as a lecture in UCLA's undergraduate course, *LGBTQ Perspectives in Popular Music*. This project began as my master's thesis at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Patrick Warfield, to whom I am still grateful every day for his exceptional skills as a mentor and editor.

Thank you to Joy Shannon, for our wonderful conversations about Oscar Wilde and aestheticism under your virtuoso needle. I am so grateful to my overseas friends, Joanna Barrett, Rayarthur Wild, and Wytse Wilhelm, for offering your generous feedback at various stages of this project, and for always reminding me why I love writing. Thank you to my martial arts family—Cara Batema, Christian and Jacqui Medina, Ellie Wan, and Micky and Leo Obradovic—for cheering me on (and beating the crap out of me) throughout so much of this process. Special thanks to Cara for arranging Jennie June's songs for me; you spared me hours (honestly, probably days) of agony. Thank you to my Maryland folks: to the inimitable Liz Massey for everything you have taught me since our very first shared TA assignment; to Donnie Scally for the many exchanged ideas and punches; and to Alice Rogers, Ben Jackson, and Steph Werning, without whom I would be totally lost in the wilderness.

To Ethan, Hannah, and Mary—thank you for being there for me since before I can remember. I am so, so grateful to the three of you.

And, finally, thank you to Jennie June. Jennie, I am humbled to have had the chance to spend some time in your world while working on this project. I feel like I found a friend in you, and I hope that I have been a good friend in return. You deserve it. I hope that you eventually found peace in life, and if not, then in death. P.S.—I wish you could be alive today to hear Lana Del Rey. You would have loved her, I know it.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Education

2017	M.A. in Music History and Literature, University of Maryland, College Park
2015	B.M. in Viola Performance, Florida State University

University Teaching Experience

2021–24	Graduate Teaching Fellow, University of California, Los Angeles
2019–21	Graduate Teaching Associate, University of California, Los Angeles
2018–19	Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of California, Los Angeles
2015–17	Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Maryland, College Park

Academic Awards, Fellowships, and Service

2023	UCLA Department of Musicology Distinguished Teaching Award
2021–22	UCLA Collegium of University Teaching Fellows Program
2020–21	UCLA Graduate Research Mentorship Fellowship
2019–20	Graduate Student Representative to the Faculty, UCLA Department of Musicology
2019	UCLA Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Fellowship
2019	UCLA Friends of Musicology Award for Best Seminar Paper
2018–19	Humanities Council Representative, UCLA Graduate Student Association Forum
2018–19	Distinguished Lecture Series Coordinator, UCLA Department of Musicology
2017–18	UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music Fellowship

Conference Presentations

2022	"'And I Lisp With A Sort of a Stutter': Sound, Sexual Difference, and Oscar Wilde Songs in America, 1882." Joint Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Society for Ethnomusicology, and Society for Music Theory in New Orleans
2021	Panelist. "Promoting Equity through Care Pedagogy: The TA Perspective." American Musicological Society Annual Meeting
2019	"Sound as Schema: Sonic Materiality, Transgender Embodiment, and Martial Arts." Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Meeting at Indiana University
2019	"Categorical Thinking of Race and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Impersonation." The Musical Theater Forum at the Lincoln Center in New York
2019	"Sensing the Sonic Body in Transgender Corporeality and Combat Sports." Co-authored with William Scally. Music and Erotics Conference at the University of Pittsburgh
2018	Female Husbands and Burlesque Boys: Staging Nineteenth-Century Masculinities in Early American Male Impersonation." AMS: Pacific-Southwest Chapter Meeting at the University of California, Irvine

Invited Lectures

2023	"1970s Rock Music and Spectacle" for MUSCLG 5: *History of Rock and Roll* (Instructor: Alexander Moore)
2019–21	"Led Zeppelin and the Occult" for CLUSTER 60CW: *New Religious Movements and Popular Media in the 1960s* (Instructor: Thomas Hanslowe)
2020	"Gendered and Sexual Identities in Formation and Performance: Popular Entertainment in the Nineteenth Century" for MUSCLG/LGBTQS M137: *LGBTQ Perspectives in Popular Music* (Instructor: Mitchell Morris)

Research and Professional Experience

2022–24	Editorial Assistant, Journal of the American Musicological Society
2020–24	Graduate Student Researcher, UCLA PEER Lab
2021–22	Graduate Student Researcher, UCLA Transdisciplinary Research Acceleration Grants, "Taking a Great Leap: The Process of Building Community Arts Archives"
2018–19	Graduate Student Researcher, Lowell Milken Fund for American Jewish Music
2016–17	Project Archivist, University of Maryland Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library, Special Collections in Performing Arts

Introduction

So pervasive were hoaxes, humbug, illusion, and impersonation in the nineteenth-century United States of America that the era was sometimes called "the age of imposture."[1] P.T. Barnum's manufactured curiosities, spirit mediums, hypnotists, and ventriloquists were among the most popular forms of public entertainment spectacle. America's first form of mass culture, the blackface minstrel show, revolved around Irish- and English-descended white men pretending to be Black. By the post-Civil War period, theatrical impersonation had expanded to include white actors pretending to be people of multiple different races (including other ethnic white groups, such as Irish and Germans), Black actors impersonating characters from the blackface minstrel show, and actors of many racial and ethnic identities impersonating characters of the opposite gender.

Meanwhile, significant public attention was dedicated to anxieties about people off the stage pretending to be something they were not. White anxieties over racial passing and miscegenation, which had long existed in the United States during the regime of slavery, persisted after abolition—reflected, for example, in the adjustments made to the 1870 U.S. census that narrowed the legal parameters of whiteness.[2] Stories about racial and gendered passing proliferated within the rapidly-expanding medium of tabloid reporting, first in the context of fugitive slave narratives in the antebellum era, and later in the context of "passing

[1] Kevin Young, *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 8. According to Young, the quote "apparently" comes from George Henry Evans, in the nineteenth-century newspaper, *Workingman's Advocate.* Young found the quote in Matthew Goodman, *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 74; Goodman, unfortunately, does not provide a date or issue number for the paper in question. Then again, it is perhaps thematically appropriate that the first citation in this dissertation be essentially word-of-mouth. I am confident enough in the moniker, though, as I did find it in one other print source: the headline of a story about a man who was found murdered in Michigan, then "turned up" days later in Vermont, "alive and well." *The Republican Banner*, February 1, 1850, 2.

[2] Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chapter 10.

woman" or "female husband" narratives.[3] These real-life accounts of imposture appeared alongside an increasingly-visible subculture of male sexual deviants in urban centers, said by outsiders to be made up "to resemble women."[4] On the other side of the Atlantic, German and English psychiatrists were producing the first medical texts that would define a condition known as *inversion*, later referred to more commonly as homosexuality. These new medicalized understandings of sex and sexuality, informed by prior writings on scientific racism, had gained traction in North America by the end of the nineteenth century. But prior to the official medicalization of gender and sexual orientation, ideas about race, sex, and sexuality that informed twentieth-century identity constructions were already circulating in mass culture and musical entertainment.

This dissertation investigates musical, sonic, and performative means through which gendered and sexual difference were articulated in nineteenth-century U.S.-American culture. I explore this issue within three contexts: the history of an entertainment genre, impersonation; the musical caricaturing of a celebrity, Oscar Wilde; and the memoirs and musicking of an individual called Jennie June, Ralph Werther, Earl Lind, and Pussie (hereafter called Ralph Werther-Jennie June; see chapter 3). I identify different cultural sites where modalities of sex, gender, and race are being articulated—for example, within scientific or academic discourse, musical entertainment, and journalistic discourse—and identify places where they resonate and diverge. Additionally, I examine ways in which members of minoritized groups engage with and make use of artifacts of the hegemonic culture, in order to articulate their own experienced

[3] C. Riley Snorton, *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.), 58; Rachel Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?': The Prehistory of Same-Sex Marriage in America." *The Journal of American History* 101 (March 2015): 1055-1081.

[4] Edward Van Every, *Sins of New York as "Exposed" by the Police Gazette* (New York: F. A. Stokes Co., 1930), 217. See also Chas. W. Gardner, *The Doctor and the Devil: Midnight Adventures of Dr. Parkhurst* (New York Gardner & Co., 1894), 52.

subjectivity. My overarching argument is that musical and theatrical performance is more than a site where identities are represented; rather, performance plays a key role in the formation and maintenance of those identities.

I chose to use the word "difference" after a fair amount of deliberation. I am invoking "difference" in two senses: first, referring to the act of differentiation (e.g., the sorting of people into discrete categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.); and, second, the labeling of some people or groups as "different" (by an observing, judging majority) or the claiming of "difference" by individuals who feel or have been made to feel that way.[5] My questions are: what roles did sound and music play in articulating certain people, behaviors, aesthetics, and experiences as sexually "different" in the sphere of public entertainment? And how have individuals used music and performance to negotiate their own feelings of sexual difference?

The word "identity" in my title was also an intentional choice. It is meant to signal to present-day readers that the constructions of difference I discuss provided the ideological underpinnings for things typically understood today to be "identities," e.g., sexual orientations, racial identities, and gender identities. This understanding is, however, anachronistic to the time period under consideration. Whereas today "identity" signals "*substantive self-definition*, self-definition as *something*" (requiring an external category with which one might identify), before the 1950s, "identity" meant *personal* identity, which includes details such as "name, sex, age, address, occupation, parentage … and physical appearance."[6] For this reason, despite using the word in the title, I try to avoid the modern usage throughout the text.

[5] Ruth Solie discusses some of the issues and debates around the idea of "difference" in her introduction to the edited volume, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[6] Gerald Izenberg, *Identity: The Necessity of a Modern Idea* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), chapter 1.

The older usage, though, comes into juxtaposition with the idea of "imposture" in various interesting ways, especially pertaining to those people whose sexual behavior or gendered presentation was not normative. For example, some people who wished to live as a gender other than the one they'd been assigned dealt with this by "disappearing" and beginning a new life under a different (legally false) identity. Others, such as Ralph Werther-Jennie June, led double lives, presenting in a normative way some of the time, and at other times pursuing a nonnormative lifestyle under an alias; in such situations, the revelation of a person's "true identity" would be incriminating. Many people in the late nineteenth century who were raised as boys, but understood themselves to be more closely aligned with femaleness, called themselves "female impersonators." Despite the fact that in our present day, "outness" is fairly normalized and sexual orientation and gender identity are generally understood to reflect a stable ontology of self, or inner "truth," imposture has long been central to the ways in which queer, sexually dissident, and gender nonconforming people have lived their lives. As I will show in this dissertation, the cultural zeitgeist of imposture played a major role in the articulation of sexual difference in the nineteenth-century United States.

I focus on the role of entertainment, and specifically musical performance, in this web of meaning-making. The musical materials I consider include music performed on the stage, in the contexts of variety theater and operetta; music that was published for home performance; and music that was composed, performed, and distributed in private settings. Much of this music is virtually untouched within musicological scholarship, with the exception of Gillian Rodger's work on variety theater and male impersonation, Matthew Morrison's article, "Race,

Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," and several books on Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience*.[7]

The nature of this repertoire presents a challenge to traditional musicological methods. For one thing, many of these songs do not exist in "fixed" versions. Lyrics and musical settings connected only loosely during this time period; parodies were common, and song lyrics were often published without accompanying musical notation (song sheets typically include the name of the "air" to which the lyrics should be sung). Most of these songs served to depict a certain kind of character, but because this repertoire relied so heavily on parody and musical borrowing, the same musical methods might be applied to very different characters.[8] The same song might be published by a number of different publishers; pirated and burlesque versions of operettas and plays are as popular (if not more so) than the original versions. A given song may have been sung by dozens of performers, all of whom sang and acted out the song differently. Performances in the variety theater changed from night to night, and often included spoken interpolation; performances in private settings were similarly improvisatory, and are only documented in scarce written accounts. My object of study is often not any given song itself, but rather what a performer—professional or lay—could have done with the song.

[7] Gillian Rodger, "He Isn't A Marrying Man: Gender and Sexuality in the Repertoire of Male Impersonators, 1870–1930," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 105–133; Gillian Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Gillian Rodger, *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 781–823; Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Raymond Knapp, *Making Light: Haydn, Musical Camp, and the Long Shadow of German Idealism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[8] Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 39.

I therefore spend significant time speculating about how songs *might have been* performed, or, to use Saidiya Hartman's phrasing, "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive."[9] Hartman develops this method while investigating the lives of young Black women who fled the South and moved to Northern cities in the early twentieth century. Her source materials similarly present limitations when approached with traditional methods; the only existing records of her subjects—"journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files"—all "represent [these women] as a problem."[10] Resisting the narrative of "judgement and classification" that the archive imposes upon these subjects, Hartman "elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents," incorporating imaginative and creative methods to develop a more complete picture of her subjects and their lives.

I analyzed some of the repertoire pertaining to Oscar Wilde and the songs of Ralph Werther-Jennie June by performing them myself, implementing what Elisabeth Le Guin calls "carnal musicology" or "cello-and-bow thinking."[11] This is a practice-based approach to the study of historical music-making, in which "the creative act is an experiment … designed to answer a directed research question about art and the practice of it."[12] While singing these songs, I paid attention to the physical sensations they cause, and the gestures and expressive techniques I felt encouraged to follow. Putting this information into conversation with both my own positionality and the cultural context that produced this repertoire, I was able to ask questions

[9] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008), 11.
[10] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Stories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), xiv.
[11] Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1–37.
[12] R. Lyle Skains, "Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology," *Media Practice and Education* 19, no. 1 (2018): 86.

about the expressive and representational potential of these songs that cannot be answered by "reading" music and lyrics alone.

In doing so, I am seeking to establish methods for studying not only repertories that are underrepresented in scholarship, but also histories of people who did not conform to sexual or gendered norms in their lifetimes. Information about these individuals is scarce, and often appears in the form of medical texts and police reports due to the construing of practices such as cross-dressing and sodomy as criminal or pathological. Musical performance, which is always open to "a range of meanings … in the subjunctive mode," can potentially hold histories of those people who "experience one or another sort of representational ban."[13] My hope is that these songs afford representational opportunities that teach us something about the way some nonconforming folk existed within their culture beyond what is articulated in written records. Moreover, I believe it is not a coincidence that replication, interchangeability, and parody feature so heavily in the music of a culture so obsessed with "kinds" of people. The unwieldiness of this repertoire places it squarely within the broader zeitgeist of imposture.

The collections and archives I consulted for this project include the Performing Arts Division of the Library of Congress, "Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885" in the Library of Congress, "IN Harmony: Sheet Music from Indiana" at Indiana University, the "Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection" at John's Hopkins University, and

[13] Mitchell Morris, "On Fairies (And Mothers)," in *Music & Camp*, ed. Philip Purvis and Christopher Moore (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 8–9. Sarah Haley makes a similar point about incarcerated Black women's use of the blues to refuse white supremacist knowledge regimes in the Jim Crow south: "Like dance, song has the potential to 'resist containment but hold history.' The blues of black feminist sabotage presented an interstitial historical embrace in which political recognition and critique encompassed criminal practice, sexual controversy, intimacy between women, and an epistemology of collective rebuke of structures of authority, disavowing a politics of ascendance even as it proliferated the allure of rebellion. The blues of black feminist sabotage emerged in recordings, hastily written or whispered lyrics, revised performances, in the glances that signaled distinction between what would be written and what would be sung, what would be shared and what would remain (and still remains) secret." Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 212.

"Oscar Wilde & le fin de siècle: Wildeiana" at the UCLA Clark Reference Library. I also rely heavily on newspaper journalism. I conducted all of this research through online databases, including ProQuest Newspapers, the New York Clipper archive, the New York Times archive, and the Digital Transgender Archive.

Nineteenth-Century U.S.-American Popular Music and Mass Entertainment

Much of the groundwork for this dissertation was laid by Gillian Rodger's *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (2010), which traces the development of variety theater in the United States in the nineteenth century from its forerunners in burlesque, minstrelsy, and the concert saloon all the way to its reorganization as Vaudeville around the turn of the century. Variety was a format that flourished circa the 1860s, and featured musical acts such as racial, ethnic, and gendered impersonation, as well as incorporating spoken comedy, ventriloquism, acrobatics, or magic tricks. The genre developed in working-class concert saloons, especially those located in the Bowery district of New York City. These venues were known for employing "pretty waiter girls" who served alcohol and were often sex workers.[14] In the 1860s, legislation advanced by middle- and upper-class moral reformers, and the entry of entrepreneurial managers with a vested interest in respectable (read: more widely marketable) entertainment, resulted in the establishment of independent theatrical spaces where the main purpose of the venue was to stage shows, rather than to sell alcohol or host working-class communities.[15] These theaters were the sites at which many of the impersonation acts in the

[14] See Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, chapter 2; Lloyd R. Morris, *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life from 1850 to 1950* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 49; David Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure: Sentiment and Sensation in Nineteenth-Century American Mass Entertainment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 126.
[15] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, chapters 6 and 7.

1860s–80s I discuss in chapter 1 were taking place. The exact nature of the theaters varied from venue to venue, and also there remained plenty of bars and dives were musicking did occur.[16]

Rodger has also written extensively on male impersonation, from its arrival in America via Annie Hindle to the form it took at the end of the twentieth century.[17] Rodger argues that male impersonation in the United States, at least in its first decades, was primarily a form of class commentary, and that women impersonating male characters would not have been understood as transgressing prescribed gender roles. She also argues that, toward the end of the nineteenth century, male impersonation grew less realistic in nature due to several factors, including an audience that was increasingly middle class, and also emergent discourse of inversion, from which performers wanted to distance themselves. Contextualizing male impersonation within a broader economy of nineteenth-century mass entertainment, I argue that impersonation was simultaneously about class, gender, and race, and that the staging of sexual otherness and class impersonation were often closely linked. It is my contention that staged impersonation was not simply responding to, or representing, extant stereotypes and ideas about gender difference, but rather was actively helping to construct these ideas.

The blackface minstrel show established the format and set of performative conventions that dictate many of the materials I cover, as well as U.S.-American popular entertainment and the music industry more broadly. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) and Katrina Moore's article, "The Wench: Black Women in the Antebellum Minstrel Show and Popular Culture" (2021), both unpack minstrelsy's invention of stereotypes about Black people and their consequences. Eric Lott's

[16] George Chauncey, Jr., *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 2019), chapter 1; Dale Cockrell, *Everybody's Doin' It: Sex, Music, and Dance in New York, 1840–1917* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), chapters 5 and 6; chapter 3 of this dissertation.
[17] See Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, chapter 11; Rodger, "He Isn't a Marrying Man"; Rodger, *Just One of the Boys.*

Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (1993) also claims that the minstrel show created new racial structures, specifically the development of a white working-class consciousness that relied, by negation, on fictional, derogatory representations of African-American people. Matthew Morrison criticizes *Love and Theft* for its framing of minstrelsy in terms of "theft" of pre-existing Black performance practice or, as Lott writes, "little more than cultural robbery."[18] Instead, Morrison contends, "sonic and embodied racialized scripts [of blackness] were negotiated through performance and in blackface."[19] I take a similar approach to the performance contexts I visit, asking how racialized and gendered scripts are negotiated through performance, rather than either reacting to existing scripts, or representing general structures of feeling.[20]

I engage with literature on intersecting and parallel genres of performance that staged race and gender, including the burlesque show, operetta, melodrama, and side show or dime museum attractions. Robert Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991) covers burlesque from its emergence in the United States in 1869 into the late twentieth century. Following the career of infamous performer Lydia Thompson and her troupe, the British Blondes, Allen traces the changes that burlesque underwent in the late nineteenth century, writing that its "charismatic female sexuality and inversive subordination" rendered it grotesque in the eyes of the patriarchal culture; as a result it was gradually pushed out of bourgeois culture into working-class commercial culture.[21] Specifically, he investigates the practice of cross-

[18] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), reprint, 2013, 8.
[19] Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 802.
[20] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.
[21] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 281.

dressing in burlesque, suggesting that its many layers of signification resulted in a kind of extreme ontological rupture.[22]

Daphne Brooks addresses the burlesque show, minstrelsy, pantomime and spirit medium possession, in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (2006). Brooks explores the careers of nineteenth-century performers who "[called] attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness in transatlantic culture," and "rehearsed ways to render racial and gender categories 'strange' and to thus 'disturb' cultural perceptions of identity formation."[23] This mode, which Brooks terms *racial phantasmagoria*, spectacularized fantastical and rapid metamorphosis, and often involved crossed dress and racially liminal figures. I draw upon both Allen's and Brooks' discussions of ontological instability, and especially Brooks' theory of racial phantasmagoria, in my discussions of male and female impersonation. I argue that the spectacular and rapid transformation that was the focus of early male impersonation was, also as Brooks puts it, "a corporeal manifestation of a turbulent era … in which social ideologies of the body remained sharply in flux."[24]

Kevin Young's *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (2017) traces the American cultural history of the hoax, beginning with showman P.T. Barnum and concluding with Donald J. Trump and "fake news." I build heavily on Young's argument that race (itself "a sort of hoax that justifies systems of inequality") was central to most nineteenth-century hoaxes, humbug, and curiosities, and, especially, his analysis of mass entertainment as a didactic tool that trained audiences in how to think about race.[25] I

[22] Ibid., 133, 147, 189
[23] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.
[24] Ibid., 22.
[25] Kevin Young, "More Truth (Season 4, Episode 11)." *Scene on Radio,* May 27, 2020. Story reported by Lewis Raven Wallace, with host/producer John Biewen and collaborator Chenjerai Kumanyika. Interviews with David

have found that imposture and the curiosity are also recurrent themes in certain late nineteenth century discourses of gender and sexuality, and I attempt to productively apply Young's argument about hoaxing and the invention of race to think through the overlapping and co-constitutive invention of modern ideas about gender and sexuality.

Constructing Race, Gender, and Sexuality

This project draws upon and attempts to contribute to the body of scholarship that analyzes nineteenth-century constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, and the ways in which they developed and were reinforced through cultural, linguistic, medical, economic, and legal means. In the nineteenth-century United States, numerous racial projects worked to establish and bolster a white supremacist racial hierarchy in an effort to justify the genocide of Indigenous Americans, the practice of chattel slavery, and subsequently Jim Crow laws and other forms of racial segregation.[26] White fears about miscegenation and racial passing led to a hegemonic investment in defining and being able to identify different "races." These projects were implemented at multiple levels: in United States law and foreign policy, at the carceral level, in the fields of scientific racism and sexology, which appropriated Darwinian and Lamarckian theories of evolution, in the popular press, and in mass culture and entertainment.[27]

Mindich, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Kevin Young. Series edited by Loretta Williams. Accessed January 17, 2023. https://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e11-more-truth/.

[26] Omi and Winant define a "racial project" as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 125.

[27] See Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2010), chapters 8–15; Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Haley, *No Mercy Here*; Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Brooks, *Bodies In Dissent.*

The development of racializing sciences that argued for biological basis of perceived "racial" difference as a justification for imperialism, expansionism, and slavery, constructed a hierarchical model of humanity that placed the world's peoples into scientifically-determined "types," lending scientific authority to already-extant notions of "difference."[28] I draw upon studies that demonstrate ways in which white supremacist racial projects drew upon, and facilitated future ways of thinking about, gendered and sexual difference in the nineteenth century.

Hortense Spillers provided the foundation for much of this work in the essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), which theorizes the project of "ungendering" committed against enslaved people of African descent through denial of subjectivity and removal from domestic and kinship structures.[29] Furthermore, Spillers delineates between "body" and "flesh" as distinct aspects of liberated and captive subject-positions respectively, the latter defined by total objectification, commoditization, and fungibility.[30] Riley Snorton builds on Spillers' analysis in the first section of *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), which argues that this notion of "female flesh ungendered" was the material prerequisite for understanding sex and gender as mutable and malleable through medical and legal intervention, eventually enabling the modern concepts of transsexual and transgender. Snorton also examines narratives of individuals who used cross-dressing as a tactic to escape from captivity, demonstrating situations in which the circumstances of being "ungendered" enabled fugitivity, as well as demonstrating the conceptual origins of gender passing in racial passing. His analysis has been highly influential to my own understanding of the relationship

[28] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 34.
[29] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987), 72.
[30] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68.

between race, the oppression of Black people in the United States, and (trans)gender. Whereas Snorton looks mainly at medical archives and print materials in the nineteenth century, I aim to unpack manifestations of the same thought patterns in popular entertainment.

Also foundational to this project is Siobahn Somerville's *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Writing in 2000, Somerville identified a "critical tendency to treat late-nineteenth-century shifts in the cultural understanding and deployment of race and sexuality as separate and unrelated" and sought to redress that theoretical and historical gap. She shows that it was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual" emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between "black" and "white" bodies. Through the study of a range of literary, scientific, and cinematic texts that foreground the problems of delineating and interpreting racial and sexual identity, Somerville argues instead that the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined. Examining literature from sexology in the latter half of the nineteenth century alongside the earlier field of scientific racism, Somerville shows that the former adopted ideology and techniques from the latter; on a broader level, widespread assumptions about the racialization of bodies, and the heightened surveillance of bodies established a conceptual framework within which the new categories of homo- and hetero-sexuality could be culturally legible. Somerville insists that rather than ascribing undue weight to sexology as a guiding discourse, we should give equal attention to the changing meanings of homosexuality in the culture at large. Somerville takes early cinema and contemporary literature for objects of analysis; I suggest that staged musical entertainment, though an earlier form, is one of these "nonexpert" sites in which twentieth-

century conceptual frameworks for thinking about gender, race, and sex can be seen beginning to percolate.[31]

Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (2016) provides another account of gendered and racial differentiation. Haley examines how the criminal legal system of the United States constructed, reinforced, and was reinforced by Black female deviance as part of the broader constitution of Jim Crow modernity, which was premised upon the general devaluation and dehumanization of Black life. She looks at the role of gender ideology in the development of gendered racial capitalism, focusing on the carceral life of gender and race ideology and how they produced, and were produced by, the southern penal regime. Additionally, Haley traces conversations around and about incarcerated Black women, showing that discourses of sexual inversion, of "queer" and abnormal sexuality, showed up in the context of Black women before they were commonly used in reference to homosexuality or gender deviance in white people.

Accordingly, I engage with literature on historical constructions of whiteness in the United States. Matthew Frye Jacobson explains that "[r]acial categories themselves—their vicissitudes and the contests over them—reflect the competing notions of history, peoplehood, and collective destiny by which power has been organized and contested on the American scene."[32] Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998) focuses on waves of European immigrants who traveled to the portion of the North American continent that became the United States between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the transmutations that "whiteness" as a category underwent in response to the shifting sociocultural makeup of the nation-state.

[31] Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*, 39.
[32] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 9.

Jacobson argues that in American thinking, whiteness is constructed through a complex nexus of factors including but not limited to: the white allegiance required to coerce cheap labor from working classes; the need to exert control over these working classes by deeming them unfit for self-governance; self-identification within groups of immigrants (for example, in the cases of Irish nationalism and Zionism); the identifications and disidentifications said immigrant groups had with one another; discursive and legal co-constructions of race and class that define who is granted rights to full citizenship, who has access to naturalization, who can own property, and who can be property; and economically-weighted "traits" such as "dependency" and "laziness" that are imagined through a lens of both class and racial biological determinism and projected onto various populations.[33]

Somerville points out that the new medical category of the "invert" was, from the beginning, racialized as white. As Haley demonstrates, Black people and other people of color in America were called sexually abnormal *before* the widespread dissemination of modern ideas about homosexuality; therefore, modern sexual categories, in their late nineteenth century articulation, described white people by default. (White people were not *already* assumed to be sexually nonnormative; therefore, white queers were marked by nonnormativity, but with the underlying assumption that were we *not* queer, then we *would* be normative subjects.) I expand upon this understanding of queerness being constructed vis-à-vis whiteness, by bringing it into dialogue with contemporary discourses of imposture in popular entertainment. What would become dominant narratives of queerness were racialized as white, but built upon racist

[33] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 21. For other studies of the entry of specific ethnic groups into whiteness, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

assumptions about sexual difference. I argue that this process of whitening took place significantly within the spheres of musical performance and mass entertainment.

My project is also in dialogue with scholarship on the relationship between voice and identity, both performed and perceived. Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016) examines the ways in which white Americans mapped vocal and other sonic traits onto Black Americans in the antebellum United States, turning listening into a new form of racialized surveillance. Stoever argues that during this time period white Americans positioned themselves as expert listeners, able to aurally determine both their own place and the places of others in the hegemonic racial hierarchy, a phenomenon that Stoever calls the "listening ear."[34] I build on Stoever's theory that during this time period, mass culture reinforced an assumption that you could see and hear "kinds" of people, and was instrumental in constructing racialized categories. Furthermore, she writes, the people placed into these categories assert agency; Black performers used their voices to resist, contest, and sometimes conform to the expectations of white listeners. Nina Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (2019) similarly interrogates the presumed attachment of certain timbres to racialized bodies, critiquing the long-perpetuated myth that the voice is synonymous with essence, and arguing that it is not possible to discern identity through vocal quality alone.[35] This project is also influenced by Stephan Pennington's work on the vocal performance of gender and sexuality, especially his point that both normative and nonnormative subjects use vocal gestures to enact a range of sexual identifications and subjectivities.[36]

---

[34] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 32–36.
[35] Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
[36] Stephan Pennington, "Transgender Passing Guides and the Vocal Performance of Gender and Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, ed. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley. Oxford Handbooks Online, 2019; "Willmer Broadnax, Midcentury Gospel, and Black Trans/Masculinities," *Women and Music* 22 (2018): 117–125.

Matthew Morrison's article, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse" (2019), addresses ways in which popular entertainment, culture, musicological discourse, and discourses of identity "have been shaped by the sonic and embodied legacy of blackface minstrelsy in and beyond the United States."[37] Importantly, Morrison points out that the blackface minstrel show often also included "the burlesquing of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class categories that extended beyond the black/white paradigm," establishing a foundation for much popular music and entertainment that followed.[38] I explore this dynamic as it manifests in the emergence of white male and female impersonation in the late nineteenth century, and the ways in which racial impersonation enabled the staging of white sexual "others."

Queer[39] Histories

Chapter 3 of this dissertation contributes to the body of literature documenting queer life in nineteenth-century North America. Several early important works that came out of the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s include Jonathan Ned Katz's books, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976) and *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary* (1983), and Alan Bérubé's lecture presentation on cross dressing in historical San Francisco, "Lesbian Masquerade" (1979). In an effort to redress historical censorship of queer life, these early historical projects represent extensive and meticulous archival work, and

[37] Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 782.
[38] Ibid., 783.
[39] I use the word queer here to mean histories that today are understood to be queer—that is, *anti*normative or in opposition to dominant cultural histories and present-day hegemonic understandings of gender and sex—with the understanding that this word did not mean the same thing during the time period under consideration. All the same, the historical subjects under discussion did not live according to prescriptive modalities of gender and sex that were operative during their lifetimes.

draw from sources including newspapers, literature, court records, medical literature, legislation, photographs, and written correspondence.[40]

George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (1994) has been crucial for my understanding of gendered and sexual dynamics in working class neighborhoods in New York at the end of the nineteenth century. Chauncy argues the binary homosexual-heterosexual construction of sexuality that has been largely operative in recent U.S.-American only emerged around the middle of the twentieth century. Before then, especially in working-class communities, the principle distinction was not between gay and straight men, but rather between "fairies" and "normal men." The former were distinguished by their gender presentation and effeminacy rather than their sexual behavior alone; the latter could freely engage with fairies as (penetrating) sexual partners without posing a threat to their masculinity. Chauncey understands fairies to be men, however, in the preface to the 2019 edition of *Gay New York*, Chauncey notes that he wrote this book before the explosion of queer theory and (the less explosive entry of) trans studies within the academy. He writes that, had he a chance to rewrite the book, he would have "drawn on transgender theory and insights to deepen [his] analysis of (trans)gender, (homosexuality), and gender fluidity" within the spaces he researches.[41] In my third chapter I attempt to do exactly that—while also complicating the application of present-day trans theory to cultures who predate that concept.

Channing Gerard Joseph has published a number of online articles and blog posts on William Dorsey Swann—the first known self-identified drag queen in the United States, on whom Joseph has a book forthcoming—and Ralph Werther-Jennie June—who is the subject of

[40] See also Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncy, Jr., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1989); Louis Sullivan, *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990); and Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003).
[41] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, xxiii.

the third body chapter of this dissertation.[42] My project contributes to this work, especially by focusing on songs and traces of performances, however ephemeral, as important carriers of queer history.[43]

An enormous body of literature is devoted to the public figure and reception of Oscar Wilde. Wilde's public image and notoriety is commonly cited as a major factor influencing emergent understandings of, and stereotypes around, homosexuality around the turn of the twentieth century, though scholars have debated the extent to which, and the terms on which, he was received as a sexually-deviant figure prior to his conviction. Richard Kaye has discussed the division in the way that Wilde has been treated between the fields of Gay Studies and Queer Theory. The former, being primarily concerned with establishing a gay literary canon, has been invested in adopting Wilde as a centerpiece of this canon, framing Wilde as both "a 'victim' of an oppressive social order and a 'martyr' for the cause of Gay Liberation."[44] Perhaps the best-known example from this body of literature is Richard Ellman's biography, which has been critiqued for (in addition to a multitude of factual and citational errors) its implication that Wilde's relationships with men were "always, from the start, somehow already homosexual."[45] Queer theorists have contended that the idea of a gay literary canon is elitist and relies on the same hegemonic power structures that place queer folks into an oppressed class in the first place. Instead, queer theory has examined Wilde as a historical figure rather than primarily an author,

[42] Channing Gerard Joseph, "The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave." The Nation. January 31, 2020. Accessed November 20, 2020. https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball; "Who Was Jennie June?" OutHistory.com. October 10, 2022. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/wwjj/wwjj2; *House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens—and Changed the World*, forthcoming.
[43] See José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 8* (1996): 5–16.
[44] Richard A. Kaye, "Gay Studies / Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde," in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 194.
[45] Alan Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5–6; quoted in Kaye, "Gay Studies / Queer Theory," 204.

looking beyond his literary works to the broader cultural ramifications of his public persona and celebrity.

Queer theorists have understood Wilde as an active participant in the formation of contemporary understandings of sexual categories and behaviors, rather than just a product of his time and culture. Working from the idea that "homosexual" was not a commonly understood category in the nineteenth century, scholars have instead looked at ways in which Oscar Wilde, as a very public figure, helped to shape emerging stereotypes of homosexuality at the turn of the twentieth century. Alan Sinfeld's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (1994) argues that Wilde's highly-publicized trials and conviction were the catalyst for the emergence of a certain gay male stereotype out of the nineteenth-century dandy, that persisted in the twentieth century. Neil Bartlett's *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (1988) is, as Kaye puts it, "a volume that mixes genres—literary criticism, autobiographical reflection, social history, political manifesto, urban exploration, history of sexuality—as it seeks to take on an amorphous Wilde."[46] Looking at histories of late-nineteenth-century London alongside contemporary 1980s London, Bartlett aims to draw out affective resonances with Wilde and with what Bartlett argues must have been a visible queer subculture during Wilde's time. He argues that Wilde's 1895 trial and the public's response to it were a "contrived spectacle" that was orchestrated to sell journalism, when, in fact, there was a recognizable gay subculture in London at the time, but the mainstream culture was willfully ignorant of it. If people did recognize the subculture, they claimed they could not, as acknowledging understanding would implicate them as well. The "contrived spectacle" of the trial, therefore, relied on this willful ignorance.

[46] Kaye, "Gay Studies / Queer Theory," 211.

In contrast to Wilde's British reception, scholars who have handled Wilde's 1882 tour of the United States are generally in agreement that he was understood, in some capacity, in terms of sexual otherness. Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith's *Oscar Wilde Discovers America* (1936), while not explicitly naming Wilde's reception in terms of sexual otherness, does allude to the idea more than once by recounting a number of anecdotes in which acquaintances address him as a woman ("she," "Miss Nancy," etc.).[47] Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst's curated volume of newspaper interviews with Wilde (2010) is also not primarily about Wilde's perceived sexual difference, but the authors do present the subject as a central aspect of Wilde's American persona, writing that "Wilde repeatedly challenged the gender norms of middle-class America. His performances, both on stage and in conversation with reporters, flouted convention."[48]

Mary Blanchard's *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (1998) and Joy Shannon's *The First Counterculture Celebrity: Oscar Wilde's 1882 North American Tour* (2011) understand Wilde as representative of a burgeoning American homosexual subculture that was already visible at the time of his arrival. Both authors believe it is likely that Wile was received by American audiences on those terms. Robert Volpicelli, on the other hand, claims that Wilde's unusual presentation situated him within the realm of the curiosity.[49] I put these ideas into conversation, within the broader relationship I establish between sexual difference and imposture. The existing literature on Wilde is based almost entirely on visual and

[47] Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America: 1882* (Benjamin Blom: New York, 1964), 255.
[48] Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst, *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews* (Champaign and Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2013), 5.
[49] Robert Volpicelli, "Curiosity: Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," in *Transatlantic Modernism and the US Lecture Tour,* 25–54 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

textual evidence; my analysis of the music written about Wilde substantially informs my argument.

Sound Technologies and Sensory History

Finally, I have found certain points of resonance with sensory histories of past musical or performative practices. Dierdre Loughridge's *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (2016) probes the relationship between epistemes and performance practice by looking at various Enlightenment-era developments in optical and audiovisual technologies in conversation with contemporary practices of listening and music making. Examining technologies like magnifying instruments, peepshows, shadow-plays, magic lanterns, and phantasmagoria shows, Loughridge argues that these new forms of spectacle gave rise to new forms of listening: "Whereas mimesis of nature and emotional expression furnished the main conceptual bases for making sense of music in the eighteenth century, notions of extending the senses and mastering invisible forces increasingly came to supplement or supplant them."[50] Loughridge's study falls temporally before the scope of my project, but I have found many of her ideas to be thought provoking and relevant to the material I study. I am especially motivated by her call to expand our understanding of "audiovisual" beyond modern-day sound-and-image media, to encompass the "varied capacities of media to produce sensory experiences beyond their own material qualities … to stimulate the imagination."[51]

Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2000) investigates the relationship between entertainment and the disciplining of

[50] Deirdre Loughridge, *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.
[51] Ibid., 15.

sensory perception and understanding. Schmidt investigates what he calls a "process of demystification" in the Anglo-American world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, identifying a shift from the presence of a speaking, listening Christian god to an age of science, reason, and mechanization that was antithetical to such a god. Crucial to this process was a "disciplining of experience"—that is, "a series of demonstrations, instruments, and social maps designed to make sensory impressions reliable, to distinguish learned reports from vulgar tales, to establish genteel measures of trustworthiness, and hence to secure the progress of knowledge": in other words, a retraining of the senses.[52] Hearing, marked as an especially spiritual, emotional, and superstitious sense, was of central importance to this process. Schmidt examines natural-philosophy-as-spectacle through the inventions, performances, and popular amusements that helped to shape new habits of listening and reasoning through the long American Enlightenment. Schmidt's argument informs my own, that later genres of musical entertainment played a didactic role in the dissemination of the concepts of gender, sexuality, and race.

Gendered Language and Terminology

Throughout this dissertation I use the words "gender" and "sex" interchangeably, as was common practice during the time period under investigation. In present-day Western culture, "sex," generally refers to anatomy, and hormonal and chromosomal makeup (organized into a male-female binary system).[53] "Gender," meanwhile, is considered to be a culturally-constructed social category, one that that exists in relation to sex, but also encompasses things such as outward presentation, behavior, social roles, divisions of labor, sexual behaviors, and kinship

[52] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.
[53] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, revised ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2018), chapter 1.

structures. In the nineteenth century this distinction was not generally made, and "sex" was used more commonly to refer to someone's status as either "male" or "female."

My interlocutors include historical subjects who did not conform to gendered and/or sexual societal norms during their lifetime. To the best of my ability, I refer to them using the terms that they chose for themselves; in the absence of that information, I try to describe their circumstances, rather than retrofitting a label onto them. For example, Annie Hindle, the first and one of the most well-known male impersonators in the United States, had several marriages, all of which (with the exception of one) were to women. I do not call Hindle a lesbian, which is an anachronistic term with entailments particular to the twentieth century, and instead explain that after one brief, failed marriage to a man, Hindle pursued exclusively romantic relationships with other women. This decision often results in clunkier prose, but I have decided to sacrifice readability in places, in an effort to avoid the extra layer of translation.

Some scholarship strives to reclaim cross-dressing, gender nonconforming, or passing figures from recent and distant history as being part of a "trans past."[54] This work reflects an important desire to remedy the erasure of gender variance in Western history and the violence that the imposition of the Western gender binary has done to colonized people. It also makes the important point that present-day understandings of "trans" are not the sole or authoritative way of understanding gender variance. I agree that it is important to historicize and reject the hegemony of the Western gender binary, and to provincialize the modern dominant episteme of sex/gender.[55] For precisely this reason, I try to resist the impulse to label nineteenth-century

[54] See, for a very early example, Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). For more recent examples, see Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017).
[55] Shiv Datt Sharma, "Provincializing Trans Studies," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (February 2023): 10–15.

subjects as "trans," simply because "trans" was not an operative idea when these people were alive. Clare Sears puts it well, writing:

> [T]he imposition of contemporary gender and sexual identities onto past cross-dressing practices rests on the assumption that past experiences can be accurately understood in terms of present-day categories and concepts. This, however, is not the case. As numerous historians have documented, the ways that Western societies organize gender and sexuality today are quite different from the ways they did so in the past. In particular the concepts of transvestite, transsexual, and transgender did not exist for most of the nineteenth century, nor did the concepts of lesbian, homosexual, and heterosexual. This, of course, does not mean that people did not dress, live, and identify as the "opposite" sex or have sex with others of the same sex. It does mean, however that the social and subjective meanings of these practices cannot be assumed but need to be carefully investigated, both to shed light on the past and to gain insight into the ways that contemporary understandings of gender normativity and difference emerged.[56]

Therefore, rather than referring to an individual as "transgender," "trans," or "nonbinary," I will instead make my best effort to accurately describe their life circumstances and the way they moved about the world. I will also use binary terms such as "male" and "female" and "man" and "woman" with the understanding that although these are culturally and historically specific ideas, they were operative during the time period under consideration, and therefore would have weighed considerably on the ways in which the subjects in question would have understood themselves.

Regarding pronouns, my practice is to use a) the pronouns with which a person referred to themselves, or, if that information is unavailable, b) the pronouns that align with the way the person seemed to prefer to outwardly express their gender. For example, for a person such as Frank Dubois, who chose to live as a man full time despite having been assigned female at birth and raised as a girl, I use "he/him/his" in keeping with the way he presented himself to the public. For Ella Wesner, who was a professional male impersonator who sometimes wore pants

[56] Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 7.

off the stage and had romantic relationships with women, I use "she/her/hers" because I have only ever seen her referred to as such and have seen no record of her passing as male off the stage. I do not tend to use the singular "they/them/theirs" because that construction was not used to indicate nonbinary or anti-binary identification in the nineteenth century in the way that it does today. I do so for two reasons; the first is to remain true, to the best of my ability, to how the people I am writing about would have understood themselves in relation to the world around them. The second is because I recognize the preeminence of the *pronoun* as a central component of a person's (trans)gender identity to be a distinct product of our current cultural moment, and I wish to denaturalize this particular logic of identity construction.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 deals with a genre of performance, staged impersonation, which emerged in the form of the blackface minstrel show and expanded to encompass other varieties of racial and ethnic impersonation, as well as female and male impersonation in which both actors and characters were white. I examine the relationship between staged male and female impersonation and nascent cultural constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality; namely, the emergent concepts of inversion and homosexuality. Staged impersonation (alongside other forms of theatrical cross-dressing) in the late nineteenth century is often understood as representing, or responding to, these concepts as they were already visible in society or articulated in medical discourse. I argue that staged impersonation in fact played a role in shaping these cultural understandings as they developed. To do so, I situate staged male and female impersonation within earlier and contemporary forms of impersonation, demonstrating that the format facilitated a racialized understanding of gender that allowed the staging of distinct sexual "types," such as the invert. I

will then contextualize impersonation within a broader cultural zeitgeist of illusion, hoaxing, and curiosity. By putting song and performance analysis into conversation with journalistic rhetoric about both staged impersonation *and* cross-dressing people off the stage, I argue that this performance genre aided in instructing audiences to understand cross-dressing, passing, or otherwise gender nonconforming people to be impersonating something they are not.

Chapter 2 focuses on a celebrity, Oscar Wilde. Through examining a repertoire of popular songs that depict Wilde and the aesthetic movement, I analyze musical and theatrical means through which his public persona was constructed in popular culture, focusing on his perceived gender difference. Specifically, I focus on literal and metaphorical representations of vocal gestures—sighs, lisps, and stutters—that represent both the aesthetic subculture and measures of sexual otherness. Through a practice-based approach that incorporates musical performance and analysis of physical gestures, I argue that these songs about Oscar Wilde expressed ideas about Wilde's sexual otherness that could not be expressed directly in print. Moreover, the animation of Wilde memorabilia through performance may have had as significant an influence on the formation late-nineteenth-century sexual stereotypes as did Wilde himself. Finally, I turn to a discussion of camp—a performance mode that I felt encouraged to pursue while performing this repertoire. By way of camp's use of theatricality, artifice, and reiteration, I connect Wilde's public figure to the nineteenth-century zeitgeist of imposture, arguing that this cultural sensibility played a crucial role in the way Wilde was imagined, and remembered, as queer.

Chapter 3 examines the questions of sexual difference, impersonation, and musical performance as they pertain to an individual, Ralph Werther-Jennie June. Werther-June was a white, college-educated member of the middle class who was raised as a boy but identified

h/imself as an androgyne. Despite maintaining a male persona in everyday life, s/he felt strongly that s/he was mostly female, and was a part-time member of the fairie subculture in New York in the last decade of the nineteenth century. S/he authored three memoirs (two of which are published) and a number of songs, which s/he performed on h/is weekly "female impersonation sprees." I explore the musical and performative means through which Werther-June articulates h/is experience of sexual difference, and also navigates through states of extreme abjection. This leads me to a discussion of the complications of working with historical figures whose worldviews are shaped by a different set of circumstances and governing forces than our own. I aim to develop ways in which the modern queer historian can write responsibly and respectfully about the distant past, while not only acknowledging the limitations of the archive—which I theorize as "noise"—but engaging with those limitations.

My conclusion wanders briefly into the twentieth century, by way of Todd Haynes' 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine.* The performative tropes and identity discourses I have explored in this project have persisted in American and British popular musical entertainment and are clearly visible in rock music of the 1970s through its staging of race and gender, its spectacular nature, and the wide range of interpretive possibilities it affords to queer performers and audiences. *Velvet Goldmine* traces a direct and fraught lineage from Oscar Wilde to David Bowie, by way of English music hall, and Little Richard—who, in the film, is supplanted as queer rock music's founder by an invented white character, Jack Fairy. In doing so, the film illustrates the construction of prevailing queer narratives as being about both white people and imposture, despite these narratives being built upon racialized rubrics, and the cultural work done by people of color. Thus, *Velvet Goldmine* speaks to the persisting centrality of performative tropes and

techniques such as innuendo, camp, impersonation, and imposture to queer expression, representation, and reception in U.S.-American culture.

It feels strange to be finishing a dissertation that deals with the subject matter at hand, at a time when the political situation for queer people, and especially transgender and transsexual people in the United States and abroad, has become so dire. My prevailing affect at the completion of this project is fear—and it speaks to my place of enormous privilege as a white (now-)man with a middle-class upbringing who has spent most of his adult life in academia that, at the start of my project, this was not the case. I believe some of that fear comes through in my prose, which I'm not sure is a wholly bad thing. I am sure I would have written a different kind of dissertation under different circumstances. Nevertheless, whereas parts of this project are serious, other parts are very funny. Some of the funny parts are actually serious, and some of the serious parts funny. I can't help but giggle, for example, at Ralph Werther-Jennie June's claims to have thrown h/imself onto moss-covered graves at night weeping for h/is plight—mostly because I could easily see myself succumbing to the same impulse, had I easier access to an overgrown cemetery.[57] (Jennie, I am mostly joking; I do think that you are probably having a worse time than I am.) I do not want to overinflate the stakes of my project, but I do hope that it might provide a couple of useful insights into how some prevailing myths about queerness developed, and how at least one person dealt with some really difficult circumstances.

[57] Earl Lind, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (New York: Medico-legal journal, 1918), 46

Chapter 1: Impersonation/Imposture

> **Impersonate**, *v.t.* **1.** To invest with personality. **2.** To ascribe the qualities of a person to; to personify. **3.** To represent the person of; to personate.
> **Personate**, *v.t.* **1.** To assume the character of; to counterfeit; to feign. **2.** To disguise; to mask.[1]
>
> Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1872)

On February 23, 2023, Tennessee became the first state to pass a bill—House Bill 9—banning "adult cabaret" performances "on public property or in a location where the adult cabaret performance could be viewed by a person who is not an adult." An "adult cabaret performance" is defined as:

> adult-oriented performances that are harmful to minors, as such term is defined under present law; feature go-go dancers, exotic dancers, strippers, *male or female impersonators*, or similar entertainers; and include a single performance or multiple performances by an entertainer. [Emphasis mine.]

An "entertainer" is defined as a person who provides:

> (1) Entertainment within an adult-oriented establishment, regardless of whether a fee is charged or accepted for entertainment and regardless of whether entertainment is provided as an employee, escort, or an independent contractor; or
> (2) Adult cabaret entertainment, regardless of whether a fee is charged or accepted for entertainment and regardless of whether entertainment is provided as an employee or an independent contractor.[2]

The Tennessee bill is just one of many bills circulating in state legislative bodies across the United States that target drag performances. This legislation is part of the larger ongoing nationwide movement among conservatives and far-right extremist groups to scale back legal

[1] Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam & Co., 1872), 367, 534.
[2] Tennessee General Assembly, "Senate Bill 3 / House Bill 9," accessed February 25, 2023, https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0003. For similar language see Missouri House Bill 1650, https://house.mo.gov/Bill.aspx?bill=HB1650&year=2024&code=R, accessed February 26, 2024; and North Carolina House Bill 673, https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2023/H673, accessed February 26, 2024. Other bills define drag as a performance in which a performer's biological sex does not match their stage persona, or one that exaggerates elements of female or male presentation through costumes, makeup, prostheses, etc.

rights and protections for transsexual and transgender individuals, and to restrict general expression of gender nonconformity.[3]

Promotors of such legislation insist that its purpose is to shield minors from obscene or inappropriate content. A representative for Tennessee Governor Bill Lee stated that "the bill specifically protects children from obscene, sexualized entertainment"; the organization Gays Against Groomers, which backed a similar bill in Arizona claims to "directly oppose the sexualization and indoctrination of children"; Montana Senator Braxton Mitchell stated that their "Republican caucus believes strongly that there is no such thing as a family-friendly drag show"; Nebraska Senator Dave Murman explained that the similar bill he proposed was to "protect children."[4] The rhetoric of "protecting" children from queer folk is "'linked to Western ideals of childhood innocence and its intersection with the discourse of child development,' which assumes children are 'too young to deal emotionally and cognitively with concepts fundamental to narratives of struggle, survival, and procreation.'"[5] Additionally, invoking children as an innocent and susceptible group in need of protection is a common tactic for drumming up public antagonism toward targeted populations; as Lee Edelman points out, there exists a tacit "social consensus" that a public appeal on behalf of America's children is "impossible to refuse."[6] These

[3] For up-to-date on the status of anti-trans legislation at the state and national levels, please see the Trans Legislation Tracker, which tracks legislation that targets transgender people's access to healthcare, education, legal recognition, freedom of expression, and general public existence: https://translegislation.com/?fbclid=IwAR1mth-MJo8Q79YkcRwkzLRXUpQFVUo_EuwDVhe2eD7PCIRkbE9dk3TIC3Y.

[4] Solcyre Burga, "Tennessee Passed the Nation's First Law Limiting Drag Shows. Here's the Status of Anti-Drag Bills Across the U.S." *Time*, March 5, 2023. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://time.com/6260421/tennessee-limiting-drag-shows-status-of-anti-drag-bills-u-s/.

[5] Kerry H. Robinson, *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children's Contemporary Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 23, cited in Julie C. Garlen and Sarah L. Hembruff. "Children as 'Difference Makers': Viral Discourses of Childhood Innocence and Activism in #Blacklivesmatter." *Children's Geographies* 21, no. 5 (2023), 930. For a historical overview of the construction of "childhood innocence," see Robinson, *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood*, chapter 3.

[6] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 2. Note also that recent movements advocating for transgender rights have made liberal use of the slogan, "Protect Trans Kids." See, for example, Judson Berger, "Yes, Protect Trans Kids," *National Review*, April 14, 2023, accessed February 29,

bills, while (for now) officially an effort to protect children, are but one measure in a larger ideological movement against trans and other queer folk.

Beyond the obvious fear in response to the fact that drag bills represent an explicit measure to restrict freedoms of expression for LGBTQ+ Americans, a great deal of concern has arisen among queer, and especially trans, populations about the vagueness of the language implemented in these bills. (For example, Tennessee House Bill 9 does not specify what makes an establishment "adult-oriented," and states that a person may be considered an entertainer "regardless of whether a fee is charged or accepted" for their services.) Trans, nonbinary, and queer individuals worry that terms such as "impersonator," "performer," and "entertainer" are so poorly defined that they could easily be extended to prosecute any person whose outward presentation does not match their birth sex—or even to other public expressions of gender nonconformity, including expressions of same-sex desire.

The Tennessee bill's authors' choice to use the word *impersonator* rather than a related term like *drag* or *cross-dressed* is especially striking because of the ways in which this term is semantically loaded. In legal contexts, the word "impersonation" refers to identity fraud.[7] In the context of entertainment, impersonation refers to a mode of performance in which an actor or singer assumes a well-known character, or character type, to deliver song, spoken word, or both.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the definition of dramatic "impersonation" was broader, and simply described the act of *acting*—that is, to bring a character to life, to *person*-ate.

2024, https://www.nationalreview.com/the-weekend-jolt/yes-protect-trans-kids/; Will Stroude, "Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse trailer praised after fans spot 'Protect Trans Kids' poster," April 4, 2023, accessed February 29, 2024, https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/04/04/spider-man-across-the-spiderverse-trailer-trans-poster/; "Margaret Cho: 'We have to protect trans kids' lives,'" ABCNews, March 9, 2023, accessed February 29, 2024, https://abcnews.go.com/theview/video/margaret-cho-protect-trans-kids-lives-97745672.

[7] United States Code Title 18, Chapter 43, lists crimes that fall under the category of "false personation," including impersonating a citizen of the United States (§911), an officer or employee of the United States (§912), an arresting officer (§913), a creditor of the United States (§914), a foreign diplomat or officer (§915), a 4-H club member (§916), or a Red Cross member (§917). United States Office of the Law Revision Counsel, accessed August 20, 2023, https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title18/part1/chapter43&edition=prelim.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, "impersonator" typically referred to a performer who specializes in kinds of characters, including racial and ethnic impersonation, such as in the context of the blackface minstrel show or Irish impersonation, and *female and male impersonation*, a form in which a male character singer impersonated female characters and vice versa. It should be said that all racial or ethnic impersonations are gendered and all gendered impersonations racialized, but gender was almost always nominally foregrounded in the way cross-dressed performers were talked about.

Although nineteenth-century male and female impersonators may share some visual similarities with modern-day drag kings and queens, their brand of performance accomplished something quite different. This older form of impersonation was informed by the logic of the blackface minstrel show, and was ideologically aligned with a tradition of American entertainment that was grounded in the illusion, the curiosity, and the hoax. The intrigue and humor in the performance depended heavily on the audience's knowledge of the discrepancy between the sex of the performer, and the sex of the character being impersonated. On the other hand, modern-day drag tends to be interested in critiquing identity and displacing normalizing discourse, and engaging with the concept of gender on a meta level.

The recent anti-drag legislation is worrisome for reasons beyond incomplete or overly general definitions; the word "impersonator" itself makes these bills particularly dangerous for trans people. Of course, many transsexual and transgender people do not consider ourselves to be "impersonating" the opposite sex. We are not impersonating *anything* in the sense of portraying a character or false persona; we have simply decided to appear in a way that is not assumed to be the default for people born with our anatomy, with the goal of being able to move about the world in a way that feels congruent with our sense of reality. However, there is a long history of

conceptual slippage, in this country anyway, between staged impersonation as entertainment and individuals who transition or pass as a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth.

In this chapter I will establish a performance context for staged female and male impersonation in the nineteenth century that encompasses a) other, contemporary forms of impersonation; b) a larger economy of popular culture and entertainment that had to do with illusion, hoaxing, and curiosity; and, c) the relationship of both to the idea of a gendered self. First I will explore historical usage of the term "impersonation" as it has been applied to staged entertainment, in order to demonstrate its etymological ties to deception and imposture. Next, I will discuss the role of staged impersonation in inventing "types" of people—racial and gendered—in nineteenth-century entertainment. I will show that impersonation worked alongside "official" discourses like scientific racism, legislation, foreign policy, and, later, sexology, to establish stereotypes that encompassed both outward traits and behaviors, and innate qualities. Specifically, I argue that while the field of sexology was articulating a connection between gender-nonconforming presentation and sexually-deviant behavior, a parallel discourse existed in popular entertainment. Some scholars have claimed that staged impersonation was reacting to these emergent sexual stereotypes, but I propose that impersonation played an active role in their invention.[8]

Finally, I suggest that impersonation not only helped to invent sexual and gendered types, but taught audiences how to think *about* these types of people. Namely, I argue that this performance mode helped to train the general public to think about cross-dressing, passing, or otherwise gender nonconforming people as being unnatural, while also impersonating something they are not. To do so, I situate impersonation within a broader economy of nineteenth-century

[8] See Rodger, "He Isn't A Marrying Man"; Sharon Ullman, "'The Twentieth Century Way': Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 4 (1995): 573-600.

entertainments that included hoaxes, curiosities, and optical and aural illusions. Building on the arguments previous scholars have made, that some of these forms encouraged a particular interpretive mode that places audiences in an "expert" position relative to the object being observed, I argue that a similar interpretive mode was at work in the nascent genre of impersonation—one where the audience is invited to make judgments about the interiority of the performer or character onstage—which enabled mainstream ideas about cross-dressing and gender passing people that emerged in the late nineteenth century and persist to this day.

Im/personate, *v.t.*

Today, the label "impersonator" in the context of entertainment is typically reserved for two types of performers: drag queens or kings (female/male impersonators), and performers who specialize in celebrity imitations (e.g., Elvis impersonators). This was not always the case; early-to-mid nineteenth-century print usage of "im/personate," refers sometimes to performers who specialize in specific character types,[9] but is equally applied to actors and acting more generally.[10] I argue that the shift in understanding of the term "impersonation" is deeply

[9] For example: "The celebrated Lecturer on Oratory, and impersonator of the Poets, Orators and Statesmen of America. MR. CLIREHUGH" (*New York Herald*, March 5, 1847, p. 3); "Professor Whitney, the celebrated Orator and Impersonator, respectfully announces that he will give his chaste, popular and elegant entertainments in the magnificent Concert Room of this Hall ... when he will have the honor to introduce some of his most interesting characters, the Indian, Briton, American, Irishman and [?], interspersed with anecdotes and poetic recitals." (*New York Daily Tribune*, April 19, 1852, p. 8); "The leading man, Mr. E McDonough, has a Philadelphia reputation. Mr. E Thomson is one of the best impersonators of serious old men in the country." (*Boston Herald*, February 26, 1855, p. 2); "From the New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore Theatres. This highly talented and popular impersonator of old men's characters, Mr. W. H. Bailey, his first appearance here for three years." (*Pittsburgh Morning Post*, April 10, 1858, p. 2); "Master Eugene, The Nonpareil Vocalist, Danseuse, and impersonator of Female Characters, whose wonderful Histrionic, Vocal and Terpsichorean performances have been the theme of universal admiration during the past six years…" (*New York Clipper*, February 4, 1860, p. 334)

[10] For example: "In the afternoon, from 3 to 5 o'clock, and in the evening at 7, and again at 3 1/2 o'clock, the Little General will appear in various Costumes and performances of the stage, in the Lecture Roots, in each of which he will personate a bombastic MILITARY GENERAL!" (*New York Herald*, March 5, 1847, p. 3); "Mr. Brougham revived his famous 'Metamora' travestie last night with considerable success … The burlesque was only moderately played,—a lack of study being more or less observable in all the impersonators." (*New York Daily Times*, September 16, 1856, p. 1); "The first piece was the favorite comedy, 'The Irish Ambassador'; Mr. John Drew being the Sir Patrick O'Plenipo. It was a relief to see this character played without the slightest dash or taint of vulgarity. Tryone

embroiled in ideas about counterfeit, illusion, race, and sex that have roots in nineteenth-century American popular culture.

Impersonation derives from the Latin word *persona*, for "mask." The first American dictionary appearance of the word *impersonate* is in Noah Webster's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1828. Webster provides three definitions: "1. To invest with personality, or the bodily substance of a living being. 2. To ascribe the qualities of a person to; to personify. 3. To represent the person of; to personate; as, he *impersonated* Macbeth."[11] (The derivatives "impersonation" and "impersonator" are listed underneath.) Webster later defines its synonym, "personate," as follows: "1. To assume the character of; to represent by a fictitious appearance; to represent by a fictitious or assumed character; to counterfeit; to feign; as, a personated devotion. 2. To net forth an unreal character; to disguise; to mask. 3. To resemble. 4. To describe. 5. To represent for praise or blame; to celebrate; to extol."[12] This collection of definitions reveals several related concepts: the insertion or transference of the qualities or essence of one living person into another, the assumption of false identity, and acting.

Acting and identity fraud are closely connected; the theater as a site of fraud, dishonesty, and immorality is a recurrent theme across a number of cultural and historical contexts, including nineteenth-century America.[13] Antitheatrical sentiment in the United States had roots in Puritan values, who believed that theater encouraged disorder and excess, and distracted from work.[14] Robert Allen identifies two characteristics of theatrical performance that were most offensive to Puritan values, mimicry and spectacle:

Power, who … was, beyond comparison, its best impersonator, as a whole, could not refrain from an indulgence in many aberrations from the straight line of decent propriety, in the performance of this part." (*Daily Picayune*, October 23, 1857, p. 2).

[11] Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 664.

[12] Ibid., 974.

[13] See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Lisa A. Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[14] Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 82–3, cited in Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 47.

> To disguise oneself and pretend to be someone else — particularly of another rank or gender—was to mock nature and God. Furthermore, the stage identities of players refused to stay put. Actors metamorphosed every day: a king one day became a villainous usurper the next, who became a clown the next, and so on. When male players took on female roles, sexual confusion was added to class confusion. For these deceivers to enact tales of what might have been but was not was to give a false version of the history through which God's work was revealed to man: plays were inherently blasphemous. [15]

In addition to pretending to be something they are not, actors create spectacles of themselves, and display themselves publicly for money, thus connecting them with "the sin of idolatry and the crimes of exhibitionism and prostitution."[16] Though Puritans represented only one portion of the population of the United States at this point, widespread religious opposition of the theater generated some reluctance to attend the theater among the population at large.

By the mid nineteenth-century, a number of theatrical reforms had passed, including the separation and stratification of venues by class and the development of museum theaters (such as P. T. Barnum's) which catered to the upper- and emergent middle-classes audiences with the promise of being both moral (eliminating the presence of alcohol, prostitution, and boisterous behavior) and educational (programing plays and lectures that were intended to impart good morals).[17] These changes lowered public hostility toward the theater; however, the word "impersonator" continued to be applied to actors, and its earlier entailments of mimicry and deception carry through to later iterations of male and female impersonation, where the use of the term persists despite falling out of use for actors in the more general sense.

By the 1860s, the word "impersonator" appeared increasingly in reference to performers who specialize in specific character types. This format was first established by the blackface minstrel show, the most popular form of entertainment among white Americans for much of the

[15] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 48.
[16] Ibid, 49.
[17] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 65. See also Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

nineteenth century, in which white male performers darkened their skin and acted out stock characters that created offensive caricatures of Black people. Other kinds of racial and ethnic impersonation followed, such as yellowface impersonations, and "ethnic" white impersonations, including Irish, German, Jewish, and Italian, as well as occasional "Yankee" characters, presumably meant to represent white New Englanders. The phrase "female impersonator" first appears in the context of the blackface minstrel show, referring to white male actors who specifically took on Black female roles, but is subsequently applied to white male actors playing white female roles, and to actors of color who performed in variety and minstrel troupes as barriers that had prevented them from appearing onstage began to lift. The first mention of an "impersonator of male characters" is in reference to Annie Hindle in 1868, the first of her kind to perform in the United States, and the profession "male impersonator" proliferated quicky thereafter.

The increased usage of "impersonator" or "impersonation" in reference to specific character types suggests the emergence of a new inflection of that term to mean actors pretending to be a particular *kind* of person. This understanding is also reflected in contemporary elocution manuals, or books that provided instruction on public speaking; many such books feature a section on impersonation. Frank Fenno's *Science and Art of Elocution* (1874), for example, provides a "list of impersonations," or scripts, which are grouped into categories by race and ethnicity, gender, and age.[18] The next section will explore the methods through which staged impersonation presented "kinds" of people as stock character types. These character types—which comprised visual and aural traits, performative behaviors, and imagined traits—were usually related to—but not an accurate representation of—real people who existed off the

[18] Frank H. Fenno, *The Science and Art of Elocution; or, How to Read and Speak.* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Company, 1878), 108–10.

stage. By repeatedly performing these racial, ethnic, and gendered types, staged impersonation gave them currency in U.S.-American culture.

Impersonation

Among the white supremacist racial projects in the nineteenth-century United States was the first form of American mass entertainment, the blackface minstrel show. In this genre, white male performers darkened their skin and performed as stock characters meant to represent Black people, depicting the characters as stupid, childlike, lazy, and vulgar.[19] The minstrel show began as a part of the economy of spectacularized violence that Saidiya Hartman calls the "obscene theatricality of the slave trade."[20] At "the height of [the minstrel show's] popularity," it featured "a semicircle of four or five or sometimes more white male performers" with "an array of instruments, usually banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine" who would "stage a tripartite show" that included songs, banter, a "group of novelty performances (comic dialogues, malapropistic 'stump speeches,' cross-dressed 'wench' performances, and the like)," and finally a narrative skit.[21]

Although the characters featured were intentionally-cruel imaginings of the white performers and did not represent real Black people, they established stereotypes that quickly gained traction and came to permeate the hegemonic culture. Hartman points out the centrality of violence to the minstrel show, which often staged slapstick physical conflict between characters;

[19] For accounts of political and social consequences of the minstrel show, see Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Lott, *Love and Theft*; William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
[20] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17.
[21] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

such representations helped to define blackness in terms of vulnerability to violence.[22] At the same time, the minstrel show portrayed its characters as childlike, simple, and carefree, "obscur[ing] violence and conflat[ing] it with pleasure."[23] Hartman points out that a running theme in the minstrel show was mocking the blackface characters' efforts to assimilate into white culture (for example, the Zip Coon character's failed attempts to emulate dandyism), thus "binding" the characters to their racial categorization, whether they are enslaved or free. This assuredness in the social order, Hartman writes, was at the heart of the minstrel show: the "pleasure obtained from the security of place and order and predicated upon chattel slavery."[24]

Although blackface minstrelsy nominally foregrounds the darkening of skin, music and dialect played as significant a role in articulating the characters of the minstrel show. As Jennifer Lynn Stoever writes, "minstrelsy's aural practice involved distorted dialect, exaggerated intonation, rhythmic speech cadences, and particular musical instruments such as the banjo and bone castanets allegedly lifted from 'the plantation,'" contributing an " enduring … array of sonic stereotypes" to the way white Americans imagined "blackness."[25] These sonic attributes were not only heard, but enacted through dance, affording white performers the ability to perform "ragged" movements that would have been considered "improper" were they not masked.[26] Through a complex history of negotiations on and off the stage, these performances—what Matthew Morrison calls "scripts of racial 'authenticity'"—were "grafted onto physiology and claim[ed] to represent natural interiority," in a process of "historical embodiment of racialized sound."[27]

---

[22] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26.
[23] Ibid., 25.
[24] Ibid., 31.
[25] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 84.
[26] Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 815.
[27] Ibid., 796. See also Mendi Obadike's theory of "acousmatic blackness," in "Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2005), 72, 71; Nina Eidsheim's "sonic blackness" in "Marian

Much impersonation was purely sonic and gestural, for example, in the case of Irish impersonation by white performers. Irish-Americanness was already being negotiated on the variety stage at the onset blackface minstrelsy, which the predominantly Irish- and English-descended performers used as a medium to "cultivate white working class consciousness."[28] Eric Lott and Dale Cockrell suggest that minstrel performers used blackface performance as an escape from Victorian bourgeois ideology, the mask of the blackface characters affording them opportunities to conduct themselves in ways that would otherwise mark them with ethnic or class abjection.[29] As Hartman writes, the "blackface mask," like "the black body" under slavery, "served as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment."[30] More generally, the minstrel show helped whiteness to establish its "illusory integrity" through group "attraction and/or antipathy to blackness."[31] Furthermore, through their "indiscriminate use and possession of the black body," white minstrel performers reenacted "the relations of mastery and servitude and the possession of a figurative body of blackness."[32] By staging racist structures that made people into property, early minstrel performers—even those who were looked down upon as immigrants—gained access to whiteness.

Irish-Americanness was also negotiated through Irish impersonation, a form of ethnic impersonation that developed following the format and methods of the minstrel show (alongside yellowface, German, "Yankee," and later Jewish and Italian types).[33] Although performers did not alter their skin tone, by the mid-nineteenth century, "Irish" (or "Celtic") was understood to

---

Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011); and Barbara Savage's "aural blackface" *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7. All cited in Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 794.

[28] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 32.

[29] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 53.

[30] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.

[31] Ibid., 32.

[32] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 32.

[33] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 193–4.

be a distinct racial type despite a similarity in skin tone to European-Americans of English descent. Matthew Frye Jacobson finds that in American thinking, whiteness has not always been perceived as a consequence of complexion, but is constructed through a complex web of factors.

In response to the shifting social makeup resulting from industrialization and immigration in the late nineteenth century, it was in the 1860s that the first print distinctions between "Irish" or "Celtic" and "Anglo-Saxon" or "English" become commonplace (what Jacobson characterizes as a "racial refinement" from the monolith "white"), and by the time of the Civil War, the New York *Tribune* was depicting rioting Irish-Americans in New York as a "savage mob," a "pack of savages," "savage foes," "demons," and "incarnate devils."[34] This notion of "variegated whiteness" persisted through the nineteenth century, appropriating the language of savagery, animality, and the demonic that was originally invented to describe peoples of the African and American continents as well as other colonized areas of the world. Developing branches of scientific racism, such as polygenism, already imagined that people of African, Indigenous American, and Aboriginal Australian descent were identifiable by visible racialized differences; these fields then claimed that whiteness could be measured in "degrees" depending on the presence or absence of these pre-existing racial markers such as "coarse skin, big hands and feet, and broad teeth," all of which were then also projected onto people of Irish descent.

A parallel discourse existed on the popular stage. Gillian Rodger traces the emergence of the Irish character song to the 1850s, subsequently development into an act that would become a staple of variety theater through the end of the century.[35] The earliest Irish songs depicted the Irish as drunk, stupid, and barbaric. Because white performers did not darken their skin to impersonate Irish characters, these impersonations were largely sonic and gestural, including the

[34] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 41.
[35] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 98–106.

use of dialect, as well as musical elements that signposted Irish racial identity. Some such attributes were the use of the fiddle, dotted rhythms, and jig meter, which Irish songs shared with minstrel songs. These similarities were part of a history of musical exchange, appropriation, and theft between people of African and Irish descent in the United States. According to Christopher Smith, cultural sharing between African-American and Irish-American canal workers in New York resulted in cross-fertilization between European, African, Irish, and Caribbean musical forms.[36] For example, as early as the seventeenth century enslaved African people who were musicians learned a diverse repertory of European song forms, such as court music and commercial dance, adapting them to instruments such as the fiddle and imbuing them with elements of African music in order to advertise them as new tunes for a diverse and higher-paying audience. Such musical innovations led to forms like the "Virginia reel" and "breakdown" that the first blackface minstrel performers, most of whom were working-class Irish Americans, appropriated in the early days of minstrelsy. Other sonic techniques include the use of "nonsense" in Irish songs, expressed in nonlinguistic syllables and in fanciful narrative.[37] Nonsense lines serve to depict the Irish characters as drunk or delusional, and also present an opportunity for the audience to sing along with the performer.[38] It should also be noted that malapropisms and nonsense sentences also featured heavily in the "stump speech" of the blackface minstrel show.

---

[36] Christopher J. Smith, "Blacks and Irish on Riverine Frontiers: The Roots of American Popular Music." *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2011), 87.

[37] One such Irish dialect song, "Pat's Curiosity Shop," appears in the *Annie Hindle Songster*. The titular character implores the audience to come visit his shop of curiosities, listing them off in verses and claiming in every chorus that his collection of oddities rivals that of P.T. Barnum himself. In addition to its use of dialect, this song is structured in a rambling list, a typical quality of the Irish song that served to paint its character as drunk or stupid. Naming a menagerie of fanciful items associated with magic (witch's brooms), mythology (the Irish Giant), and charlatanism (the "learned pig"), this song further depicts the Irish character as either gullible (if he does indeed believe in the integrity of his collection) or as deceitful. "Learned" or "sapient" pigs, trained to perform feats like counting, recognizing words, and responding to questions by gesturing toward word cards placed in front of them, were a popular touring attraction in the Anglo world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These pigs were frequently named Toby.

[38] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 100–1.

Another convention of the minstrel show used in Irish impersonation was the "sentimental" song, which depicted the Irish immigrant as longing to return to their homeland. The sentimental "plantation song" (see, for instance, the songs of Stephen Foster) portrayed a free person expressing longing for their previous, "simple" life under enslavement. Though viewed by many abolitionists as socially progressive due to their "humanizing" portrayal of enslaved people (in contrast with the more overtly grotesque representations of the minstrel show), the plantation song remained offensive and paternalistic, revising the history of the Atlantic slave trade to remove its horrors, and painting its subject as pathetic, weak-minded, and in need of salvation by white people. Although the same ethic of plantation paternalism does not apply to the Irish immigrant, it nevertheless paints him as childlike and helpless, forever longing for a return to his native land and therefore being in, but never quite of, American culture. Rodger also points out the gendered dimension of these songs: the fact that Irish and Black American male characters were assigned sentimental songs, a genre typically relegated to female characters, undermines their masculinity, reinforcing the narrative that normative gender can only fully be expressed by white bodies, and that otherwise-racialized individuals are always, to some degree, gender-deviant.

Sonic cues may have been especially instrumental when performers did less in the way of altering their appearance. Writing about what are now considered to be different kinds of ethnic whiteness, Jacobson writes that "an earlier generation of Americans *saw* Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness."[39] In the absence of visual cues, then, music, dialect, and gesture may have taken precedence as a method of impersonation. Dierdre Loughridge suggests that we understand language and verbal discourse in terms of audiovisual technology, and urges

[39] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 10.

cultural historians to "take seriously the ways in which they—like music—could produce audiovisual experiences as vivid as those of a magic lantern show."[40] I believe that song and speech, in impersonation, likely worked as one such audiovisual technology. Jennifer Lynne Stoever observes, in her reading of Charles Chesnutt's short story collection *The Conjure Woman*, that dialect is "a fictional device in the truest sense of the word: an invented visual representation of sound connected to—and reinforcing—the notion that black Americans are out of time ('old'), out of place ('Southern'), and out of step ('ignorant') with modernity."[41] Here, written dialect is an audiovisual technology of race: a visual evocation of a sound that indexed "blackness" to white listeners and readers. In what is perhaps a flip-side to Eidsheim's assertion that "nonsonic information [including visual] plays a crucial role in how we perceive voices and determine racial identities in general," dialect and other sonic markers may have been utilized by performers of, for example, "Anglo-Saxon" descent to influence audiences to read them visually as "Celtic."[42]

The idea that a sonic and gestural performance could articulate a body is also evident in contemporary elocution manuals, many of which, by the 1870s, included sections on impersonation where voice and gesture were primary techniques. Frank Fenno, for example, declared that a sufficient impersonation entailed a change in "tone," "style," and "general manner."[43] W. H. Fertich's *An Instructive Elocution* (1876) specifies that "the application of [imagination, empathy, the sacrifice of one's own individuality, and facial/bodily gesture] together with vocal power and skill, enables one to personate the character of another."[44] In John

[40] Loughridge, *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow*, 15.
[41] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 166.
[42] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness,'" 644.
[43] See Fenno, *The Science and Art*, 96; Frank H. Fenno, *The Speaker's Favorite; or Best Things for Entertainments for Home, Church and School* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Company, 1893), 10.
[44] W. H. Fertich, *An Instructive Elocution: Designed Especially for Teachers and Private Learners* (Muncie, Ind., The Author, 1876), 34.

Swett's manual, *School Elocution* (1884), "dialect reading" and "[im]personation" are collapsed into a single section.[45] The elocution movement was closely connected to the development of early recording technologies. Alexander Graham Bell (who was himself an elocutionist) invented the ear phonautograph with the intention of teaching deaf people to speak, thus achieving "social mobility through the transformation of dialect," and "eradicat[ing] cultural difference through the perfection of technique."[46] In other words, elocution manuals and early recording technologies demonstrated an understood close connection between audible utterance, and social categorization.

Early sound reproduction technology rested on the basic (and persisting) principle that sound could be turned into other things, and other things into sound.[47] In the case of the ear phonautograph, the machine turned sound waves, through the tympanic apparatus of the ear, into visible etchings. In staged impersonation, sound and gesture are transformed into an imagined body, representing a kind of person. This "migration of voice between bodies" appeared at a number of other, contemporary cultural sites, including ventriloquism and spiritualism.[48] I argue that impersonation is best understood as being among these audiovisual technologies, in which sound moves between bodies, social strata, and even serves on its own as a representation of those people and categories.

---

[45] John Swett, "Dialect Reading and Personation" in *School Elocution: A Manual of Vocal Training in High Schools, Normal Schools, and Academies* (New York: American Book Company, 1884), 262

[46] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 37.

[47] Ibid., 34.

[48] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 342. Some scholars have understood racial impersonation, and white imagining and mimicry of "the Black voice" in terms of "racial ventriloquism"; see Jennifer Glaser, *Borrowed Voices: Writing & Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); and Ryan Jay Friedman, "'Mike Fright': Racial Ventriloquism in the Hollywood Talkies." In *Media Ventriloquism: How Audiovisual Technologies Transform the Voice-Body Relationship*, ed. Jaimie Baron, Jennifer Fleeger, and Shannon Wong Lerner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 83–96.

To summarize so far, staged entertainment played a significant role in inventing and reinforcing racial, ethnic, and gendered identities in nineteenth-century America. The blackface minstrel show was the first site where this process occurred; its conventions were then were reappropriated for other forms of racial, ethnic impersonation. Most racial and ethnic character types were enacted through dialect, and were understood by audiences regardless of whether the performers darkened their skin (including white performers impersonating characters of any racial stereotype, or, later, performers of color impersonating characters supposed to represent their own race). This format taught audiences to interpret people as belonging to racial or ethnic categories that encompass attributes like visual and sonic markers, as well as mannerisms and behavioral traits. This type of thinking was articulated in emergent racist and evolutionary theories that presented themselves as scientific or anthropological, which ballooned in the nineteenth century, but had a parallel life in mass entertainment culture.

Sexology and the Invention of Sexual Stereotypes

This time period also saw the emergence of new, sexually deviant types—namely, the invert—being articulated at a number of cultural levels. Most frequently credited for "inventing" the invert is the field of sexology, a field established by psychiatrists and psychologists in the late nineteenth century to study human sexual behavior, with special attention to those behaviors that were considered abnormal. In 1870 German psychiatrist Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal first wrote about what he called the "contrary sexual instinct" or sexual behaviors between members of the same sex.[49] Westphal's text was significant because it described same-sex inclinations as a

[49] Carl Westphal, *Die conträre Sexualempfindung, Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes. Archiv f. Psychiatrie* 2 (1870), 73–108.

congenital abnormality, rather than a psychological or moral shortcoming, thus producing a definition of a sexual behavior as an innate physical condition.

Shortly thereafter, Richard von Krafft-Ebing initiated a study of a range of behaviors that were considered "perversions." Generally speaking, perversions were sexual behaviors that were not reproductively or economically useful: sex between men or between women, non-reproductive sex between men and women (including oral and anal sex), masturbation, sadomasochism, sexual interest or excitement from objects (such as shoes, or certain fabrics), other sex acts considered purely recreational, as well as behaviors such as cross-dressing that were seen as transgressive along the lines of biological sex. Krafft-Ebing taxonomized these perversions according to type and perceived severity, as well as providing case studies, and published them in a volume called *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886. The main focus of study was the condition known as "sexual inversion," Krafft-Ebing's term for exhibiting the characteristics associated with the opposite sex, which could include behaviors such as attraction to members of one's own sex (eventually recoined as homosexuality), cross-dressing, participating in social behaviors associated with the opposite sex, or degrees of physical identification with the opposite sex (including the desire for anatomy more closely resembling that of the opposite sex, or the presence of ambiguous primary or secondary sex characteristics).

Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* was the first major English-language work on the subject of sexual inversion; Ellis, whose wife was a homosexual, advocated for the decriminalization of homosexual practices, describing it as not a perversion or disease but a biological variant that was better managed by treating the patient with dignity than by attempting to rehabilitate them into a heterosexual lifestyle.[50] The earliest known American appearance of

[50] John Johnson, "Havelock Ellis and his 'Studies in the Psychology of Sex,'" *British Journal of Psychiatry* 134 (1979), 522–27.

the words "homosexual" and "heterosexual" is in an 1892 article in a Chicago medical journal by Dr. James G. Kiernan, which defined "heterosexuality" as having "[sexual] inclinations to both sexes" (different from the present-day understanding of the concept) and "homosexuality" as persons whose "general mental state is that of the opposite sex."[51] By the early twentieth century, there was a prevailing view among European-descended people in the United States that gender-deviant behavior was a potential signifier of inversion.

Siobahn Somerville demonstrates that the field of sexology adopted its methodology, theoretical frameworks, and vocabulary directly from scientific racism. Nineteenth-century scientific racism in its obsession with anatomical measurements established the "epistemological assumption" that "the body was a legible text, with various keys or languages available for reading its symbolic codes"; in other words, that humans could be taxonomized according to arbitrary visual markers such as skin pigment or head circumference.[52] Furthermore, a significant way in which scientific racism articulate race was through the language of gender deviance and sexual abnormality, focusing especially on purported difference in genital size between people of European descent and people of African descent. This supposed difference projected excess and sexual deviance onto the bodies of Black women and men, discursively framed as signaling barbarism or primitiveness. Thus the very idea of sexual difference was crucial to the conceptualization of race as a category. Once again treating the body as a text onto which difference could be read, sexologists in the United States similarly fixated on genital size, mapping pre-existing myths about deviance from white sexual norms onto the new figure of the white female invert, who was consistently characterized as having unusually large genitals.[53] Sexology also shared a eugenic impulse with scientific racism; one of its goals was to identify

[51] Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 20.
[52] Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*, 23.
[53] Ibid., 25–27.

disorders and sexual deviations that made one "unfit" to "perpetuate the race," and to either cure or contain these individuals.[54] Crucially, sexology took from scientific racism the assumption that humans fell into "types" that could be visually and anatomically identified, and both fields were rooted in white supremacist ideology.

This literature codified, in "medical" terminology, the concept of the "invert"—a person who was by virtue of biology, inclined toward sexual and social behaviors associated with the opposite sex. In the same manner as scientific racism provided "biological" justification of European domination over groups of people declared inferior (and indeed building on and contributing conceptually to that process), sexology provided biological reasoning behind the association between gender-transgressive behavior and deviant sexual behavior. This new figure of the invert was necessarily white because of her or his "newness": as Sarah Haley and Siobhan Somerville have demonstrated, Black women and men in the discourse of European and European-American racism were already understood to be sexually abnormal, queer, or inverted.[55] To be clear, the white "invert" was not understood to be less white due to their status as sexually abnormal; white queer people are still given advantages by racist structures in our everyday lives. The white invert was marked as sexually different *because* they were not already marked racially, which reflects the assumption that were they *not* inverted then they *would* be sexually normative.

However, sexology did not single-handedly invent the idea that sexually deviant behavior and gender nonconforming presentation had something to do with one another. Somerville writes that the influence of sexological discourse on popular discourse is often overstated: "while the 'expert' discourse of sexology was a powerful site for the emergence of these models of

[54] Ibid., 31.
[55] Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 40, 94-102; Somerville, *Queering the Color Line.*

homosexuality and their imbrication with racial discourses, it was also a relatively exclusive discourse (though … it drew from 'nonexpert' discourses and appealed to 'nonexpert' readers as well.)"[56] She insists that rather than ascribing undue weight to sexology as a guiding discourse, we give equal attention to the changing meanings of homosexuality in the culture at large. I suggest that variety theater, though an earlier form, is one such "nonexpert" site in which twentieth-century conceptual frameworks for thinking about gender, race, and sex began to percolate.

Specifically, I argue that, much like sexology adopted its logics and methods from scientific racism, white male and female impersonation adopted logics and methods from racial impersonation. Michael Omi and Howard Winant write that:

> in the United States, race is … a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States. … Since the historical encounter of the hemispheres and the onset of transatlantic enslavement were the fundamental acts of race-making, since they launched a global and world-historical process of "making up people" that constituted the modern world, race has become the template of both difference and inequality.[57]

They go on to specify that while "race" is an invented and mutable construct that arguably works as a structuring principle, *racism* is a material reality; furthermore, lived identity is intersectional, and that the categories of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are co-constitutive.[58] There is also no cut and dry distinction between racial or ethnic impersonation and gendered impersonation in theatrical contexts, not only because racial and ethnic impersonations are always gendered and gendered impersonations are always racialized, but because even white impersonators who specialized in character types of the opposite gender who were white did also

[56] Somerville, 39.
[57] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 106.
[58] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991), 1241–1299.

sometimes include racial and ethnic characters in their repertoire, and sometimes performed in minstrel shows. However, I propose that in the sense of "race" as a structuring concept, racial impersonation offered a performance rubric enabled male and female impersonators to stage sexual others as distinct "types."

The first female impersonators—that is, male actors who specialized in female stock characters—were performers in the minstrel show. These white male actors performed one of two blackface character, either the prima donna or the wench, both of which advanced ideas that Black women were sexually deviant. The prima donna was a light-skinned, aesthetically-white character who was considered beautiful and an object of sexual desire for both Black male characters onstage (played by white men), and white men in the audience. According to Katrina Moore, the prima donna represented "a particular population of Southern Black bondswomen, those who were often a byproduct of rape, between a White male and Black woman," and portrayed Black women as innately "lewd and lascivious" and thus perpetually sexually available to white men.[59] Because the character typically either ended up in a relationship with a male protagonist, or met a violent end, Moore asserts that the prima donna represented "the epitome of beauty and desirability" while still being "controlled by White men."[60]

The wench role, on the other hand, was intentionally grotesque, depicting its character as ugly, with exaggeratedly-large body parts. This representation built upon and reinforced stereotypes about Black womanhood as being primitive and deviant in comparison to white womanhood, working in tandem with other cultural institutions such as the freak show or museums that displayed actual Black women like Sarah Baartman as exhibits.[61] These same

[59] Katrina Thompson Moore, "The Wench: Black Women in the Antebellum Minstrel Show and Popular Culture," *The Journal of American Culture* 44, no. 4 (December 2021), 323.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 327.

ideas were being codified within as well as writings in scientific racism that sought to locate anatomical markers that could emblematize groups of people and serve as "empirical evidence" for what was already assumed about their deviation from the norms of whiteness; in reference to Black women, these writings focused obsessively on their sexuality.[62] The wench role in the minstrel show is therefore an example of a deviant sexual type being invented at the level of popular culture, alongside discourses that were, at the time, treated as anthropological or scientific.

As stated earlier, female impersonation, from its onset, was involved in articulating ideas about gendered otherness or deviance—initially as they pertained to Black women. By the late 1860s, female impersonation expanded to include white male performers impersonating white female characters in variety theater. The most well-archived of these performers is William Horace Lingard, an English actor who immigrated to the United States in 1868, and began performing as a character singer in New York. Lingard impersonated both female and male characters, including: ethnic impersonations; occupational impersonations such as a sailor, an actor, a dog dealer, and a cheese monger; the "swell," or upper-class man about town and his counterpart, the fashionable young girl, or "belle," and, famously, a soldier called "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines."[63] A self-described *protean* artist, Lingard would switch between many

[62] See Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1, "'Race,' Writing, and Difference" (Autumn 1985): 204–242; Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[63] See *William H. Lingard's "On the Beach at Long Branch" Song Book* (Dick & Fitzgerald Publishers, [1868]); and William H. Lingard, "Captain Jinks" (William A. Pond & Co., 1868). Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons provide a fascinating second-hand anecdote in *Gay L.A.* about an 1860s encounter between Harris Newmark and a "muscular-looking woman" who called herself "Captain Jinx," after Lingard's song. The woman was, apparently, "very strong for women's rights … and certainly looked it." See Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 15. On the "belle" character, see Michelle Durden, "Not Just a Leg Show: Gayness and Male Homoeroticism in Burlesque, 1868–1877," *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 3, no. 2 (March 2004), accessed February 1, 2020, https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/thirdspace/article/view/durden/3147.

characters over the course of each set. Unlike previous female impersonators, he did not perform primarily in minstrel shows. In surviving photographs and prints, Lingard is presented similarly to Francis Leon, one of the most widely-respected contemporary prima donna singers. Both wore in wigs and dresses typical of the time period, with fitted waists and stuffed busts to emulate a woman's figure. Lingard appears in dresses with high necklines, fitted sleeves, and in one instance an overskirt; Leon is pictured in fuller silhouettes with bustles and ruffled sleeves, in one instance with a low-cut neckline, reflecting changes in women's fashion of the 1860s and 70s. Both pose in a manner consistent with the way women appear in illustrations in photos, including details such as bent or soft wrists, heads inclined toward the viewer, and closed-mouthed smiles. Unlike Leon, Lingard sometimes appears in male costume; interestingly, his gendered appearance is no more or less congruent in male costume than it is in female costume. In the photograph of Lingard in a dress, his jaw stands out as being rather angular (a feature which seems to be softened in a contemporary illustration). In male costume, his face appears rounded and soft—perhaps because it is partially obscured by a fake moustache and what appears to be a wig covering much of his forehead. His appearance is not noticeably different from that of contemporary male impersonators—such as Annie Hindle or Ella Wesner—in male costume (see figures 1 through 4).

Figure 1: William Horace Lingard, in a dress

Figure 2: William Horace Lingard, in a suit

Figure 4: Annie Hindle, in a suit

Figure 3: Ella Wesner, in a suit

Male impersonation started in the United States in 1868 with the arrival of Annie Hindle, an English music hall performer who specialized in male characters.[64] Hindle was one of a handful of male impersonators in Britain performing in the mid-1860s, and was the first of her kind in the United States. Upon beginning her American career in New York, Hindle achieved almost instant popularity, and remained one of the most lauded singers in the profession for the next several decades. Based on the few surviving photographs of Hindle, she was virtually indistinguishable from contemporary male character singers. She was a short, sturdy-looking woman with curly hair cropped short, who is pictured in boxy-looking jackets. Her immediate (and ultimately more popular) successor, Ella Wesner, was similarly stocky and photographed in men's outfits that emphasize straight lines in her silhouette.

Annie Hindle's songster includes songs almost exclusively from a male perspective, many of which feature narratives of romantic pursuit (sometimes failed), occupational impersonations including a sailor and a postman, a Zip Coon song, and several "ethnic" dialect songs. A *New York Clipper* article dating from early in Hindle's career lists her impersonations as including "a gent of the first water," "a gent in the army," "the Washington fop," and "the lively young swell."[65] This repertoire is consistent with contemporary male character singers. To my knowledge Hindle is not documented as having performed in dresses in the United States; however, the same *Clipper* article describes her as "of medium stature, with a pleasing figure," suggesting that she may have sometimes performed in female attire. Reinforcing this hypothesis is the fact that one song in Hindle's songster, titled "Winking At Me," is presumably sung from

[64] For a detailed history of male impersonation as it developed between the mid-late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, see Gillian Rodger, "Male Impersonation on the North American Variety and Vaudeville Stage, 1868–1930," (PhD diss., University of Pittsburg, 1998), Rodger, "He Isn't A Marrying Man"; Rodger, "Champagne Charlie" in *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*; Rodger, *Just One of the Boys*.
[65] "Music Halls," *The New York Clipper*, December 19, 1869, 295.

the perspective of a female narrator.[66] As Rodger points out, none of the songs performed by Hindle or Wesner, representative of early male impersonators, employ an especially wide vocal range.[67] Unlike Lingard and Leon, their performances do not seem to have showcased vocal acrobatics, though both women were generally said to be good singers, Hindle an alto and Wesner a mezzo soprano.[68] The key feature of the male impersonation routine was the ability to switch between a number of realistic male characters very quickly, for which Annie Hindle was often praised.[69]

Male impersonation remained extremely popular through the nineteenth century, though by the turn of the twentieth century the artform looked very different than it had in its infancy. Gillian Rodger traces a large-scale shift in the manner of male impersonation from high realism in the performances of the first generation of impersonators, such as Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner, to less realistic impersonations in the later generation, such as those by Vesta Tilly, Kitty Doner and Ella Shields.[70] While the former favored a realistic mode of impersonation, the later generation tended to present more legibly as female by wearing more fitted attire, keeping their hair longer, and wearing makeup.

Alongside changes in performance style, later male impersonators were careful to present themselves publicly as inhabiting traditionally feminine social roles. Hindle and Wesner, the most prominent of the early male impersonators, made little to no effort to obscure their gender-transgressive behavior off the stage; Hindle and Wesner were both rumored, or known, to have

---

[66] *The Annie Hindle Songster* (New York: Frederic A. Brady, Publisher, 1869), 53–4. I will later discuss this song in greater detail.
[67] Rodger, "He Wasn't A Marrying Man," 112.
[68] I came across one negative review of Hindle's singing; a reporter in the *New York Clipper* noted that Hindle "makes up well, but has a voice that is by no means a pleasant one. Her business is rather taking, if her singing is not." (*New York Clipper*, September 4, 1869, 174). Other reviews are positive, praising her singing as "graceful and spirited" (*New York Clipper*, June 8, 1872, 79), and "with a vim and dash that was really refreshing" (*New York Clipper*, December 19, 1868, 295). Perhaps the disapproving reporter caught her on a bad night.
[69] On realism in male impersonation, see Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 129.
[70] Rodger, "He Isn't A Marrying Man," 123.

romantic relationships with women—not typical of male impersonators as far as we know, but notable since they were the most famous of their generation. Meanwhile, male impersonators of the latter generation, such as Vesta Tilley, spoke publicly about her distaste for "mannish" women, and emphasized her heterosexual marriage. Rodger argues this shift was the result of two things: first, a general move in variety toward "respectable" performances that appealed to a middle-class audience, and therefore a move away from realism and toward traditional modes of gender presentation; and, second, public anxiety about homosexuality that drove performers to distance themselves from displays of gender nonconformity. In the wake of the newly-medicalized discourses of homosexuality, male impersonators took steps to avoid accusations of sexual inversion based on their chosen profession.

Sharon Ullman makes a similar argument regarding female impersonators. Focusing on the public scrutiny around popular female impersonator Julian Eltinge, Ullman writes that contemporary attempts on the parts of journalists to read Eltinge for signs of true sexual deviance reflect a growing association between gender nonconforming behavior (such as cross-dressing) and homosexuality. To preeminently ward off allegations of homosexual behavior, Eltinge made an effort to emphasize his virility off the stage, appearing out of female costume in photographs, speaking publicly about living on a farm in order to demonstrate his penchant for manual labor, and advertising the fact that he was an amateur boxer. Ullman proposes that the widely-circulated discourse parsing out Eltinge's offstage appearance as a viably-heterosexual man versus his propensity for cross-dressing likely played a role in the production of "a common language addressing sexual practice and gender identity to the society at large."[71]

Rodger and Ullman have explored ways in which performers intentionally distanced themselves from obvious expressions of gender nonconformity for fear of being suspected of

[71] Ullman, "'The Twentieth Century Way,'" 600.

homosexuality, in response to the new medical discourse of inversion. I argue, however, that gendered impersonation in fact contributed to contemporary sexual and gendered stereotypes since its American inception. Even impersonation in which both performer and character were white was in conversation with stereotypes of sexual otherness and gender variance before sexology entered into the equation; rather than simply reacting to them, it likely played a role in inventing these stereotypes. This section will close by examining three more sexual stereotypes—the female husband, the aesthete, and the fairie—and explore potential ways in which male and female impersonation could have contributed to their formation.

The Female Husband

Although the medicalized figure of the invert did not yet exist in medical terminology for much of male impersonation's early life, the appearance and behavior of performers like Hindle and Wesner did have a cognate outside of theatrical culture, known as the *female husband.* Passing as male was a common strategy used by women or female-assigned people with a range of different intersectional experiences in order to navigate their world: to escape slavery, to marry, to find employment, to enter male-dominated spaces like the concert saloon, to travel, or simply because they felt more comfortable living as men. From the late eighteenth century onward, a character often referred to as the *female husband* became the subject of numerous journalistic pieces, novels, pamphlets, and songs. Female husband stories typically shared one or more common tropes: an adventurous usually white woman from modest or repressive social circumstances, who disappeared from the public eye, and was "discovered" "masquerading" in male attire. The female husband was sometimes apprehended and brought before law enforcement who found her guilty of any number of things, such as public intoxication,

brawling, enlisting in the army, or seducing women. Female husbands appeared with increasing frequency mid nineteenth century with the advent of the penny press, and appeared with fair regularity by the time Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner were performing in the 1870s and 1880s.

Lisa Duggan points out that the female husband story of the mid-nineteenth century "was not marked with deviant sexual desire or pathological psychology," and the passing itself was considered "eccentric," but overall "benign."[72] The "lesbian," or "invert," did not yet exist; nevertheless, the female husband's marriage was still regarded as "socially marginal and dangerous," as it represented a disruption to normative kinship and economic structures. By the 1890s, however, the "lesbian love murder story" developed—represented most famously by the murder of Freda Ward by her lover, Alice Mitchell in 1892—a genre that played a major role in construing "marriage" between two white women as pathological and violent. The genre flourished in the 1890s, but still had roots in popular culture of decades prior. One such place was in the female husband story; another was in the theater. Duggan writes:

> The lesbian love murder story, and other narratives of female sexual danger and deviance, developed in relation to the brothel and the figure of the prostitute throughout the nineteenth century. In close cultural and social proximity, the theater and the actress also played central roles, positioned at the boundary of female sexual respectability. Both settings, tainted as clearly or possibly immoral, provided extrafamilial living arrangements and economic support for some women and produced fearful images of untrustworthy femininity and suspect female masculinity—both referenced by the epithet "fast."[73]

There was a strong understood connection between female actors and sex work, and thus alterity, in nineteenth-century America. Actors place themselves on display for money, thus associating them with prostitution; this association was amplified in variety by the dynamics of the concert saloon, the setting out of which variety emerged. Concert saloons were typically staffed by

[72] Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 128.
[73] Ibid., 142.

"pretty waiter girls," women who served drinks dressed in revealing clothing, and were expected to flirt with male patrons.[74] Many of these women were also sex workers, and ran their businesses from within the saloons. Women who sang and acted in the concert saloons were often also expected to serve drinks; out of this nexus of things grew an expectation that a woman performing in variety was immoral and sexually available.[75] Even after a series of legal and moral reforms in the 1860s forced the removal of "pretty waiter girls" from variety halls, the assumption that actresses were prone to licentious behavior remained intact.[76]

This assumed connection between female actors and deviant behavior is evident in one lesbian love murder mystery that Duggan locates in the February 1892 issue of the *Memphis Public Ledger*, featuring a male impersonator, "Marie Hindle," obviously based on Annie Hindle:

> In 1869–70 the bright particular star of Broome's Variety Theater, on Jefferson Street, was Marie Hindle, a very attractive woman, who played male parts. Nature had especially fitted her for that line of the business. Her features and voice were masculine, and her tastes in accord with her physical peculiarities. Though by no means chary of accepting the admiration of the other sex, she cared nothing for men as such. Her inclination was altogether toward women, and she inspired in them a like feeling toward herself. It was remarked by the stage hands and those among the habitues who were admitted to the inner circle of the performers that Marie was a reigning beau among the petticoat brigade, from the well-paid high kicker to the humblest ''chair warmer.''[77]

The tale culminates in a brawl between two of "Hindle's" admirers; thanks to the intervention of two prudent male bystanders, who were able to restrain the women before they could draw knives, no one was hurt.

---

[74] Morris, *Incredible New York*, 49.
[75] Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure*, 126.
[76] On the Anti-Concert Saloon Bill of 1862 and its role in shaping variety entertainment, see Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, "Chapter 6: Legal Intervention."
[77] Reprinted in Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*, 142.

Duggan observes that a central plot point in the lesbian love murder story in the 1890s was young women's interest in the theater and the lives of actresses, which provided the possibility of "economic self-support and social freedom within the boundaries of a precarious respectability."[78] The theme of female deviance vis-à-vis unusual interest in actresses indeed seems to predate the 1880s, and even features in theatrical gossip of decades prior. An article published in the August 12, 1870 issue of *The New York Times* titled "LYDIA THOMPSON: The Persecutions of an Insane Woman—Diamonds, Love-Letters, Poetry and Violence," tells of a run-in popular burlesque performer Lydia Thompson had with a female admirer in the United States. Said admirer was apparently "in the habit of dressing herself in male attire and visiting the gallery," and had become "infatuated" with Thompson's performances:

> The fair burlesquer, Miss Lydia Thompson, seems to reserve all her sensations for the special benefit of Chicago. Her encounter with the editor of the Times of that city was just beginning to be looked upon as an old "story," when a circumstance transpired a few days since which has helped to revive it, and make the details as fresh as ever. It appears that for some months past Lydia has been pursued and haunted by an insane woman calling herself Miss Ellen A. Griffin, and that the said Ellen, while in male attire, had fallen "madly" in love with her.

The episode culminated after a show in Chicago one evening, when Griffin made a final attempt of many to enter Thompson's dressing room and shower her with gifts, to which Thompson retaliated by assaulting Griffin, leading to their joint arrest. As I have argued elsewhere, despite predating medicalized language of inversion, this story still indicates a connection between abnormal interest in other women, gender-transgressive behavior, and the theater.[79] The fact that it is couched in what Cleves identifies as a language of disbelief renders the woman in male attire a shocking anomaly, despite the fact that the tandem presentation of these details, implies that there was some frame of reference for their relationship.

[78] Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*, 148–149.
[79] James R. Ace, "A Character Singer In Male Attire: Annie Hindle in America, 1886–1868" (MA thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2017.), 61.

By sheer coincidence, a song published in Annie Hindle's songster, "The Baronet," mirrors this narrative almost exactly. (It really is a coincidence—Hindle's songster predates this story about Thompson by two years.) "The Baronet" portrays a subject who falls deeply in love with an opera singer, only to pursue her backstage and be slighted, making a fool of themselves, and ultimately watch her elope with a man of the upper class:

I knew an opera singer once,
And deep in love I fell,
She had a voice that tinkled like
The sweetest silver bell.
Upon herself and silvery notes,
I lavished love and gold'
You'll pity me—I'm sure you will,
When all my story's told.

For she bolted with a baronet,
A baronet! a baronet!
She bolted with a baronet,
And left no trace behind.

I used to take her every night,
In cabs to the stage door,
So happy, little dreaming,
The bad luck for me in store.
For once while wishing her good night,
A swell exclaimed, 'sweet pet,
I'll have that girl for my wife, as sure
As I'm a baronet.'

That fatal night, I'll ne'er forget,
I walked into the pit,
And in a stage box pompously,
I saw the baronet sit.
He threw my love a fine bouquet,
She picked it up and smiled,
I tore my gloves and ground my teeth,
I felt so awful wild.

The play being o'er I rushed behind
The curtain in a rage,
She wasn't in her dressing room,
She wasn't on the stage.
But in a brougham in the street,
The guilty pair I find,
I tried to stop the carriage,
But she cried out 'whip behind.'

SPOKEN.—Yes, and the brute of a coachman did whip behind too, and as I stood rubbing my shoulder—She drove off, &c.

I bought some precious ointment,
Which my shoulder greatly eased,
But precious ointment will not cure
A mind that is diseased.
It almost broke my heart last week,
To hear they both were wed;
But never mind, since that I've got
Another girl instead.

The protagonist of "The Baronet" is shown to be almost mad with desire for the opera singer; see specifically the line "precious ointment will not cure a mind that is diseased." I want to foreground two caveats: first, this song predates what Duggan identifies as a widespread understanding of relationships between women in terms of pathology; second, that the narrator in this song is presumably meant to be male, in which case framing his infatuation in terms of madness or disease does not carry the same baggage as it would if the narrator were female. That being said, I do not know who authored the lyrics to the version in Hindle's songster. "The Baronet" appears to be a parody of a song called "The Telegraph Girl," which Katherine Mullin identifies as being performed by a swell singer, Harry Liston, in the summer of 1865.[80] There is no way of knowing whether the decision to swap out "telegraph girl" for "opera singer" was Hindle's own, or another swell singer preceding her. But, it is possible that Hindle was intentionally drawing on the trope of women developing inappropriate or abnormal interest in actresses, if it was in fact already in circulation.

It is also worth noting that the language of pathology was already being applied to women in theater, even before male impersonators, in the context of the burlesque show. Burlesque became the target of a moral panic in the late 1860s, due to its anarchic, pastiche nature, the public display of women's bodies in various states of undress, lewd jokes and sexual double-entendres interspersed in the dialogue, and the degree of agency the actress exhibited on the stage, constantly acknowledging the audience's presence. Public discourse described a widespread "mania for burlesque" in terms of disease and epidemic, and the burlesque actress as "both the diseased body and the carrier of the disease within the civic body … a female body out of control and unable to control itself … an exposed public body that insisted on calling attention

[80] Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 36.

to itself: a raving, convulsive, incoherently screaming, hysterical, mad body."[81] In addition to being unruly, the burlesque actress was also inflected with homoeroticism, as the romantic plotlines in a burlesque show were, by necessity, between two female actors—whose costumes clearly identified them as women, even those playing male roles. Pathologized sexuality and homoeroticism between women were, then, linked in the context of staged entertainment prior to the language of inversion, and could therefore have also been read onto the male impersonator.

Similar language was applied to male impersonator Ella Wesner and actress Josephine ("Josie") Mansfield, the two of whom sailed to Paris together in 1872. The *Hartford Daily Courant* disclosed that Mansfield had "formed a singular infatuation" with Wesner, and would "probably follow her to Hartford as she has done to other cities."[82] The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported on Wesner and Mansfield's departure, noting, "it is said" that there is "an unnatural attachment … between the two women."[83] Other reports of Wesner and Mansfield's "elopement" emphasize Wesner's unprofessionalism in failing to give her agent and theater managers adequate notice in advance of leaving, and the logistical and financial problems she caused.[84] An "unnatural" same-sex relationship is presented side-by-side with more generally unruly behavior. Such themes are also to be found in journalism on female husbands and white women (or people assumed to be women) passing as men more generally, many of whom are also purported to have engaged in activities such as drinking, frequenting saloons, spitting, smoking, and public brawling.

This image created is not unlike the *swell*, one of the stock characters most frequently performed by male impersonators. The swell was a young, upper-class man preoccupied with

[81] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 128.
[82] *Hartford Daily Courant*, September 10, 1872, 2.
[83] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 18, 1872.
[84] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*¸144–6. See also *Cincinnati Enquirer* October 18, 1872, 7; *The Pittsburgh Commercial*, October 19, 1872, 2; *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 21, 1872, 2.

revelry, women, alcohol, and sartorial elegance. He was known for loitering away in saloons, frequent intoxication, and general rowdiness. Gillian Rodger proposes that a large part of the appeal of male impersonators to their largely male and working class audience was their ability to poke fun at the swell (a number of male character singers in variety also played *swell* roles), and that the knowledge that performers like Hindle and Wesner were women may have further served to emasculate the man of the upper class.[85] However, given the similarities between the swell and the increasingly common narrative of the female husband, it is possible that some audiences would have understood the swell, in the hands of the male impersonator, in terms of unruly white women off the stage.

The Dude

Rodger observes that by the 1880s, the swell character had morphed into an updated version—the "dude," or dandy, who was markedly effeminate compared to his earlier counterpart. According to Rodger, the dude is "more effete than the swell of the 1870s had been and was less interested in women and more obsessed with his own appearance … closely resembl[ing] the more modern stereotype of the effeminate gay man."[86] See the following verse in the 1883 song "The Aesthetic Dude":

> I'll try to describe you a young man of fashion,
> Who just about now seems the style and the rage;
> He looks like a Donkey, and acts like a Monkey
> The best place for him would be in a big cage.
> His pants are so tight they make his brain light
> And you'd think that a bull pup his whiskers had chewed,
> He's so 'ristocratic it makes him lunatic
> This queer freak of nature the Aesthetic Dude![87]

[85] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, chapter 11.
[86] Ibid., 137–8.
[87] "Queer" did not signal politicized or antinormative sexual or gender identity in the 1880s in the same way that it does today; nevertheless, as this example demonstrates, it was applied to people who were considered sexually

The *dude* is directly connected to the aesthetic movement, which was the subject of popular satire in America during and following the 1881 premiere of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience, or Bunthorne's Bride*, and Oscar Wilde's concurrent 1882 American tour. The "aesthete," most famously encapsulated in Wilde's public persona, was stereotyped to be lazy, effeminate, vapid, and pretentious. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the aesthete was received in terms of sexual difference (see chapter 2). Even just the verse above connects him to the freak show and circus animals, while also making reference to his suffocatingly-tight pants, thus implying a degree of sexual abnormality.

Rodger also connects the appearance of the dude to increased visibility of homosexual subcultures, and a growing fear of feminization in American men. She also contends that by mocking the dude through musical comedy, performers were "equating middle- and upper-class men with male homosexuals," thus undermining the perceived manhood of the former, "[j]ust as working-class men might physically attack a lone middle-class slummer or an unprotected homosexual man in their neighborhood in order to prove their own manhood."[88] Impersonation, originating with the minstrel show, always included the practice of defining oneself against an abjected other, therefore it is not surprising that dude songs may have followed this dynamic. Furthermore, the "dandy" first appeared on the popular stage in the form of the blackface character, "Zip Coon." The discourse of the minstrel show was so pervasive that Zip Coon served as an archetypal dandy whose image could easily be conflated with that of Oscar Wilde; a

---

nonnormative. For example, Haley finds that "queerness" and "blackness" were rhetorically linked in the American southeast as early as the 1890s. See Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 40.

[88] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 138–9.

great deal of contemporary media depicted Wilde as a blackface character as a means of satirizing him.[89]

Alan Sinfeld asserts that Oscar Wilde had a significant influence on the development of queer stereotypes in America, especially contributing to a "mythological association" that exists between "gay men, 'high' culture, and the upper class."[90] It is possible that the interpellation of the aesthete, or the dude, into working-class theater also played some role in the development of this stereotype. It should be noted that working-class communities in New York were, on average, more tolerant (not necessarily welcoming) of sexual minorities in the mid-to-late nineteenth century than middle- and upper-class communities.[91] However, it is also true that people of the middle and upper classes did frequent working-class neighborhoods, some of whom were themselves sexual minorities looking to escape the confines of their everyday lives, and some of whom were essentially cultural tourists. So, the dude caricature should perhaps be understood as simultaneously class and sexual commentary, and one that contributed to an emergent nexus of assumptions about homosexuality.

Fairies

Among those sexual minorities present in New York (and, likely, other metropolitan areas) in the late nineteenth century were *fairies.* "Fairy" was a common vernacular term in the nineteenth century that described a youth or young man (or male-assigned person) who presented

[89] See Victoria Dailey, "The Wilde Woman and the Sunflower Apostle: Oscar Wilde in the United States," Los Angeles Review of Books, February 8, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020,https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-wilde-woman-and-the-sunflower-apostle-oscar-wilde-in-the-united-states/.
[90] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century,* 154.
[91] See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, part 1; Lind, *Autobiography of an Androgyne*; Earl Lind, *The Female-Impersonators: a sequel to the Autobiography of an androgyne and an account of some of the author's experiences during his six years' career as instinctive female-impersonator in New York's underworld* (New York: The Medico-Legal journal, 1922). See also chapter 3 of this dissertation.

with some degree of effeminacy and pursued sexual relations with men.[92] Fairies were highly visible members of New York's sexual underworld by the 1890s, and possibly earlier; many either worked at or frequented saloons and other establishments that catered toward men who had sex with other men, and many were also sex workers. Some fairies understood themselves to be men, others understood themselves to be women, and some considered themselves to occupy an intermediary category; some regularly wore dresses and makeup, while others presented as male but with selected sartorial flourishes that indicated their status as fairies.

As mentioned earlier, Annie Hindle's songster contains one song, "Winking At Me," whose narrator is presumably a woman, because she interacts flirtatiously with various men in her audience:

Kind friends, your attention,
I'll ask for awhile;
And I'll try to amuse you,
In my simple style.
To sing to you nightly,
It's a pleasure, I see,
For the gents in the house
All keep winking at me.

Winking at me, winking at me.
Now how can I sing,
While they're winking at me.

There's a gentleman sitting
Down there on the right;
He came here to-day
In a terrible plight.
He's lately been jilted
By a fair one, you see,
And now he comes here
And keeps winking at me.

There's a gent sitting there,
Dressed in elegant taste,
By the side of a lady,
His arm round her waist.
An artful deceiver I fear he must be,
For while he makes love to her,
He keeps winking at me.

Winking at me, winking at me.
Now how can I sing while he's winking at me?

[92] See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, chapter 2; Lind, *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, 7.

This song was written by a female composer, Alice Siedler, and also performed by burlesque actress Lisa Weber, who was a member of Lydia Thompson's infamous troupe, the British Blondes.[93] When performed by Weber, "Winking At Me" would have served as both a self-referential play on her position as an object of the erotic gaze, and also as an opportunity for her to actively flirt with her audience, thus turning the mere observer into a potential participant and heightening the sexual appeal of the act. Annie Hindle, however, was not known to appeal sexually to male audience members. I have found no indication as to whether Hindle may have performed this number in a suit or a dress. On one hand, I have never read mention of her switching between male and female costume in performance, and if this song appears in her promotional material we might assume that it represents her personal brand—male impersonation—and therefore that she performed it in male costume. On the other hand, it is possible she did switch between male and female characters, especially early in her career, just as William Lingard did.[94]

Both possibilities are worth considering. If Hindle performed in a costume that skewed male, moving about the stage and flirting with male patrons, it is very easy to imagine Hindle was using this song to depict the stereotype of the fairy, though I wonder if such an unambiguously sexually deviant character would have been staged in a manner so overt, especially in venues that catered to middle-class respectability politics, such as Tony Pastor's. Had she performed in a dress, a number of interpretations are available. Depending on the physical and vocal gesture she deployed, Hindle could have played this character very "straight" in the manner of contemporary female variety singers, thus creating a break in her seamless flow

[93] *The Canadian Rose Bud Song Book: Containing All the Popular Songs of the Day.* Toronto: A. S. Irving, [1869], 16.

[94] An early review states that "Annie Hindle made her first appearance in this city, dressed in male attire and sang songs something of the Lingard type." "City Summary," *The New York Clipper*, September 4, 1869.

of male characters. Doing so would call attention to the medium of staged impersonation, emphasizing her own bodily presence on the stage and amplifying the element of illusion in her act, a point to which I will later return. However, had Hindle employed gestures or interpolated speech associated with sexually dissident subcultures (limp wrists, for example, were already used in illustrations as visual markers of effeminacy and sexual difference in the 1870s and 1880s), she still could have conjured the image of the fairies, entertaining or waiting tables at saloons.[95]

In her discussion of the burlesque show, Michelle Durden suggests that female actors playing male *and* female characters enhanced the gender ambiguity of both, which opened up a range of possible ways of perceiving them, a kind of humor she characterizes as "polysemic."[96] This ambiguity is evident in the reaction cultural critic William Dean Howell had to the sight of burlesque performers in male costume in the late 1860s. Robert Allen writes that the problem was that "in their guise of masculinity, there was no intention to deceive the spectator or to suppress their femininity. They produced a monstrous hybrid gender that both aroused and repulsed Howell: 'Though they were not like men, they were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both.'"[97] It should be noted, as Allen does, that Howell seems to have had a pathological fear of not only women on the stage, but of sex in general; therefore, he represents an extreme example of an opponent of burlesque rather than the average burlesque-goer. Nonetheless, it speaks to the fact that the multiple and conflicting sexual signifiers on the burlesque actress opened her up to readings beyond the normative categories "male" and "female." According to this framing, Durden suggests that the exaggerated effeminacy of female characters in burlesque could have potentially represented

[95] See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 32.
[96] Durden, "More Than Just A Leg Show."
[97] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness* 134.

fairies.[98] Similarly, Hindle's (and Lingard's) staging of differently-gendered characters in a single set may have opened up space for the representation of people who occupied places of sexual intermediacy.

To summarize this section: in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the medical field of sexology began the work of systematically organizing people into "types" based on gender presentation and sexual behaviors. While this project was occurring on the "expert" level of sexology, it was also occurring at the "nonexpert" level of popular culture, such as within variety theater. Parallel to the way race (as an abstract concept) enabled the concept of biologically-determined sexual "types," the impersonation of racial and ethnic types in variety enabled the eventual impersonation of gendered and sexual types, in which both actors and characters were white. Central to this new medical paradigm was a connection between gender nonconforming presentation and sexually deviant behavior; this connection was also established through staged impersonation, whose stock character types embodied both sonic, gestural, and sometimes visual cues, as well as behaviors.

[98] Durden ultimately concludes that the viable presence of gay subtext in burlesque (including fairy and aesthetic character types, songs that emphasize the word "gay," and allusions to homoerotic relations between men) implies that members of nascent gay subcultures (e.g., aesthetes and fairies) must have been present in the audience alongside the "working-class men and women who lived close to their establishments and knew their cultural symbols." I'm not sure that these suggestive performance elements imply that production companies were aware of the presence of audience members who would have understood those innuendos. I would, however, argue that burlesque, like impersonation, was one site where modern meanings were in the process of being articulated. Fairies were regularly present on the nineteenth-century American stage, for example, in the "fairytale melodramas" popular in the 1820s and 30s, and later in Victorian operettas (for example, Gilbert and Sullivan's popular comic opera, *Iolanthe*). See Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), chapter 2. Additionally, fairies were the purview of at least one famous music hall singer—George Leybourne, best known for the swell song "Champagne Charlie"—who performed a song called "Oh, The Fairies." While not explicitly about members of the sexual subculture, the chorus is slightly suggestive with its explicit focus on gender (Oh, the fairies, whoa the fairies, Nothing but splendour and feminine gender. Oh, the fairies, whoa, the fairies, Oh, for a wing of a fairy queen"). The breadth of the circulation of "queen" as gay slang in the nineteenth century is indeterminate, though William Dorsey Swann did refer to himself as a "queen of drag" as early as the 1880s. See Joseph, "The First Drag Queen Was A Former Slave."

Imposture

Impersonation played a role in inventing gendered and sexual stereotypes in the late nineteenth century. It also established and reinforced ways of *thinking about* these new gendered types. I argue that alongside discourses of racial passing, as well as the concepts of illusion, curiosity, and hoaxing from popular entertainment, impersonation contributed to an interpretive mode that trained the general populace to understand cross-dressing, passing, and (later) transitioning people in a specific way—as simultaneously unnatural, and *impersonating* something they are not. By *interpretive mode* I mean a set of rules or assumptions that dictate the way we extrapolate context and meanings from an object. I am building here on two ideas, both of which are also central components of this economy of public discourse and entertainment I am describing: Riley Snorton's discussion of racial passing as providing a foundational "interpretive frame" for later transgender passing; and Robert Volpicelli's discussion of the nineteenth-century phenomenon of the *curiosity* as an "interpretive category" that provided a "structuring principle" for other kinds of entertainment. I use the word "mode" because it highlights the process of active reception and the series of decisions the interpreter makes and the questions they ask about who—or what—they are looking at; otherwise, this idea does not diverge greatly from either of the two ideas advanced by Snorton or Volpicelli.

Robert Volpicelli calls the nineteenth-century phenomenon of the *curiosity* an "*interpretive category* for objects that fall outside of established classifications."[99] In the context of the circus or freak show, the concept of "curiosity" was applied to humans—many of whom were of color, were visibly disabled or had abnormal physical features, and/or had been kidnapped from colonized regions of the world and marketed as "primitive" or sub-human, who

[99] Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," 28. Emphasis mine.

were displayed as exhibits and said to trouble the boundaries of normative personhood.[100] While the curiosity was featured prominently in the context of the circus, famously that of P. T. Barnum's, Volpicelli claims that the curiosity was so pervasive it acted as a "structuring principle" for other kinds of entertainment.[101]

Riley Snorton argues that the ways in which cross-gendered passing strategies enacted by fugitives were presented in the antebellum white abolitionist press played a central role in shaping the way passing would come to serve as an "interpretive frame" for transgender phenomena in the next centuries. "Passing" as a concept has its origins in racial passing, specifically in the context of the "assumption of a fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as 'Negro' or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry."[102] Concerns about Black Americans passing as white, either for reasons of escaping enslavement or seeking economic or social mobility, caused a cultural panic among white Americans, which fueled legal and pseudoscientific measures to define the standards by which one might be determined to "be" a certain race. This panic about people pretending to be something they are not enabled the eventual conceptual nexus between transgender people, "passing," and deception.[103] Looking at the fugitive narratives of Black people escaping enslavement in the nineteenth century, Snorton finds that cross-gender passing was frequently deployed as a strategy. These events, when publicized via abolitionist media, "required

[100] On the cultural construction of the "freak," see Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 272–286; Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[101] Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," 30. In chapter 2 I build on Volpicelli's argument about "curiosity" as it pertains to Oscar Wilde's 1882 lecture tour.
[102] Elaine K. Ginsberg, "The Politics of Passing," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.
[103] Thomas J Billard, "'Passing' and the Politics of Deception: Transgender Bodies, Cisgender Aesthetics, and the Policing of Inconspicuous Marginal Identities," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, ed. T. Docan-Morgan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 465.

resignification in order to present these incidents as examples of the extreme measures fugitives took to escape the problems of slavery rather than as a contingency of a contemporaneous pseudoscientific project that linked blackness with gender and sexual polymorphous perversity." To do so, they foregrounded "*cunning wit* on the part of the fugitive actor, who manages to successfully assume and maintain an *unnatural performance of artifice*." Furthermore, the narrative always ends with a return to the protagonist's original state, thus establishing gender passing as "a *limited durational performance*."[104]

Stage impersonators, and character singers more generally, were also talked about in terms of spectacular transformation of limited duration. Characters singers who embodied multiple roles in a single set were often referred to in the *New York Clipper* as "protean artists" or "protean mimics"; sometimes these singers were also called "metamorphosic." While the label "protean" is not exclusive to gendered or racial impersonation, there was a parallel increase in usage of the two terms in the *Clipper* between the 1860s and 1870s. A search of the newspaper's database between 1860 and 1869 yields 81 results for "impersonator" and 228 results for "protean"; a search between 1870 and 1879 yields 454 results for "impersonator" and 604 results for "protean." While not a perfect count, these numbers do suggest correlation between the developing ideas.[105] Critics of Annie Hindle often emphasized this talent of hers, writing that her "rapid changes of dress and personations … are astonishing," that she was a "decided hit in her … rapid changes," was "quite clever in her changes," and "excels all 'lightning change' vocalists now before the public in the rapidity of changing costumes."[106]

---

[104] Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 58. Emphasis mine.

[105] https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/cgi-bin/illinois?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=NYC&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-------. Accessed February 28, 2024.

[106] *The New York Clipper*, December 5, 1868, 279; *New York Clipper*, March 27, 1869, 407; *New York Clipper*, July 5, 1873, 110; *The New York Clipper*, February 28, 1874, 382.

This fixation on metamorphosis fits in well with Daphne Brooks's theory of "racial phantasmagoria."[107] Racial phantasmagoria describes forms of entertainment in the nineteenth-century transatlantic world that spectacularized fantastical and rapid metamorphosis and harbored a fascination with racially liminal figures such as the "octoroon" or "mulatto." As Brooks puts it, the "theatrical body" that emerged in the years leading up to the Civil war was "a corporeal manifestation of a turbulent era," or the staging of "a playful ontological instability" in "an era in which social ideologies of the body remained sharply in flux."[108] The "transformation scene" in Victorian pantomime and spirit possession all fall under this umbrella. Brooks understands the minstrel show through the lens of racial phantasmagoria: "With its notorious dependency on the spectacle of duality and contradictions mapped across unruly bodies, the minstrel show lends itself to curious and provocative comparisons with other phantasmagoric performances."[109] In other words, nineteenth-century entertainment was full of characters who channeled and shapeshifted into others, and gendered impersonation was no different. An 1874 review of Ella Wesner even alludes to supernatural transfiguration, stating that "Miss Ella Wesner has been playing to fair business at the Academy of Music during the past week, exhibiting her ability to *counterfeit the lords of creation* in the proper use of the masculine uniform."[110]

One of the impersonator's real-life cognates—the female husband—was also at times a cultural source of shock and awe. While a number of female husband stories circulated in the form of fiction or song, even the nonfiction accounts appearing in publications like the *New York Clipper* were sensationalized. (Virtually all reporting on crime was sensationalized in the

[107] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, chapter 1.
[108] Ibid., 22.
[109] Ibid., 25.
[110] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1974, 7. Emphasis mine.

nineteenth century, and continues to be today. "Crime" itself is an invented category constructed significantly via the press and mass media.)[111] Rachel Cleves shows that nineteenth-century female husband stories consistently utilized rhetoric that indicated shock on one hand, and amusement on the other, in order to keep their subjects marginal.[112] Such tactics might include descriptions of marriages between women or women passing as male as "strange" or "surprising," the use of punctuation such as exclamation points to indicate unusualness or disbelief, or comparisons to fiction. As mere "objects of bemusement," female husbands were constrained to the realm of entertainment, and therefore posed no serious threat to the social order.

Gendered impersonation also functioned as a *performance of artifice*—that is, it made clear to its audience that what they were experiencing was an illusion. One way in which this occurred was through the use of differently-gendered vocal registers. Two songs in Lingard's songster appear to highlight a range of vocal impersonations—male and female—in a single number. The first, "The Pleasures of the Opera," is described as "a medley with recollections of the Primo Tenore, the Baritone, the Basso, and the Prima Donna."[113] It features original lyrics set to three arias from two nineteenth-century operas, *Maritana* by William Vincent Wallace (1854) and *La Sonnambula* by Vincenzo Bellini (1831)[114]; the songster does not indicate a tune that corresponds with the "baritone" impersonation. The named arias vocally athletic, featuring wide melodic leaps, quick turns and sixteenth-note runs, and chromatic passages—notably, highlighting their spectacular nature. The song is presumably intended to showcase Lingard's

[111] On the relationship between the mid-nineteenth-century penny press and later mass circulations technologies of the Gilded Age, and the construction of "crime" in American culture, see David Ray Papke, *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830–1900* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987); John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[112] Rachel Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?' The Prehistory of Same-Sex Marriage in America." *The Journal of American* History 101 (March 2015), 1064–68.
[113] Lingard, "*On the Beach at Long Branch" Song Book*, 31.
[114] "The Flower that Bloometh," "In Happy Moments," and "Do Not Mingle."

imitative range, and also his vocal ability generally. Similarly, "The Musical Party" is Lingard's adaptation of a popular song that features a variety of party guests singing a collection of "very queer" (meaning odd) songs.[115] The songs are actually just popular songs of the day, including "Oh Would I Were a Bird," "Oh! If I Had Someone to Love Me," and what may be a version of a folk song, "Jerusalem Cuckoo."[116]

This type of vocal performance was also the purview of "double-voiced singers," a contemporary form of entertainment (sometimes billed alongside male and female impersonators) in which a performer sang in at least two separate "voices"—typically one male, and one female—and made a show out of switching between the voices, sometimes singing duets with themselves, sometimes appearing in costumes that were half-male, half female. One prominent example is Dora Dawron, who sang for two seasons at Barnum's Museum, from 1860–61 and 1864–65, alongside other auditory curiosities such as ventriloquists, talking heads, and automatons (statues that could move and speak like humans or animals).[117] Dawron used visuals to amplify her vocal spectacle; she wore a costume that was half-suit and half-dress and sang duets with herself, standing with one side to the audience for the "male" parts and flipping around to face the other way for the "female" parts. David Monod calls Dawron a "curiosity" because of her wide vocal range, but also clarifies that Darwon's sex was never in question. Her hermaphroditic costume did not obscure that she was a woman; rather, "she wore a disguise that her audience knew was false in order to help them better appreciate something bizarre or

[115] Lingard, "*On the Beach at Long Branch" Song Book*, 68.
[116] The lyrics, "Oh! Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Oh! Jerusalem! The costermonger's donkey," do not match those on broadside versions of this folk song I have seen, nor does the melody match the version Alan Lomax recorded; however, there are several similarities, including lyrical mentions of both Jerusalem and a donkey, and a dotted-rhythm melody that often lands on the third and fifth scale degrees, and therefore it is my best guess.
[117] David Monod, "Double Voiced: Music, Nature and Gender in Performance," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015), 173–193.

otherwise inexplicable: in this case, her vocal abnormality."[118] In other words, the costume served the purpose of reassuring the audience that they were indeed being tricked.

Lingard's act is working quite differently from Dawron's, but adopts similar techniques. The songs in Lingard's repertoire that presumably feature a number of different "voices" showcase an unusually wide range of sonic personas in the same manner as the double-voiced singer—what Monod claims situates Dawron within a "vast corpus of unusual and deceitful performances that operated on the fringe of freakery, acts that were popular because they confused the senses and appealed to the spectators' interest in the unusual."[119] Furthermore, Lingard (and, possibly, some male impersonators like Annie Hindle, as discussed above) would sometimes assume both male and female characters over the course of an act. These transitions in and out of crossed dress—which, if infrequent, as was likely the case with Hindle if she performed out of male costume at all, might be thought of as slips "back" into the performer's "real" sex—also served as signposts that reminded the audience that the impersonation was an illusion.

The illusion that made itself known as such was a central component of entertainment in nineteenth-century America. Kevin Young identifies during this time a broader cultural zeitgeist of "imposture," which included the curiosities and freaks in traveling shows like P.T. Barnum's, entertainments such as magic tricks and ventriloquism, and the widespread phenomenon of hoaxes broadcasted in the penny press.[120] Young writes that a key feature of Barnum's show was that many of the exhibits were fakes—but fakes with the goal of entertaining the audience with their fakery. Barnum called this *humbug*: "An honest man who … arrests public attention will be called a 'humbug,' but he is not a swindler or an impostor. He may only be called a "swindler,"

[118] Ibid., 177.
[119] Ibid., 173. Monod understands "freakery" as something that is performed.
[120] Young, *Bunk*, 7.

"cheat," or "impostor" if, "after attracting crowds of customers by his unique displays, [he] foolishly fails to give them a full equivalent for their money."[121] Part of the appeal of Barnum's humbug was that it was up to the audience to figure out if what they were looking at was what it seemed to be.

Young argues that, at their core, hoaxes in America were about race. The nationwide fascination with hoaxes, humbug, illusion, and trickery was both an expression of and a response to the fact that there was a basic contradiction at the core of the United States: that it was, officially, a nation founded on the principle of individual liberty, but in reality relied on the institution of chattel slavery. In other words, the national mythology was nonsensical, and required an alternative mythology to take its place. The hegemonic culture needed a large-scale hoax—race—to "justify the bondage of fellow human beings," who otherwise, in theory, would need to have had the same unalienable rights as everyone else.[122] The blackface minstrel show factors into Young's equation as both a progenitor of invented stereotypes about African-American people, and also America's first mass culture; the original effect, therefore, of American mass culture, was to broadcast a myth that justified the nation's hypocrisy.[123] Barnum's humbug facilitated this mass gaslighting by throwing *everything* into doubt, which made the spectacular, inconceivable violence evident in everyday life seem more plausible. If truth was always in question, then anything was possible.[124] By "making experts of his audience"—telling them to *come in and decide for yourself*—Barnum (and other hoaxers)

[121] P. T. Barnum, *Humbugs*, 19–21, cited in Young, *Bunk*, 8.
[122] Young, *Bunk*, 27.
[123] Ibid., 29.
[124] For further discussion on what Young calls the "colonization of doubt" and its persistence in contemporary American mass culture, see Young, "More Truth." According to Allen, this potential for mass entertainment to call established narratives into question and suggest new ones was one of the driving forces behind early Puritanical rejection of the theater: "Whereas the actor's mimetic abilities linked the theater with the sin of blasphemy and the crimes of fraud and bearing false witness, his showing off connected it with the sin of idolatry and the crimes of exhibitionism and prostitution. If mimicry overturned the truth by creating a competing but false history, spectacle called the very nature of truth into question by exaggerating it." See Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 29

empowered members of the hegemonic culture not only to define themselves against what they were *not*, but to make judgments *about* that which they were not, based not on truth or fact, but on how they perceived them.[125]

I argue that other forms of ethnic, racial, and gendered impersonation also fall within the entertainment context that Young describes. While the male or female impersonator of the nineteenth century did not critique the notion of identity or serve to disrupt normalizing constructions of gender in the manner of modern-day drag, they nonetheless made gendered types into public entertainment spectacle. The spectacle might be an unbelievably realistic impersonation (prompting the audience to wonder if they can *really* believe their eyes and ears); or, the spectacle may entail some discrepancy between the way an actor looks or sounds and the gendered type they are impersonating (in other words, impersonations that are spectacular in their failure, thus empowering audiences to observe and interpret that failure, or to identify what the performer really *is.*) In other words, based on gendered visual and sonic cues, the audience is invited to make judgments about the interiority of the performer or character onstage, representing the same *interpretive mode* through which today's hegemonic culture understands trans people.

Scholars have observed this kind of gaze at play in the blackface minstrel show, specifically in the way the prima donna was viewed from the standpoint of white male spectators, focusing on the character's desirability and potential for homoerotic encounter.[126] Evidently, spectators placed high value on the perceived realism of these performances. Robert

[125] Young, *Bunk*, 32.

[126] For example, Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Lott, *Love and Theft*; Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 245–256.

Toll's compiled accounts of Francis Leon, a prominent impersonator of both Black and white female characters whose career peaked in the 1880s, include the following anecdotes: "He is more womanly in his by-play and mannerisms, than the most charming female imaginable"; "Heaps of boys in my locality don't believe yet it's a man in spite of my saying it was"; and, "Leon's charms could cause 'to make a fool of a man if he wasn't sure.'"[127] This focus on realism and illusion is one shared by the male impersonation act for much of the mid-late nineteenth century.

Lott suggests that there was also some appeal in the potential incongruity between the gender presentation of a performer and their presumed anatomical sex; in other words, the wench performance presented a "game" of "genital guessing."[128] This comment about "genital guessing" resonates with Rodger's statement that early male impersonators "appeared to perform a kind of magic trick in which a *female body* was transformed into a realistically male character," though the audience was "fully aware that they were watching women perform."[129] In both cases we are to understand that the impersonator turned into spectacle the discrepancy between a character singer's outward appearance, and the assumed knowledge of their anatomical sex characteristics hidden beneath their costume. In some cases a performer's singing style may align with their appearance (Francis Leon, for example, was praised for realistically female vocal impersonations); in other cases, a performer's voice may create a crack in the illusion (Rodger has found that many male impersonators sang in a soprano register, and could therefore not emulate a normative "male" sounding voice). In other words, the audience is asked to witness the gendered traits of a character, and (maybe tacitly) make judgments about the performer's

[127] Toll, *Blacking Up*, 142, cited in Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," 251.
[128] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 171, citing a paper given by Lillian Schlissel. Unfortunately I have not been able to access the original paper to understand the quote in context, though I am sure Lott's interpretation is true to the source.
[129] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 129. Emphasis mine.

gendered attributes that are unseen (but assumed to exist), deriving pleasure from the question of whether they can really believe their eyes and ears.

Or is this something that we are reading onto the female or male impersonator in retrospect? It is difficult to say, writing in a cultural environment where transgender people hold a fair (in the 1990s) to high (today) degree of visibility, and a good portion of discourse is focused on anatomical difference, particularly genital difference. Thinking back to William Lingard's imagery on the covers of sheet music, my first instinct upon seeing his photographs after taking note of the costuming was to examine his face and posture for gendered markers. One of my conclusions was that he does not look more convincingly "male" in a male costume than he looks "female" in a female costume, based on physical markers like the contours of his face and hair pattern (I believe even in when pictured in male costume he is wearing a wig). Personally, I am not able to parse out how much of my own thought process was informed by the lived experience of being a transsexual—and living in a state of constant hypervigilance about passing, so that I instinctively look for variations from the Western binary construction of maleness, as I would do to myself—and how much was informed by the knowledge that Lingard impersonated characters of different genders professionally, leading me to wonder if he was equally "realistic" in either sort of role. I am spending time on this anecdote to demonstrate that I too participated in the "game of genital guessing" Lott describes, though it is not possible to imagine how I would have experienced Lingard as someone operating under a different set of cultural codes or inhabiting a different positionality. But I believe it does speak to a deep relationship between gender transformation turned into theater, and gender variance off the stage. I suspect we have been being trained to think about the phenomenon of transgender (and queer

people more generally) in this way since those ideas emerged in their modern formulation, due in part to the influence of mass entertainment.

The language of curiosity is also evident in contemporary journalism people who transgressed the boundaries of normative gendered behavior. Annie Hindle is one such example. In 1886 (coincidentally, the same year the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* was published) Hindle had her first marriage to a woman. (It turns out, as Gillian Rodger mentioned to me several years ago, that this same-sex marriage was the first of a great many.) The woman in question was Hindle's stage dresser, Annie Ryan. Clad in a suit, Hindle married Ryan, officiated by a friend and fellow variety performer, Gilbert Savoy, in a hotel room in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Immediately following the event, Hindle was hounded by a journalist, who, after several hours of badgering, Hindle apparently informed she was a man, setting off a newspaper scandal over the nature of her "true" sex.

In her discussion of the press coverage of Hindle's marriage, Rodger draws attention to the ambiguity in the *National Police Gazette*'s language: "Since the marriage of Annie Hindle to her maid the question arises, 'Is she he?'" "Annie Hindle(?) or Charles Hindle(?), recently married in Cleveland, says that she married Vivian, and that when he discovered her sex he wanted to masquerade with her, but not having such a feminine appearance failed to make a success. … A Western reporter states emphatically that Hindle is a man."[130] Rodger interprets this ambiguity as confusion, suggesting that the writer does not know how to refer to Hindle after the revelation of her marriage. She proposes that this confusion is related to Hindle's class status; writing that while the *Gazette* was "quick to denounce women, particularly educated and professional women, who sought equality to men … it was less certain of how to make sense of

[130] "Stage Whispers," *National Police Gazette*, July 3, 1886, 2; "Stage Whispers," *National Police Gazette*, August 21, 1886, 2; quoted in Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 143.

Hindle's marriage" and "the implication that, just possibly, some working-class women were not content to occupy traditional roles."[131] In other words, the idea of a working-class woman challenging gender roles was so unthinkable that the *Gazette* concluded instead that Hindle's entire career was a "fraud," and that she had been a man all along.

However, when viewed within the entertainment context I have tried to establish, it is clear that the press coverage on Hindle's marriage relies heavily on both the language of the curiosity, and also of spectacularized imposture in popular entertainment. The story was widely circulated in newspapers across the country, and was clearly itself a source of entertainment for readers.[132] This journalistic rhetoric does more than display confusion, rather, it places Hindle into a place of indeterminacy, left up to the reader to decide: "GUESS WHAT IT IS AND YOU CAN HAVE IT," a *Cincinnati Enquirer* headline shouts before providing a version of Hindle's backstory, referring to Hindle as both "she" and "he."[133] Similar language appears in *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*'s report, titled "Mr. or Miss? Annie Hindle, a Variety 'Male Impersonator,' Changes Her Sex and Marries a Woman at Grand Rapids, Mich":

> Annie Hindle, "the great and only Hindle," as her three-sheet posters style her, is well known in Chicago, and has filled numerous engagements in the local variety theaters, always drawing big salary and being given a prominent place on the bills. She, he, or "it" has always dressed in female attire off the state, though her dress was always of that style affected by young women who wish to appear masculine.
>
> "Gracious goodness and five hands' round!" shrieked an enchantress, who was dressing for the last act of the evening's bill. "And that horrid thing has been

[131] Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 144.

[132] Shifts in the press in the 1880s and 90s including typewriter and telephone technology and corporatization of newspapers facilitated unprecedented mass circulation of information, leading to the format of modern tabloid reporting, and the emergence of an imagined national public readership. See Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press*; Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

[133] "Annie Hindle, well known in vaudeville circles as a male impersonator, was married last night by the Rev. Mr. Brooks, a Baptist clergyman, under the name of Charles A. Hindle, to Annie Shaw [*sic*], of Cleveland, Ohio, a comely young woman, thirty years old, who has been traveling with Hindle as her maid. In 1869 Hindle became the wife of Charles Vivian, an English comedian, and they lived together one day. Hindle now claims to be a man. He has always dressed as a woman, and has impersonated the masculine character." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 8, 1886.

> dressing in the same room with us girls. Well! If she—I mean he—ever comes here again he'll not come in our room again."[134]

Both articles refer to Hindle as "it," the second to Hindle as a "horrid thing," reminiscent of the language of the human curiosity. The first headline ("Guess what it is and you can have it") even adopts the voice of the showman or snake oil salesman, presenting Hindle to an imaginary audience as a prize to be earned. I am by no means arguing that Hindle's status as gigging performer was equivalent to that of racialized or disabled people who were put on display as exhibits. However, the language in these reports does point to Hindle as being in some sense nondescript; her ontological status is called into question by her fluctuation between categories.

In fact, several press clippings indicate that Hindle was understood in terms of curiosity *before* the public scandal of her marriage. In 1882, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* lauds her as such: "Miss Hindle is not only the beau-ideal of the *genus* homo, but so elegantly depicts the foible fancies of the sterner sex that the audience are mystified as to her *denomination* in this beau-monde of ours."[135] An 1884 advertisement places her at a dime museum in Detroit performing alongside a "398 pound fat girl" (fat people were among those with displayed as "curiosities" or "freaks" due to perceived physical abnormalities).[136] I suspect that the frameworks through Hindle was already received and advertised as a male impersonator contributed to the ways in which the event of her marriage was shaped by the press.

Several advertisements in the years following the scandal indicate that Hindle's ambiguous status may have even been a selling point from that point forward. The next year, a

---

[134] *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*, June 8, 1886, 3.

[135] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 30, 1882, 21. Emphasis mine. Note the use of evolutionary language when describing the two sexes.

[136] *Detroit Free Press*, September 7, 1884. It should be noted that Hindle is not unique in performing at dime museums. See, for example, "Just Arrived: The New Dime Museum," poster, ca. 1880, accessed via *The Digital Transgender Archive* on September 05, 2023, https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/np193924b; "The United Novelty Company!," poster, ca. 1800s, accessed via *The Digital Transgender Archive* on September 05, 2023, https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/ht24wj630.

blurb in the "Local Lines" column of the *Boston Daily Globe* reads "Annie Hindle, the greatest of male impersonators is a strong feature this week at Keith & Batcheller's Museum. Is he a woman, or is she a man? is a question sure to be asked by all who see her or him (?)."[137] An 1888 *Baltimore Sun* ad announces: "She or He has come … The Great and Only Living Annie Hindle, With his or her combination of 10 Young Ladies, 10."[138] These advertisements are clearly enabled by the idea of the curiosity, inviting audiences to come decide for themselves whether Annie Hindle was "really" a man or a woman, and foregrounds the process of "genital guessing." The implication is that the audience will derive pleasure from placing Hindle under a spotlight, and determining whether her male persona is legitimate, or whether she is really a woman.

I want to finally note that the *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean* headline ("Annie Hindle, a Variety 'Male Impersonator,' Changes Her Sex") is striking in that it refers to a *changing* of sex, rather than just a revelation of Hindle's "true" sex, which would be more typical framing for the time period (the article does later refer to Hindle's "true sex … revealed").[139] This phrasing implies a transition from one sex to the other that is more permanent than contemporary passing narratives. Weeks later, the San Francisco *Daily Examiner* made such a claim outright with the headline "A Permanent Transformation: History of Annie (Charles) Hindle, Who Married Annie Ryan." The article also notes that "[a]t times there has been some talk about Annie Hindle not being a woman, but not much attention had been paid to the supposed 'guy' until all doubts upon

[137] *The Boston Daily Globe*, April 17, 1887, 2.
[138] *The Baltimore Sun*, October 29, 1888, 1.
[139] Cf. the widely-reported case of Frank Dubois, just three years prior. Dubois was "discovered" in 1883, by a man who claimed to be his former husband, living full-time as a man and having married a woman. The former husband, S. J. Hudson, accused Dubois of abandoning him and their children; Dubois insisted, with the support of his wife, that he was a man and would not return to life with Hudson. Contemporary press on Dubois presents the narrative that, though Dubois initially insisted that he was a man, and acted like one, he did not look or sound like a man and eventually, under questioning, "admitted she [*sic*] was not a man" ("Frank Dubois A Woman," *New York Times*, November 2, 1883, 1). Dubois's story was circulated in New York, Atlanta, Little Falls, Chicago, and San Francisco. See Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, 232–237. (Manion uses the pronouns they/them to refer to Dubois; I am using the pronouns he/him to respect Dubois's choice to live as a man, and because "they" as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun was not commonly in use in the 1880s. Likewise, though I understand Dubois to be a man I do not understand him to be "trans," as the concept was not yet articulated in the formulation it is today.)

the matter were set at rest late Sunday night, when at Room 19, Barnard House, Annie Hindle, under the name of Charles Hindle, was quietly married … to Annie Ryan."[140] In neither case does the author seem to mean that Annie Hindle literally changed her sex. Not only does Hindle's marriage predate the possibility of changing one's sex medically, but both articles go on to suggest that she had "really" been a man all along, rather than changing from female to male. Nonetheless, the language of "transformation" does stand out from usual tabloid articles about passing women or female husbands. It is, however, similar to the language typically used to describe male impersonators. I suspect that because of Hindle's profession, the language of popular entertainment is being projected onto a marriage between women beyond what would be typical for the time period.

The rhetoric of illusion and curiosity was not, however, exclusive to professional stage impersonators. Similar language appears in a series of reports on an individual in Tuscarora, Nevada known as Samuel Pollard, who inspired a national stir in 1878 when he was accused of having disguised himself as a man and married an unsuspecting woman, who turned him in to the authorities upon discovering her husband's secret. According to the Eureka *Republican*, via the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Pollard was so ambiguous that "a pronoun of any gender might be appropriately used in describing her."[141] The *Minneapolis Tribune* asked, "WAS IT A WOMAN?"[142]; the *Tuscarora Times-Review* referred to Pollard as "him or her, he, she or it."[143] A retrospective in the *Winnemucca Silver State*, reprinted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* even invokes one of P. T. Barnum's infamous exhibitions—crassly titled "What is It?"—in which Barnum dressed a Black man, William Henry Johnson, in animal skins and advertised him as the

[140] *Daily Examiner*, June 30, 1886, 3.
[141] "The Pollard Puzzle," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 26, 1878, 1.
[142] "Was It A Woman?" *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 17, 1878, 3.
[143] "Pollard as a Shoemaker," *Tuscarora Times-Review* June 18, 1878, reprinted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 19, 1878, 4.

"missing" link between humans and animals, or what Barnum called the "nondescript."[144] Opening just months after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1860, this exhibit reflected the contemporary "scientific" discourse of evolution, also happening at the level of popular entertainment. The *Silver State* article begins, "Everybody remembers the Tuscarora 'What Is It'—Sarah, Samuel Pollard—who created a sensation two or three years ago, and took to lecturing for awhile. Pollard, whether male or female, or both or neither, married a buxom lass named Maraney Hughes."[145] And the *Winnemucca Silver State* published the following poem by an anonymous "gentleman" contributor:

> Oh, Samuel Pollard, alias Sarah M. Pollard,
> How came you to dress up in pants,
> And *humbug* the fancy of poor Miss Marancy
> With love and all that at third glance?[146]

Both the poem and the article in the *Silver State* suggest that Barnum and his "nondescripts" were a recognizable frame of reference for talking about passing people. Pollard was presumably white, as the article does not mention his race, so it is highly doubtful that his humanity was thrown into question in the same manner as Johnson, who was literally treated like an animal. Rather, "humbug" and "nondescript" are invoked as a way of insulting Pollard, commenting on his illegibility, but somehow simultaneously asserting that the observer can determine with certainty that he is a woman.

Conclusion: "What's That?"

Sam Feder's 2020 documentary, *Disclosure,* examines the role of film in the way transgender people are understood in the present day. Through a curated collection of film clips

[144] Young, *Bunk*, 37.
[145] "A Belligerent Tusacroran," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 22, 1880.
[146] Winnemucca *Silver State*, May 22, 1878, reprinted in "The Pollard Puzzle," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 26, 1878, 1. Emphasis mine.

and interviews with transgender actors, writers, scholars, and producers, *Disclosure* argues that American cinema has functioned as a didactic text that trains audiences to think about transgender people in a certain way: as jokes, "freaks," as mentally ill, as not "real," as figures to be feared.[147] Susan Stryker states in an interview that "trans and cinema have grown up together … and it's not just coincidental … there's something really deeply connected."[148] As I have argued in this chapter, Stryker is absolutely correct in asserting that the hegemonic understanding of transgender in our society is deeply enmeshed with entertainment spectacle. I furthermore believe that this mutually-informed relationship in fact predates film, and has roots in an ecosystem of nineteenth-century amusements which include the curiosity exhibit, the minstrel show, and male and female impersonation.

Vestiges of Barnum's humbug are evident in relatively modern media featuring trans people. In *Disclosure*, actress Laverne Cox cites a 1975 episode of The Jeffersons titled "Once A Friend," that features a transgender character, Edie Stokes. Edie was a friend of George Jefferson's prior to transitioning, and she is in town visiting him; Louise Jefferson, not believing that Edie is really George's old friend Eddie, suspects George is having an affair. Edie is played by a cisgender actress, Veronica Redd. But there is a scene in which George, in an attempt to convince Louise that Edie is really his old friend, enlists a male friend, Leroy, to impersonate Edie by wearing a wig and a dress.

When Louise and Florence first look at Leroy's impersonation of Edie, their reaction is to ask, "What's that?"—echoing P. T. Barnum's "What Is It?"—creating space for observers to fix the subject with an authoritative interpretive gaze in order to draw an ontological conclusion about that subject's nature. While Edie is not actually present when the question is asked, the

[147] See interviews with Tiq Milan, Laverne Cox, Nick Adams, *Disclosure.*
[148] Susan Stryker, in *Disclosure.*

hypothetical trans woman is still the butt of the joke; George puts Leroy in the dress in the first place because that is what he imagines a trans woman to be—someone impersonating a gender that they are not. Cox observes that this scene is based in a long tradition of Black male comedians being asked to perform in drag as a rite of passage, which has historically served a measure of emasculation by white society in response to the racist idea that Black men are threatening. The scene also draws upon and reinforces the transphobic expectation that a trans woman will not look like a woman, but rather a man in a dress. The implication is that the obvious impersonation (the one that reassures the audience they are being "tricked") is more believably "trans" than someone who looks (to the audience) exactly like the gender they say they are.

The interpretive mode I have described in this chapter exists not only in entertainment media, but in widespread cultural narratives about trans people passing as cis, which tend to center fears around being "clocked," or recognized as trans.[149] Passing is "a complicated concept that can range from intentional deception via self-management to living based on the racialized and gendered expectations others project onto oneself," but these simplified narratives both demonstrate and reinforce the assumption that trans people are pretending to be something they are not.[150] As Sandy Stone argued in her foundational essay, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," this way of thinking is also central to the way "transsexual" has been constructed as a category. When gender-affirming surgery entered into mainstream healthcare, medical professionals were tasked with determining whether an individual was

[149] Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." Camera Obscura 10, no. 2 (May 1992), 150–176, cited in Davida Jae Schiffer, "Researching While Trans: Being Clocked and Cooling Cistress," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 51, no. 5 (October 2022), 700–725.

[150] Schiffer, "Researching While Trans," 702. Considering the fact that racial passing predated gendered passing as a widespread public phenomenon in the years around Abolition and Reconstruction, it is not surprising that public anxieties around gendered passing build on the same logics as anxieties around racial passing. See Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

"really" trans, and therefore in need of gender affirmative care, or simply insane; as a result, a set of criteria was established to prove that a patient's interior sense of self was indeed at odds with their anatomy.[151] Although the question of gender affirming medical care comes later, the question of the relationship between sexual behaviors, anatomy, and interiority is already present in the nineteenth century, first in the discourses of nineteenth-century scientific racism, and subsequently in the field of sexology. The concepts of illusion and imposture are intrinsically linked to these ideas, at least in the United States, because of how they were being articulated concurrently in popular culture.

[151] Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back."

Chapter 2: An Aesthetic Sham

> The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered.[1]
>
> Oscar Wilde

On the third of January, 1882, Oscar Wilde alighted from the *S.S. Arizona* at Castle Garden in New York City. The twenty-eight-year-old Oxford graduate was visiting the United States with a missionary purpose; he had been sent by Richard D'Oyly Carte, whose Savoy Theater was staging Gilbert and Sullivan's latest operetta, *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*, in New York City. The show was a satire of the aesthetic subculture, which was, at the time, taking England by storm. Aestheticism was a literary and artistic movement led by artists like Dante Gabriel Rosetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. In large part in reaction to industrialism, aestheticism embraced "Victorian-era Romanticism's celebration of the beauty of the natural world," and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's aims of applying "Classical and Renaissance techniques of poetry and the visual arts to work that celebrated English beauty and mythology."[2] Its primary creed was to value art for its beauty, rather than for its intellectual or ethical content. Aesthetic artists took a special interest in design and the decorative arts and sought to elevate the "banal and pretentious furnishings and domestic objects of the middle-class home," a desire that blossomed into a larger cultural movement dedicated to cultivating aesthetic beauty in everyday life.[3]

Aesthetes, with all of their vain interest in exteriors and appearances, quickly became the subject of popular British parody. They were caricatured relentlessly in the early 1880s by

---

[1] Wilde, Oscar. "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *Chameleon*, December 1894, reprinted in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 1205.
[2] Joy Shannon, *The First Counterculture Celebrity: Oscar Wilde's 1882 North American Tour* (North Bend, Oregon: Plain and Simple Books, 2011), 14.
[3] "An Introduction to the Aesthetic Movement," The Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed January 20, 2023. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-the-aesthetic-movement.

cartoonist George Du Maurier in the weekly humor magazine *Punch*. Du Maurier's illustrations—full of "langorously longhaired men" who spilled over the edges of their chairs with an apparent "inability to maintain somatic rectitude"—were formative to the way that the aesthetes, and specifically Oscar Wilde, were popularly imagined.[4] These cartoons also mocked the highfalutin aesthetic jargon and its exhaustive use of intensifiers like '"precious," "intense," "consummate," "utter," "too-too," "quite," and "exactly so."[5] Between *Punch* and several of its competitors (including the magazine *Fun*, where Gilbert launched his career as a writer and cartoonist), a "burlesque aesthetic vocabulary, iconography, and personality" emerged in British popular culture.[6] These cartoonish depictions directly inspired Gilbert's portrayal of the aesthetes in *Patience.*[7]

Patience is an operetta in two acts, featuring spoken text, recitative, arias, and ensemble numbers. The main parties in *Patience* include Reginald Bunthorne, an aesthetic poet whose style is meant to parody Pre-Raphaelite poets such as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rosetti; Archibald Grosvenor, an idyllic poet and a parody of English poets such as Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning; Patience, a milkmaid who is portrayed as simple, innocent, and the object of Bunthorne's affections; a chorus of "aesthetic maidens" who fawn over the poets; and a chorus of Dragoon guards.[8] Over the course of the story, different characters strategically adopt (and then abandon) aestheticism for social clout. At the end of Act

[4] Ed Cohen, "Posing the Question: Wilde, Wit, and the Ways of Man," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 41.
[5] Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 157.
[6] Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 22–23; Jane W. Stedman, *W. S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and His Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 181.
[7] Gilbert and Sullivan were also inspired by several theatrical predecessors, including James Albery's *Where's the Cat?* (1880). F. C. Burnhand, a writer for *Punch*, produced a contemporaneous play, *The Colonel* (1881), which similarly parodied the aesthetic subculture. See Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 154. For an example of a cartoon mocking "*aesthetiana*," see *Fun*, July 6, 1881, https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00078627/00039/images/10.
[8] On the relationship between the libretto of *Patience* and contemporary Victorian poetry, see Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 174–186.

1, Bunthorne himself admits that he does not, in reality, subscribe to aesthetic ideals. For him, aestheticism is a *pose,* something he puts on to win attention from ladies; in other words, he is an "aesthetic sham."[9] But by the end of the operetta, the maidens have lost interest in aestheticism altogether and instead turn to Bunthorne's rival, Grosvenor; thus, all Bunthorne's posing is revealed to have been for naught. *Patience* is a commentary on superficiality, vanity, the fleeting nature of popular fads, and public imposture.

The operetta relies upon popular stereotypes of the aesthetes as being lazy, effeminate, vapid, pretentious, and gullible. While these stereotypes were well-known in Britain, D'Oyly Carte was concerned that American audiences might be unfamiliar with the aesthetic movement, and that the show would go over their heads. For a solution, he arranged for the young poet and socialite, Oscar Wilde, to tour the United States concurrently with the operetta, showing the American public what an aesthete was really like, by lecturing on topics including decorative arts, the home, and nineteenth-century poetry.[10] Despite D'Oyly Carte's concerns, however, a parallel aesthetic movement was developing in North America. In what Mary Blanchard argues was largely a response to the aftermath of the Civil War, industrialization, and the rise of a new professional class, white Americans of the middle and upper classes in the mid-nineteenth century began to develop a general interest in self-stylization and interior decorating.[11] Wilde's audiences, therefore, largely received him with enthusiasm.

---

[9] W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride, vocal score* (The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, 2010), 50.

[10] For details on Wilde's tour, see John Cooper, Oscar Wilde in America, 2022, accessed August 1, 2022, https://www.oscarwildeinamerica.org. This website provides an archive of information and ephemera pertaining to Wilde's 1882 lecture tour, including dates, locations, and details of the 141 known lectures given between January and November.

[11] Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4. This interest was a manifestation of the "ideological shift among the white middle class in the relationship between the self, the body, and affect" that Daniel Cavicchi identifies as the catalyst for an emergent culture of music fans in the nineteenth century, who intentionally curated their music tastes as a form of self-stylization. Cavicchi refers to this practice as "individuation of listening and response," or privatization of

The popular press, on the other hand, was far more hostile. Journalists covering Wilde's tour deemed aestheticism an "absurd farce" and a "silly craze" fit for "soft-headed noodles."[12] Significant attention was devoted to Wilde's appearance and manner, which reporters frequently described as bizarre and androgynous, referring to his "womanly air," his "lisp," his "feminine way," his "sapphic speech," and his "effeminate voice."[13] According to Blanchard, the reaction to Wilde was driven by rising cultural anxieties around the apparent feminization of American men; while the dominant image of masculinity during the Civil War years was that of the soldier, aestheticism represented a turn toward art, fashion, and the home. In other words, the movement deviated from the gender roles that were traditional in white middle-class culture, a phenomenon that journalists mapped onto Wilde's physical attributes. Wilde's arrival also coincided with the increasing cultural visibility of gender nonconforming and sexually dissident folk in the mid-late nineteenth century.[14] (Such populations include, for example, *fairies*—effeminate male homosexuals who were a subculture at least in New York City—and *female husbands*—or, people assigned female at birth who passed as male, many of whom married women.)[15] Blanchard posits that there was "an awareness among the public, and among the new breed of aggressive journalists, that in fact there was a viable, invert [or homosexual] subculture at the time of Wilde's visit, and that Wilde was often addressing these very groups."[16]

---

experience in order to find deeper inner meaning. See Daniel Cavicci, *Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 164. On the pervasiveness of the aesthetic movement in white, middle-class American life, see Lee Glazer, "Aestheticism in Anglo-American Culture," *Nineteenth Century Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999), 201–202.

[12] "Oscar Wilde," *New York Evening Post*, January 4, 1882, reprinted in Hofer and Scharnhorst, *Oscar Wilde in America*, 15; "A Silly Craze," *New York Times*, January 8, 1882.

[13] Hofer and Scharnhorst, *Oscar Wilde in America*, 5.

[14] See Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*, 10–19.

[15] On fairies, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, Chapters 1 and 2. On the increasing cultural visibility of female husbands, or passing women, see Cleves, "What, Another Female Husband?" See the previous chapter for a full discussion of the representation of gender nonconforming populations in popular staged entertainment.

[16] Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*, 11–12.

Indeed, any understood connection between aestheticism and homosexuality was made loudly public in 1895, when Wilde was arrested and put on trial for gross indecency over his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglass. Alan Sinfeld argues that, in fact, Wilde's trial catalyzed the emergence of a new gay stereotype that encompassed the qualities of "effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence, and aestheticism."[17] These traits were vestiges of the older stereotype of the *dandy*, which the aesthetes adopted in a kind of impersonation of upper-classness. One possible reason that many homosexual men *did* flock to aestheticism is that the dandy *already* represented sexual deviance. The dandy (and later the aesthete) challenged the "manly purposefulness of industry and empire" with "an idleness and amorality that claimed the authority of art and class."[18] Thus, the dandy was often suspected of being sexually deviant, because of a general failure to conform to normative masculinity. This deviance could have included interest in members of the same sex, but was more often understood as an extreme version of heterosexuality, in which the dandy's effeminacy and narcissistic preoccupation with his appearance were tricks for ensnaring women. Aestheticism, therefore, provided a convenient alibi for those who did happen to be homosexual. Sinfeld theorizes that, following Wilde's conviction, this loose association was transformed into a public understanding that the aesthetic stereotype indexed homosexuality.

Sinfeld's argument is specific to Britain; Blanchard and other scholars have argued that, in America, Wilde would have been understood in his time as representative of homosexual subcultures that were already visible in the public eye.[19] Nevertheless, Sinfeld maintains that Wilde had some bearing on "the queer stereotype" in America (though he doesn't say which

[17] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century,* 3.
[18] Ibid., 97.
[19] See Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*; Shannon, *The First Counterculture Celebrity*; Hofer and Scharnhorst, *Oscar Wilde in America.*

"queer stereotype" he means, he seems to be referring mainly to white men of the middle and upper classes), and specifically that Wilde's celebrity promoted a "mythological association" between "gay men, 'high' culture, and the upper class."[20] This reading is supported by the recollections of Ralph Werther-Jennie June, whose published memoirs name Wilde as the "best known contemporary" example of a homosexual who is "mildly androgynous."[21] Werther-June also notes that "[a]estheticism and homosexuality are often linked together," though s/he does not specify *who* assumes this connection, or whether this connection predated Wilde's trials.[22] In any case, there is general consensus that Oscar Wilde's public image and notoriety significantly influenced emergent understandings and stereotypes of homosexuality around the turn of the twentieth century.

Although Wilde was initially sent to America to promote *Patience*, he quickly attracted interest in his own right. There was already precedent for a traveling lecture tour in the earlier nineteenth-century lyceum movement and later Chautauqua circuit, which brought lectures on literary, artistic, scientific, and political topics to rural areas with the goal of educational enrichment. His arrival also coincided with the emergent popular culture phenomenon of the celebrity interview. According to Michèle Mendelssohn:

> As this new form of reporting swept him up, he would become one of the era's most interviewed people. Interviewing would turn journalism into a gossipy, tell-all medium. … For Wilde, it would do two things: make his name familiar to millions, and make them feel like he was speaking directly to them. This added to what photography and technologies of mass reproduction were already doing to make him visible to millions. Now the printed interview was going to make him accessible and familiar.[23]

[20] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century,* 154.
[21] "Mildly androgynous" referred to someone whose anatomy was "not conspicuously feminine" and whose "psyche" contained "only a few feminine traits." Lind, *The Female-Impersonators*, 18-19.
[22] Lind, *Autobiography of an Androgyne,* 258.
[23] Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79.

The American entertainment industry thus seized on Wilde's growing popularity—and, crucially, his image—as something it could use to sell things. An outpouring of cultural memorabilia accompanied his tour, including "soap, hosiery, sewing machines, and 'aesthetic corsets.'"[24] The scholarship on Wilde's reception in the United States, especially in terms of gender, looks primarily at interviews, journalism, fashion, and Wilde's image in photographs and caricatures. Less attention has been devoted to the corpus of musical memorabilia that was published in conjunction with Wilde's tour. This repertoire includes songs whose lyrics poke fun at Wilde (or the aesthetic movement in general), meant to be performed at home or on the popular stage, and untexted songs, mainly popular dances with Wilde's name and/or image featured in the title as a marketing ploy. So far, these songs have only been examined for their lyrical portrayals of Wilde. This chapter explores this repertoire in depth, drawing out musical methods through which Wilde and aestheticism were depicted in order to explore the relationship between mainstream popular culture, emergent narratives about sexual otherness, and contemporary gender nonconforming subcultures. First I will provide some background information on the ways in which Wilde was constructed, through words and images, as a sexual other upon arrival in America. Then, I will turn to the songs; after a short discussion of lyrics, I will turn to a lengthier analysis of musical and sonic markers representing sexual difference and expand upon the networks of meanings they reveal when deployed in reference to Oscar Wilde.

For my analysis, I have recorded myself singing several of these songs, accompanied on the piano, with the goal of practicing Elisabeth Le Guin's "carnal musicology" or "cello-and-

[24] Roger B. Stein, "Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in Its American Cultural Context," in *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, ed. Amy Horbar (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 26.

bow thinking."[25] This method focuses on the "sensations and experiences of playing" (or, in this case singing) and the information that might be gleaned from the embodied experience of producing a sound or gesture. By considering the physical feelings and their extramusical associations that arise in performance, I ask what kind of body might be represented in these songs, and what its relationship might be to the culture that produced it. This method is obviously subject to significant bias; specifically, as both my accompanist and I are gay-identified men, our physical realization of these scores is unavoidably shaped by the way our culture has constructed *our* bodies. Rather than treating this influence as a problem, I treat it as another source of information about the ways in which meanings enter into culture and make their homes in people's bodies. Through an analysis that is both historically situated and performance based, I argue that popular songs such as these ones animated a kind of gestural language that contributed to the imagining of Oscar Wilde as a gender transgressive figure.

Oscar Wilde as Sexual Other

As Sinfeld asserted, twentieth-century queer stereotypes in the United States coalesced as the result of different cultural factors than those in England, evident in the way Wilde was received when he toured the United States. Several passing mentions in contemporary journalism suggest that Wilde was, at least in some sense, received in terms of sexual otherness. Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith relay a visit that Wilde made to the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, at which "a group of the younger and livelier wits, 'considering him,' as Jerome A. Hart reported, 'a Miss Nancy,' had decided to take the Englishman into camp. … They would start drinking before dinner, wine the guest without stint through the meal, bombard him with

[25] Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body*, 1–37. My sincerest thanks to Jordan Hugh Sam for accompanying me on the piano and contributing to the realization of these pieces.

anecdote, egg him on, get him drunk, and have fun with him."[26] "Miss Nancy" was a common nineteenth-century euphemism for an effeminate man; and, although an understood relationship between that concept of effeminacy and homosexual behavior is not documented explicitly, there is evidence to suggest it existed. For example, Andrew Jackson is known to have called James Buchanan a "Miss Nancy" in reference to his relationship with William R. King (who Jackson called "Aunt Fancy"), Buchanan's companion with whom he lived for thirteen years and was noted by outsiders to have been unusually close.[27]

When discussing Wilde's appearance at New York's Century Club, the authors quote a *New York Tribune* article reporting that "one member had objected [to Wilde's presence]—'a venerable poet,' who 'went about the club saying, "Where is she? Well, why not say 'she.' I understand she's a Charlotte-Ann."'"[28] It is possible that "Charlotte-Ann" was contemporary

---

[26] Lewis and Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America*, 255. This passage is difficult to interpret, as it is quoted from a second-hand source written in the twentieth century, *In Our Second Century* by Jerome Hart (1931), and is impossible to know whether Hart is quoting others contemporaneously referring to Wilde as a "Miss Nancy," or if Hart himself is making this gloss. See Jerome Hart, *In Our Second Century* (San Francisco: The Pioneer Press, 1931), 313.

[27] Possibly by sheer coincidence, the January 6, 1882 issue of the *New York Tribune*, under the "Personal" column, published a short blurb about Gilbert and Sullivan's Bunthorne being based on James Abbott McNeill Whistler—"one of the most aesthetic of the aesthetes"—directly followed by a paragraph about Buchanan's permanent bachelorhood. Given that Buchanan's presidency ended more than twenty years prior, and that the cameo was seemingly unprompted, it is notable that the two subjects are mentioned in immediate succession: "Mr. Reginald Bunthorne's white lock is modelled upon that which waves among the raven tresses of Whistler, the eccentric artist. Mr. Whistler, by the way, is recovering from his bankruptcy troubles and from the effects of Mr. Ruskin's savage attack. He is busily engaged upon a number of full-length portraits, and it is said that Mr. Ruskin's onslaught did him more good than harm. Whistler has long been one of the most aesthetic of the aesthetes, and used to cover his floors all over with blue and white rugs and Japanese tea-trays. He was several years ago famous in London for his buckwheat cake breakfasts.

President James Buchanan's bachelorhood was the result of a foolish misunderstanding. While a successful young lawyer in Lancaster he became engaged to a beautiful but somewhat domineering girl. Some legal business sent him into a neighboring county, where he remained for several days. When he returned one evening he found his office filled with importunate clients, and tired and hungry as he was he attended to their business. Then hurrying to the home of the angel of his dreams he found it closed and dark. Next morning he repeated the visit, and although he saw Miss ---- at the window, he was told by a servant that she was not at home. He walked away and never approached the home again. Neither could subdue pride enough to make or seek an explanation. The young lady shortly after died, and Mr. Buchanan never attempted to win another woman."

[28] Lewis and Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America*, 47. I was unable to locate the quoted passage in the *Tribune*; however, I did find it in a London newspaper, which cited an American correspondent. "The nearest thing to a snub which Mr. Wilde received here was at the Century Club, which is composed of our most eminent literary men—writers, preachers, and others. Mr. Wilde attended the club's monthly meeting at the invitation of a single member,

slang for an effeminate male (in the same vein as "Miss Nancy" as discussed below, "Mary," etc.), though I have not encountered additional materials that explicitly support this reading. John Cooper, on his Oscar Wilde In America blog, interprets this slight as being a play on *charlatan*, a point to which I return later in this chapter.[29]

Wilde's appearance and manner were the subject of constant journalistic comment, but not limited to his effeminacy. For as often as Wilde was portrayed as "womanly," "sapphic," and "effeminate," paradoxically, he was described in terms of his tall stature, self-possession, and masculinity. For example, upon his arrival, the *New York Tribune* noted that he was "several inches over six feet," and had "broad shoulders." "Instead of having a small delicate hand, only for to caress a lily," the paper reported, "his fingers are long, and when doubled up would form a fist that would hit a hard knock, should an occasion arise for the owner to descend to that kind of argument." Meanwhile, his voice "is so far from feminine that it is almost burly, and becomes coarse in a laugh."[30] For this reason, Joy Shannon argues that rather than being understood as simply effeminate (which, in England anyway, would have pointed to dandyism), Wilde was viewed as distinctly *other*.[31]

Victoria Dailey has examined visual representations of Wilde that circulated during his 1882 tour, looking at sheet music covers, advertising trading cards, photographs, chromolithographic prints, and newspaper cartoons, and has found that a significant portion of his iconography invokes racist caricatures of Black people in an attempt to insult Wilde, as was

---

whose wife had been one of the ladies most conspicuous in the lionizing attentions showered upon him. Many members of the club refused to be presented to him at all, and the whole atmosphere of the place during his visit was very chilly. One veteran member, who took affairs more jovially and, I am bound to say, more sensibly, went around saying, 'Where is she? "Have you seen her? Well, why not say "she"? I understand she's a Charlotte-Ann!'" [Punctuation *sic.*] "Mr. Oscar Wilde in America," *The London Daily News* March 2, 1882, 6.

[29] Cooper, "Doubtful As Men," Oscar Wilde In America Blog August 1, 2015, https://oscarwildeinamerica.blog/2015/08/01/doubtful-as-men.

[30] "Arrival of Oscar Wilde," *The New York Tribune* January 3, 1882, 5.

[31] Shannon, *The First Counterculture Celebrity,* 119.

embarrassingly typical in media created by white Americans in the nineteenth century.[32] Volpicelli argues that these images display "a certain anxiousness to classify Wilde among the denigrated races of the period," and explain why, at least for the first part of his tour, Wilde did not choose to highlight his Irishness, preferring to allow Americans to assume he was English.[33] A number of burlesques on *Patience* by blackface minstrel troupes participated in this same discourse. Dailey also points out that an early circulating image of the "dandy" in America was through the minstrel song "Zip Coon," and finds the image used in at least one instance to satirize Oscar Wilde. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, white people historically invented and weaponized a myth that people of color, especially Black people and Indigenous peoples in America, represented less "complete" or "correct" versions of the male and female sexes, an idea that established the basis for sexology's racialized ideas of human difference, and early writings about physical signs of sexual "abnormality" (inversion, or homosexuality) drew upon racist imaginings about the physical attributes of nonwhite people.[34] It therefore followed that white commentators of this time period to invoke racist imagery in order to imply Wilde's sexual indeterminacy, though, as Dailey points out, the real harm done by these representations was to the Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color who were subjected to violence as a result of these racist stereotypes.

Oscar Wilde Songs

This collection of songs includes twenty-four pieces of sheet music, and one songster containing multiple broadsides with lyrics pertaining to Wilde (see Appendix). Almost all of the

[32] Dailey, "The Wilde Woman and the Sunflower Apostle."
[33] Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," 47.
[34] See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*; Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*; Haley, *No Mercy Here*.

songs were published in North America, primarily on the East Coast where the majority of sheet music publishers were located at the time. The song "The Flippity Flop Young Man" (based on a song from *Patience*) was published in London, and *The Oscar Songster* does not include publication information but does contain topical references that suggest British origin.

Thirteen of the pieces are untexted dances (e.g. waltzes, galops, polkas) with Wilde's name or likeness (or other images associated with aestheticism, like flowers) on the cover. Three of the texted songs mention Wilde by name in the lyrics, while five of the texted songs are about aestheticism more generally. One song, titled "Oscar Wilde's Serenade," features words and music attributed to Wilde. The lyrics are indeed a poem of Wilde's, titled "Serenade," but I have not been able to track down the source of the music. To my knowledge Wilde did not write music, and the attribution on the cover does not necessarily mean that Wilde *was* the composer; it was not unheard of, at the time, to attribute a piece of music to someone who was not actually the author, as a marketing move. As Michael Broyles points out, printers were often "more interested in whose name on the title page would sell than who actually composed the contents"; I suspect that Wilde's name is being used here to attract potential buyers.[35] Musically, these songs are typical of those composed for either home performance or the popular stage in the late nineteenth century. The dances are, repetitive, diatonic with secondary harmonic embellishments and light chromaticism, and easy enough for amateurs to play; the comic songs are also par for the course, notable for their unwieldy vocal lines and occasionally awkward text setting.

[35] Michael Broyles, "America's First Waltz-King," in *Researching Secular Music and Dance in the Early United States: Extending the Legacy of Kate Van Winkle Keller*, ed. Laura Lohman (London: Routledge, 2021), 117. In his study of waltzes in the antebellum United States, Broyles discovered a disproportionate number of popular waltz tunes attributed to Mozart—nearly four times as many as any other composer—despite Mozart himself having never actually composed a waltz. See, for example, E. Mack's "Mozart's Celebrated Oxen Waltz."

Many of the covers feature images of Wilde. The untexted dances tend to use photographs or realistic illustrations that do not exaggerate Wilde's features or poses. Meanwhile, the cover art for comic songs that mock Wilde or the aesthetic movement feature more obvious caricatures, and include visual elements such as a limp wrist or a cinched waist that have been connected with sexually dissident subcultures.[36] Other cover designs are reminiscent of the decorative arts or Arts and Crafts movements, such as floral imagery, wallpaper- or textile-like patterns, or orientalist text setting or motifs (a common trope in American aesthetic art) as in the songs "Aesthetic Waltz" the "Oscar Wilde Galop," or the

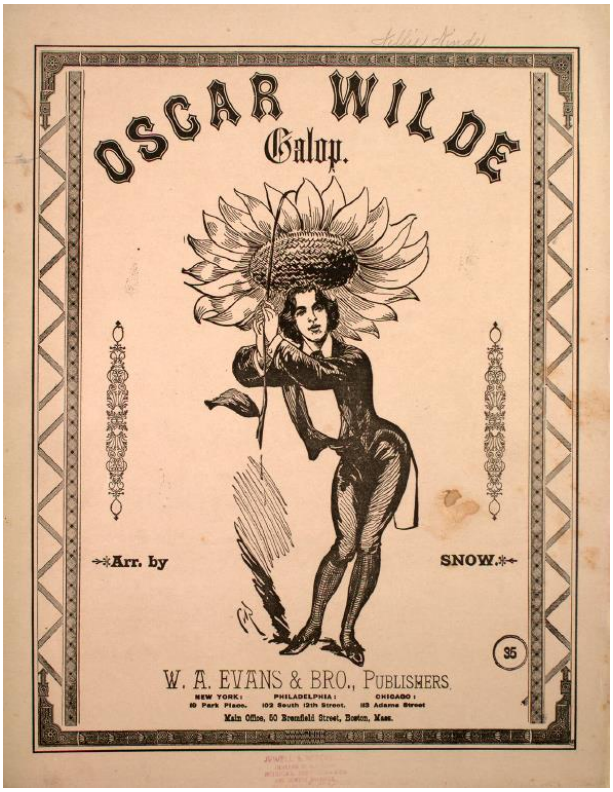


Figure 6: "Oscar Wilde Galop"

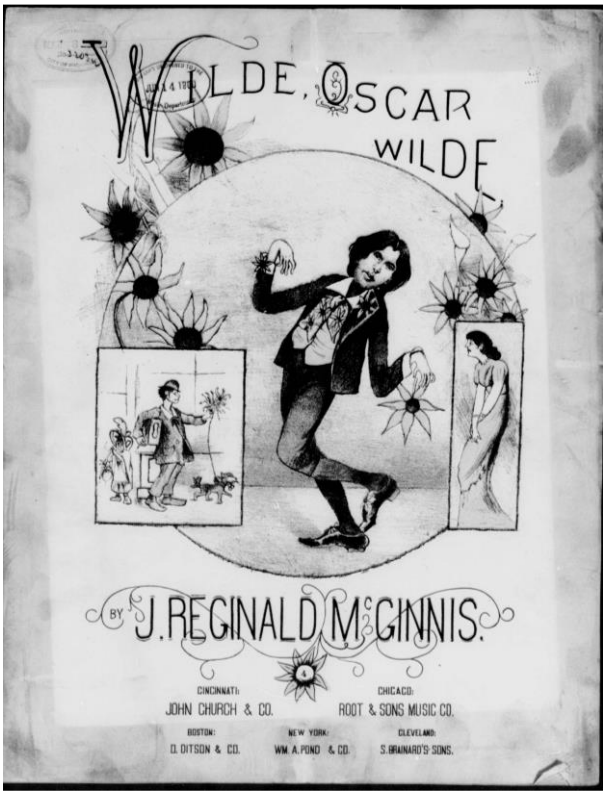


Figure 5: "Wilde, Oscar Wilde"

[36] In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey shows an illustration from a book published in the 1870s, designed to introduce Latin American businessmen to New York neighborhoods. The illustration features portraits of the different kinds of people one might expect to encounter along the Bowery. The fairy (or "male degenerate") is supposedly identifiable by his sloped shoulders, his scarf and smoking jacket, and his limp wrist. His figure is also distinctly woman-like, drawn with exaggeratedly curvy thighs and a cinched waist—not unlike the way Wilde is caricatured. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33.

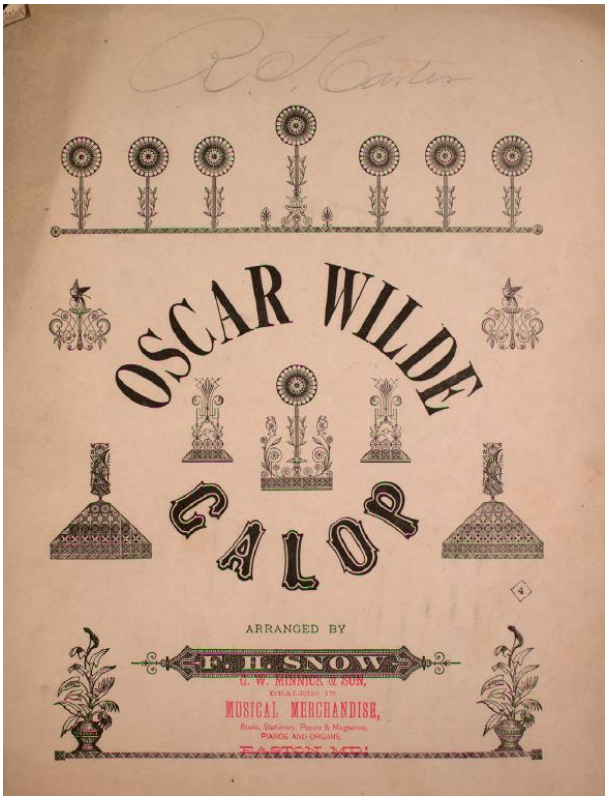


Figure 7: "Oscar Wilde Galop"

Figure 8: "Oscar Mazurka"

"Oscar Mazurka" (see figures 5 through 8).

Several songs in this collection do include lyrics that suggest a connection between Wilde, the aesthetes, and sexually deviant behavior. The first is the song "Utterly Too Utter," by Ned Straight, which tells of a romance between the narrator and a woman he meets at a park:

> We met while strolling in the park,
> As by the lake we wander'd,
> And her style I could'nt [*sic*] help remark,
> While on her form I ponder'd.
> She wore an ulster, like a man,
> A cane, which made me mutter,
> While there she flirted with her fan:
> "You're utterly too utter!"
>
> CHORUS
> With grace and ease she glided by,
> My heart was in a flutter;

I knew 'twas caught, Although I thought,
"You're utterly too utter!"

We talked about the pretty birds
That round the lake were flying;
And she sighed and listen'd to my words,
Her lustrous eyes replying.
I asked her if she'd like to wed,
And vowed I loved none but her;
She tapped me with her fan and said:
"You're utterly too utter!"

CHORUS

She then referr'd me to her "Pa,"
And said he was a banker;
And she begg'd I see her to the car,
I press'd her hand to thank her.
I call'd on him, he raged and swore,
While I began to stutter,
He yelled while showing me the door:
"You're utterly too utter!"

CHORUS

The scenario incorporates a number of aesthetic tropes that create space for play on gender and sexuality. Halfway into the first verse, the love interest is described as wearing an ulster, a garment associated with Wilde. As Blanchard points out, an "aura of public carnival surrounded the display of aesthetic costume"; journalistic reporting on Wilde's lectures often described his "aesthetic followers who appeared as a calculated spectacle at many performances."[37] Aesthetic women appeared in what is described as "artistic dress," meaning uncorsetted garments that were loosely draped, or wrapped. By contrast, the female character in "Utterly Too Utter" is not dressed like an aesthetic maiden, but "like a man," potentially linking her to the ubiquitous

[37] Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*, 152.

contemporary cultural narratives about women who cross-dressed and courted women.[38] Moreover, the attempted romance ultimately fails; upon meeting the love interest's father, the narrator is rejected, accused of being "utterly too utter," the implication being that members of the aesthetic subculture are unfit for marriage. It is notable that the character is said to "stutter," a detail that appears more than once in this repertoire; the imagined relationship between stuttering and alterity, or failed masculinity, is discussed later in this chapter. For now, the fact that the narrator does not get the girl in the end (the girl who dresses like a man) due to some perceived unsuitability for marriage presents the possibility of a performance that pushes the boundaries of normative sexuality.

The song "Oscar Dear!" by Monroe Rosenfeld also offers a range of gendered interpretations. "Oscar Dear!" was apparently quite popular during Wilde's lecture tour; according to Michèle Mendelssohn, men in the streets would serenade Wilde with the song as he passed through in his carriage.[39] Similarly to "Utterly Too Utter," this song is about a romance of sorts between Wilde himself and a narrator (presumably, though not explicitly, female), but "Oscar Dear!" is much more *risqué*, physically-oriented, and heavily laden with innuendo. The lyrics read as follows:

> I fell in love with a nice young man,
> Of virtues rich and rare,
> Of stature tall and ankles slim,
> And long and curly hair.
> Aesthetic to a great degree,
> In actions sweet and mild,
> Sublimely lank and nonchalant,
> But just a little "wild."
>
> CHORUS
> Oscar, dear, Oscar, dear!

[38] On the relationship between crossed dress, assumed sexual behaviors, and staged male impersonation, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.
[39] Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde*, 89.

Take your hand away, sir;
Someone might be looking, love,
Take your hand away, sir.

"WALTZ REFRAIN"
Oscar, dear, … Oscar, dear! …
How flutterly, utterly, *flutter* you are.
Oscar, dear, … Oscar, dear, …
I think you are awfully "wild," ta! *ta!*

One evening as we took a walk
Upon the crowded street,
We stopped before a window bright,
Linked arm in arm so neat.
I thought of nothing else but joy,
Until, just at my side,
I felt a "something" softly creep,
And gently there abide.

CHORUS / "WALTZ REFRAIN"

But this was many days ago,
When snow the winter clad,
And recollections of that time
Has often made me sad.
For far across the sea he's gone,
And left my heart beguiled,
Yet, I shall ever love him true,
Though he is "O, so wild."

CHORUS / "WALTZ REFRAIN"

The innuendos and double meanings are clear and abundant. Mendelssohn interprets this song as a response to Wilde's "ladykilling reputation," i.e., his tendency to flirt with female journalists (though it should be noted that he conducted *all* of his interviews reclining, regardless of the sex of the interviewer), his highly sensual book of erotic *Poems*, and the droves of "swooning" women and girls who tended to show up at his lectures.[40] This interpretation also resonates with Sinfeld's argument that, prior to Wilde's trials, aesthetic traits such as effeminacy, leisure-class

[40] Ibid., 79–89.

decadence, and preoccupation with beauty often indicated the brand of oversexed heterosexuality associated with the older tradition of dandyism.[41]

I suspect, however, that something else is going on here, specifically because of the dedication on the front cover: "Written expressly for, and inscribed to America's refined comedian Mr. Sol Smith Russell of the 'Edgewood Folks' Combination." Russell was a character singer who performed with a number of theater companies throughout the late nineteenth century, and who did sometimes impersonate female characters. As discussed in Chapter 1, impersonation often played on the discrepancy between the gender of the character, and the audience's knowledge of the performer's gender. This space of cognitive dissonance created opportunities for the enactment of sexually dissident personas that might not otherwise be directly representable on the stage.[42] The song was evidently also performed by women; a *New York Clipper* article mentions serio-comic singer (and soon-to-be murderess!) Ada Hulmes performing the song in Cincinnati and Detroit.[43] But the fact that the original intended performer was a female impersonator suggests that at least in some performance contexts, this song played on the presumed gender of Wilde's love interests.

It is also notable that the composer provides an alternative set of lyrics on the back of the sheet music: "Oscar, Dear! For Male Characters; Supplemented by the Author, for America's favorite Motto Singer and Character Artist, TONY PASTOR." The supplementary lyrics shift the narrator from Wilde's love interest to a third-party observer, e.g.: "I'll sing to you of a nice young man" instead of "I fell in love with a nice young man," "She felt a 'something' softly

[41] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*.
[42] I have seen one modern mention of the popular female impersonator and blackface minstrel performer Francis Leon played a character called "Miss Patient Wilde" in 1881–2. See Michael F. Moore, *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television: An Illustrated World History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1994), 59. Moore does not specify whether Leon was performing this character as a standalone act, or as part of a burlesque on *Patience*, of which several existed.
[43] "Variety Halls," *The New York Clipper* February 25, 1882, 813.

creep" instead of "I felt a 'something' softly creep," etc. (the lyrics are otherwise unchanged). Tony Pastor was known for establishing a "respectable" brand of variety in the 1870s, that eliminated the raunchier, more overtly sexual acts in favor of a lineup that would allow for women and families to attend shows.[44] That Pastor could have sung this song, therefore, suggests that "Oscar Dear!" was not an unusually dirty song in and of itself, and does not present Wilde in an especially deviant light. Performed by a female impersonator, however, it might have. I would also argue that even the modified lyrics are tinged with homoeroticism; after all, the performer is still singing about Oscar Wilde's "something" creeping softly to abide at the other character's side. Though it may seem like an odd comparison to make, we could place this song in the same category as relatively recent songs like Dolly Parton's "Jolene" or Rick Springfield's "Jessie's Girl," both of which speak in vague erotic terms about a same-sexed object, but through an opposite-sexed object as a proxy.[45] The fact that this song was perhaps the most popular one while Wilde was touring the United States (and, apparently sometimes men sang it *at* him) makes me wonder whether Wilde may have been the target of the particular kind of eroticized teasing to which men and boys who are known or suspected to be queer are so often subjected.

The "Wildeiana" collection at UCLA's Clark Library also includes a song, "Oh! Oscar Wilde, We Never Thought That You Was Built That Way," which appears in a two-sheet songster, titled *The Oscar Songster*. The document is undated but presumably published shortly following Wilde's trial. Judging by cultural and geographical references in the song, it is most likely of British origin; due to the high rate of transatlantic musical and theatrical exchange, however, it was likely also sung in the United States. Interestingly, Sinfeld identifies this song as

[44] See Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima.*

[45] "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene / I'm begging of you please don't take my man … Your smile is like a breath of spring / Your voice is soft like summer rain / And I cannot compete with you, Jolene"; "And she's watching him with those eyes / And she's loving him with that body, I just know it / And he's holding her in his arms, late late at night / You know I wish that I had Jessie's girl."

evidence for a lack of commonplace understanding that Wilde was a homosexual, specifically citing the lyrics:

> Now wonders they will never cease, and as each day we read,
> The papers, why we of't say, well, "I am surprised" indeed,
> For people who we think are 18 carat turn out brass,
> And what we thought a Lion's roar's the braying of an ass.[46]

This excerpt does indeed seem to express shock at the revelation about Wilde. However, the song's chorus strongly suggests a covert meaning:

> Oh! Oscar, you're a Daisy, you're a Sunflower and Rose,
> You're a thick old "Dandylion," from your pimple to your toes,
> You're the sweetest lump of "Boy's Love" that's been picked for many a day,
> Oh! Oscar Wilde, we never thought, that you was built that way.

Simply put, the jokes in the chorus rely on a degree of shared public understanding about a relationship between homosexuality, aestheticism, and dandyism. Calling Wilde a "daisy," "sunflower," or "rose" is a clear reference to the strong association between flowers and the aesthetic movement—but wouldn't be funny in this context if there wasn't also already an assumed connection to the "boy love" alluded to two lines later. Even more telling is the second line; the pun on "dandelion" as "dandy-lion" (predating *The Wizard of Oz* by nearly forty-five years!) only makes sense if dandyism holds homosexual connotations. All of these innuendos set up the punchline: "Oh! Oscar Wilde, we never thought that you was built that way." The humor lies in the fact that—as illustrated by the three preceding lines—yes, of *course* we thought Oscar Wilde was built that way, but we are all silently agreeing, with a wink and a nudge, to pretend that we didn't. This song supports a claim like Neil Bartlett's, that Wilde's 1895 trial and the public's response to it were a "contrived spectacle" that was orchestrated to sell journalism, when, in fact, there was a recognizable gay subculture in London at the time, of which the

[46] Reproduced in Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*, 2.

mainstream culture was willfully ignorant.[47] The same seems to have been the case in America, though perhaps the public was less insistent upon performing ignorance, as evidence for the assumed ties between Wilde, gender nonconformity, and sexually dissident subcultures is clearly present.

Musical Gesture and Sexual Difference

In addition to lyrical content, this repertoire invokes a set of vocal gestures—sighs, lisps, and stutters—that are used to mock the perceived sexual difference, and deviance, of Wilde and the aesthetes. Sometimes these gestures are mentioned by name in lyrics and stage directions; at other times, they are realized musically. This section will examine these gestures, the emotive properties that emerge from them in performance, and the potential cultural meanings that arise from them.

The Aesthetic Sigh

The *aesthetic sigh* is a sonic gesture that appears in several songs in this collection, including "Wilde, Oscar Wilde," "Utterly Too Utter," and "The Aesthetic Maiden"; as well as in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience.* The *aesthetic sigh* is represented in this repertoire either by a literal sigh, a melodic gesture or vocalization meant to represent a sigh (such as a downward leap), or some combination of the above. Though it appears in multiple guises, I argue that they hold enough coherence to be reasonably understood as representing different manifestations of the same phenomenon. I argue that within this repertoire, the *aesthetic sigh* serves as a *schema,* or a conceptual framework that includes the literal vocal utterance of a sigh (or a sound intended to imitate or point to said utterance), an embodied sensation, and finally a number of emotional

[47] Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).

or personal qualities associated with aestheticism and Oscar Wilde: languidness, excessiveness, effeminacy, failure, and ridiculous display of feeling. [48] The *aesthetic sigh* works such that musical sounds *either* directly facilitate or represent bodily sensations; *or*, musical sounds create the impression of physical space or motion, which in turn translates to more abstract concepts pertaining to the aesthetic movement, sexual dissidence, or gender nonconformity.

The clearest musical depiction of an aesthetic sigh is in the song "Wilde, Oscar Wilde" by J. Reginald McGinnis, a comic song intended for home performance by amateurs that features a vocal line punctuated by stage directions on the part of the pianist. At the end of each sung phrase, the pianist is instructed to perform gestures that evoke the aesthetic characters in the song. Notably, "the Pianist must assist the singer in breathing an aesthetic sigh at all the rests in the vocal part." The "aesthetic sighs" are indicated by the directions "(Sigh.)," "(Ecstasy.)," and "(Roll eyes.)" placed over rests as gestural cues that indicate to the performer the over-the-top nature of the sigh (see figures 9, 10, and 11).

The sigh is eventually realized in the vocal melody. At the end of the song's minor-key B section, heralding the return to the original major key is a figure featuring repeated downward leaps of an octave on an open "Ah" syllable, in an exaggerated "sighing" gesture. Such a figure also appears in the very first song in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, "Twenty Love-Sick Maidens We," which introduces the chorus of aesthetic maidens, all according to the score "in the last stage of despair" (see figure 12). The sigh appears once more as the Dragoon guards attempt to impress the aesthetic maidens by performing sensitivity in the manner of the poets,

[48] A downward step or leap representing a "sigh" has long been understood as a musical *topic* (see Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980); Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart:* Le Nozze di Figaro *and* Don Giovanni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Kofi V. Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). My understanding of the sigh as a *schema* is related to *topics* insofar as the musical gesture represents a vocal gesture, but diverges in that it either implies or directly facilitates embodied sensations that carry culturally-specific meaning.

singing “Our soldiers very seldom cry, and yet they need not tell us why a teardrop dews each martial eye!” with the last word suspended on a high note under a fermata which descends an interval of a sixth (see figure 13).

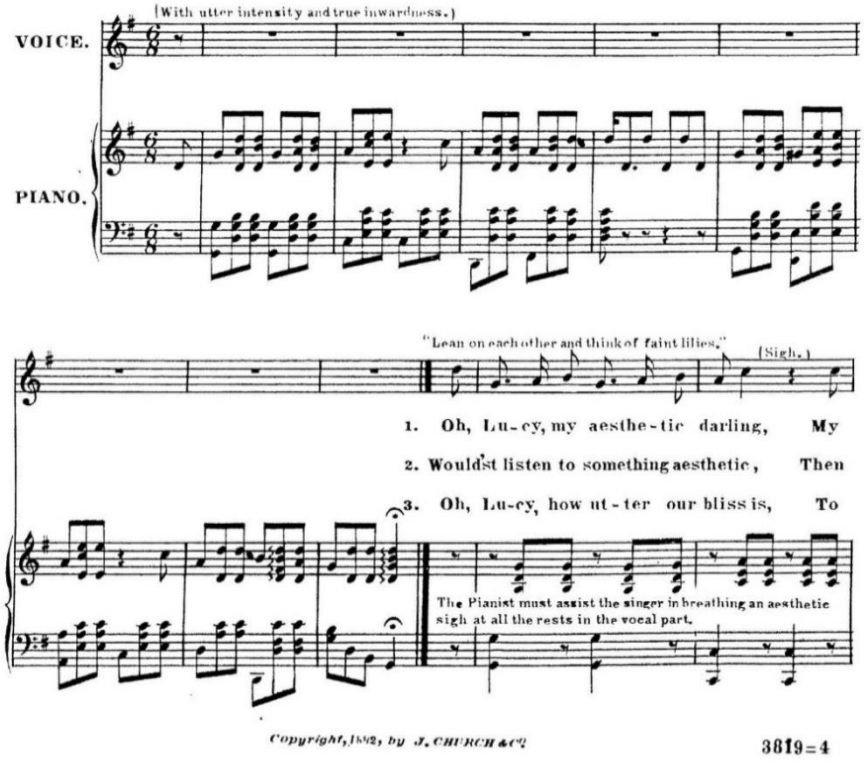
This gesture theatricalizes the languidness that was associated with the aesthetes, in part through the body of the performer. To sing the “sighing” gesture—that is, to leap from a relatively high note to a relatively low note—can result in a physical relaxation of the throat, especially in those singers who are not professionally trained. Often, unprofessional singers will strain the *strap muscles* in the throat as they move higher in pitch which increases both physical tension in the neck and *subglottic pressure* (the pressure that air from the lungs exerts upon the opening between the vocal cords).[49] To descend suddenly releases that tension, causing the singer to literally relax their body.

A different variety of languid sigh appears in the song “The Aesthetic Maiden,” at the conclusion of each verse (see figure 14) asking the singer to hold an “ah!” while the piano plays a meandering, descending melody, marked “*Sym. Placidamente*.” (Placidly. I am not sure whether the first part is indicating “symphonic,” as this abbreviation typically would, or “*sympatique*,” as in “pleasant.”) Here, the sensation of relaxation arises from the decrease in subglottic pressure that occurs in the throat as the singer draws out the single note; the volume of air in the lungs dwindles over time, affecting a natural decrescendo and exerting lesser force upward against the vocal cords. This feeling of release is reinforced by the downward musical movement expressed in the piano accompaniment, which repeatedly descends in intervals of a fourth or fifth, thus implying a move from a higher note to a noticeably lower one, with passing tones between.

[49] I am grateful to Jordan Hugh Sam for generously offering his vocal expertise to assist me here in describing this physiological process, as well as in the following vocal descriptions.

WILDE OSCAR WILDE.

Words by E. E. Rexford. Music by Japonica Reginald Mc Ginnis.



3819=4

Figure 9: "Wilde, Oscar Wilde," page 3

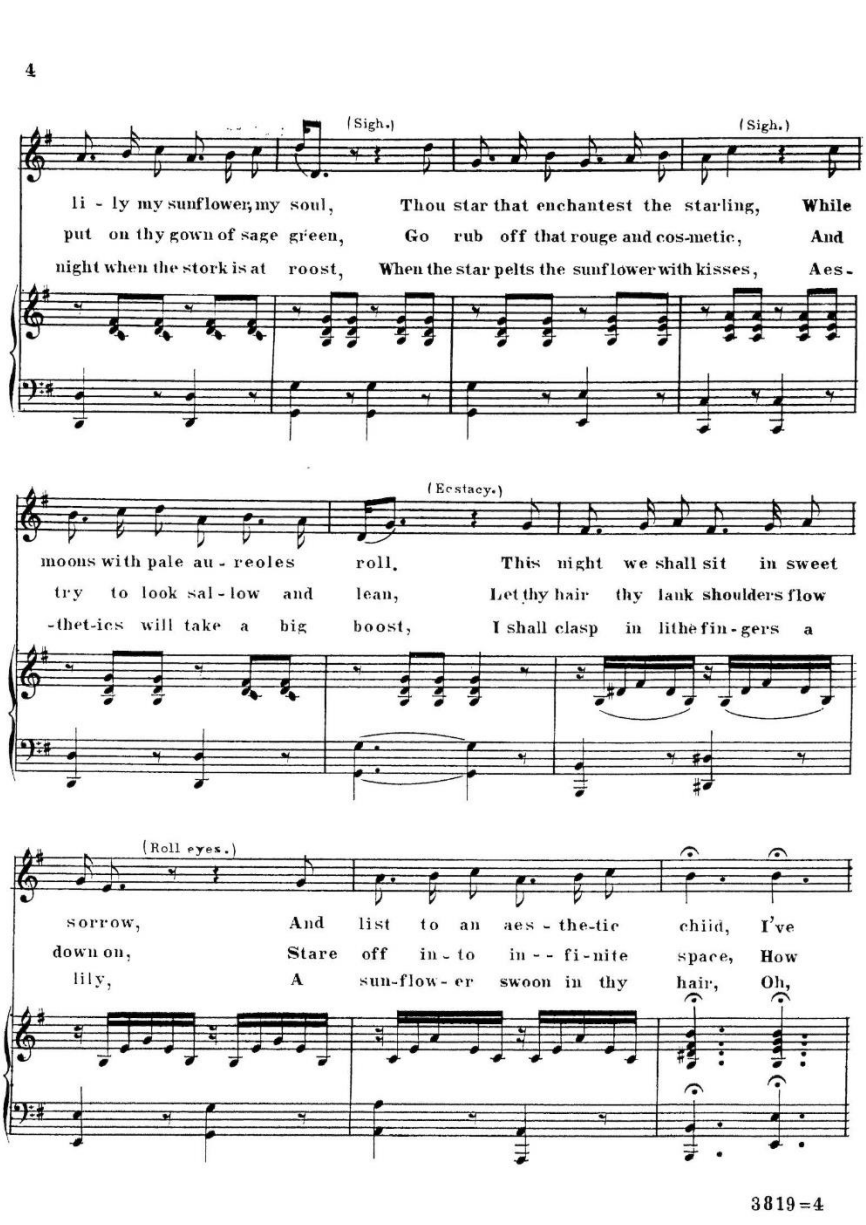


Figure 10: "Wilde, Oscar Wilde," page 4

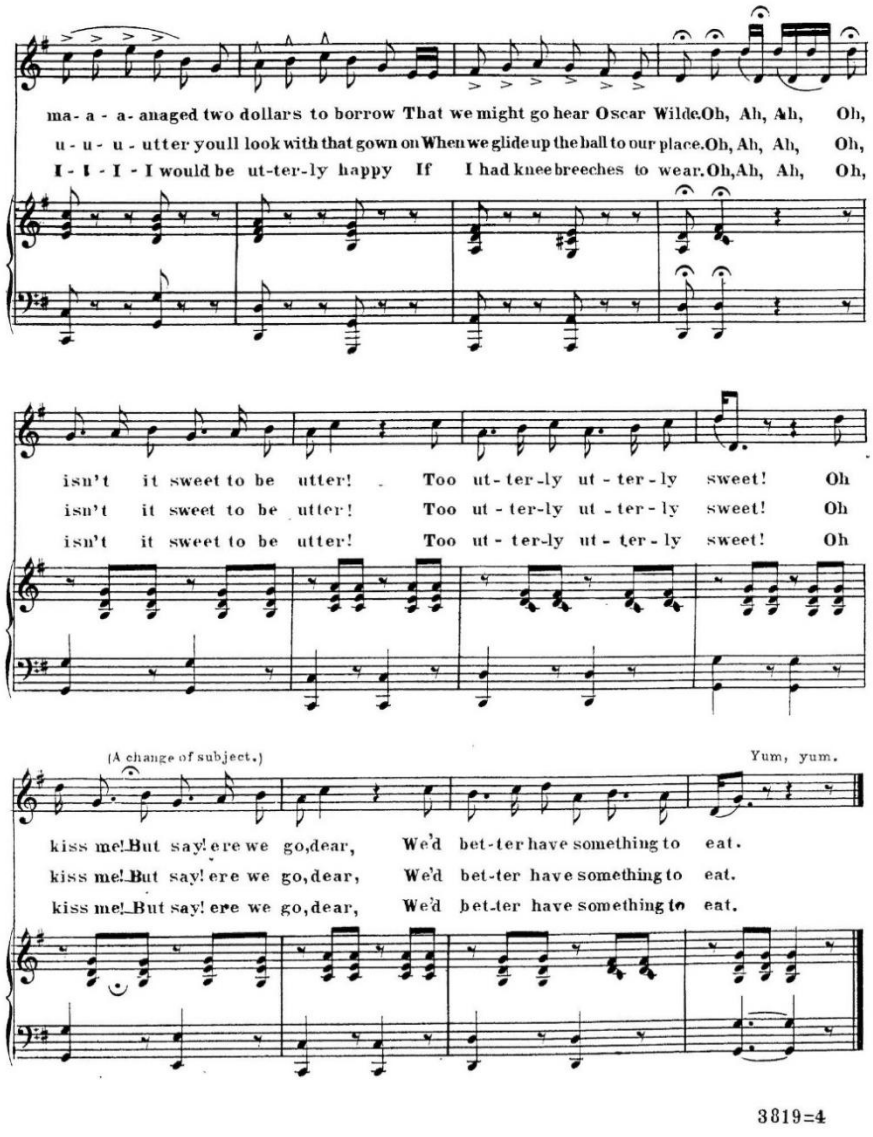


Figure 11: "Wilde, Oscar Wilde," page 5

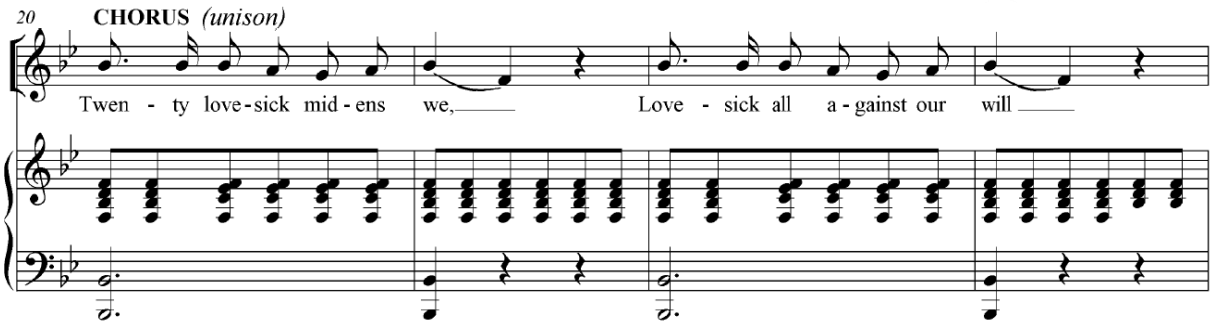


Figure 12: "Twenty Love-Sick Maidens We"

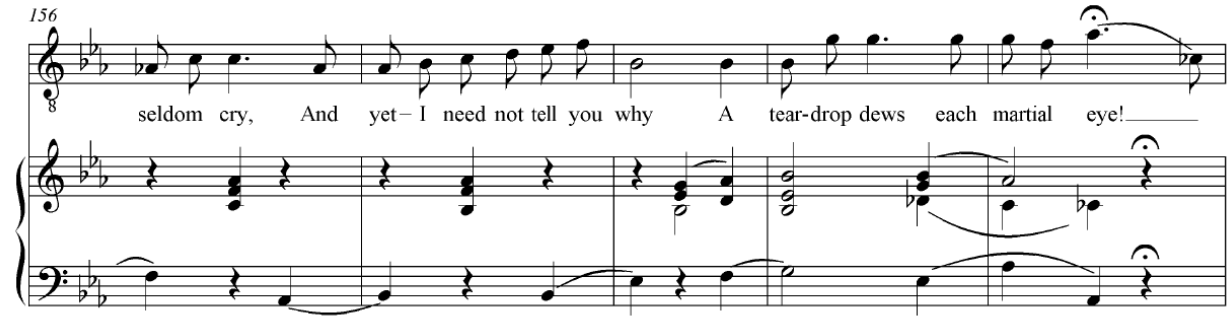


Figure 13: Patience, "Finale, Act I"

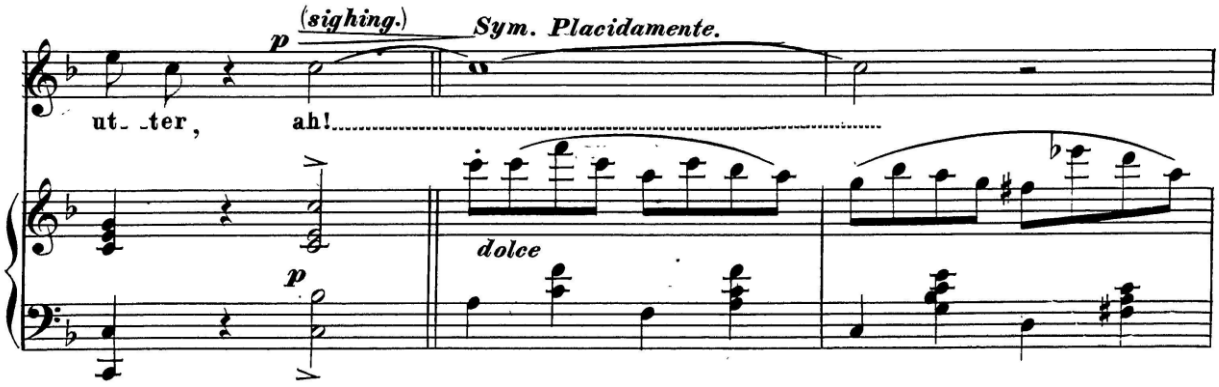


Figure 14: "The Aesthetic Maiden"

Even for audiences not physically producing the sound, it is possible that the melodic gesture can communicate an embodied sensation through mimesis. Arnie Cox's *mimetic hypothesis* proposes that when we hear sounds from an external source, we unconsciously

imagine making the sounds we are hearing, resulting in a kind of physical empathy with the sound.[50] Our mimetic response may or may not actually align with the source of the sound. For example, if a listener hears a melody played on a violin, and that listener happens to be a violinist, then they might have embodied knowledge of the physical motions necessary (e.g. the manipulation of a bow in the right hand, the movement of fingers on a fingerboard with the left hand, etc.) to produce that sound. If a listener who has no prior knowledge of the violin hears the same sound, they may imagine physical motions that produce similar sounds (for example, movement of the vocal cords to sing the same melody), or motions that feel gesturally similar to the sounds they are hearing. For this reason, even upon hearing an instrumental motif such as a "sigh," we might actually *feel* the muscles in our throats moving sympathetically, and even a feeling of release or relaxation in our overall carriage (see below).

But the sigh also communicates a sense of failure, or shame. The leap down the octave featured in "Wilde Oscar Wilde" is inherently unwieldy for a tenor or baritone singer (the likely intended performer, as the song is openly addressed to a female subject; due to the prevailing heteronormativity of the 1880s it would be presumed that the narrator was male). To perform this leap, a tenor or baritone singer must transition between using the *thyroarytenoid* muscle, which controls lower voicing, to a combination of *cricothyroid* and *thyroarytenoid* muscles that control the higher range. Highly trained singers are able to transition smoothly using the two muscle groups cooperatively; however, for amateur singers (which the majority of people singing this at home would have been) the transition is unlikely to be smooth, and the voice may break. Even

[50] Arnie Cox, "Embodying Music: Principles of the Mimetic Hypothesis," *Music Theory Online* 1, no. 2 (2011).

more embarrassingly, it may crack into falsetto, that "profoundly perverse" "freakish sideshow" that Wayne Koestenbaum names as "among the greatest of singing shames."[51]

Falsetto occurs naturally when the singer moves into a range that is too high for the thyroarytenoid muscles to continue to engage. A trained professional, such as an opera singer, develops techniques to compensate for what is otherwise a dramatic shift in timbre; if a singer fails to do so, the illusion of control is disrupted, and the medium of the body makes itself glaringly apparent. Even in *Patience*, which would have been performed by professionals, falsetto is invoked when the Dragoon guards attempt to perform aesthetic sensitivity to win over the maidens, on the words "martial eye" (see again figure 5). Though falsetto is not explicitly indicated, the high register pulls toward falsetto due to the prolonged note in a soft dynamic. As one of the most notorious features of the aesthetic subculture was deviance from gendered norms, this failure in the vocal line may reflect the notion of failed masculinity—as Koestenbaum points out, falsetto itself has long been associated with "effeminacy," "degeneracy," and "artifice"—and more broadly represents failure to maintain authority and control over one's own body.

Aesthetes were understood to be not only lazy, but physically weak, or limp, further removing them from the conventions of ideal masculinity.[52] This stereotype is especially apparent in popular culture iconography. Ed Cohen specifically describes the *male* aesthetes in George du Maurier's cartoons as being "spineless," "about to slide off their chairs," representing a failure to conform to "'somatic rectitude,' … [to] literal as well as metaphorical uprightness."[53] Wilde himself appears similarly in Napoleon Sarony's famous portrait; he sits on a fur- and silk-

[51] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York, Simon and Schuster Inc., 1993), 164.
[52] Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 158.
[53] Cohen, "Posing the Question," 41, quoted in Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 158.

covered couch, leaning to one side and slumped forward in his seat, chin propped on a relaxed hand, wrist soft, elbow posted on one knee. His head is tilted and his face is neutral; his legs are splayed, left leg positioned at a *slightly* deeper incline than the right, so that he looks almost knock-kneed (see figure 15.) This brand of aesthetic posturing is parodied in a famous scene in *Patience*, in which the Dragoon guards adopt aesthetic dress in a last-ditch effort to win the affections of the maidens: "Enter DUKE, COLONEL and MAJOR. They have abandoned their uniforms and are instead dressed and made up in imitation of aesthetes. They have long hair, and other outward signs of attachment to the brotherhood. As they sing they walk in stiff, constrained and angular attitudes – a grotesque exaggeration of the attitudes adopted by BUNTHORNE and the Maidens in Act I."[54] They fail spectacularly, mistaking stiffness and angularity for the limp, languid posturing of the aesthetes, declaring with full confidence, "You ought to get a Marionette, and form your style on him." As Williams writes, the guards "cannot bend their upright manly bodies into the correct postures … the manly body cannot contort itself into a shape not essentially its own. Only unmanly men can perform these particular poses."[55]

Limpness may also carry connotations of sexual impotence: limp as in *flaccid.* Impotence is connected to perceived sexual alterity, as it challenges a particular U.S.-American construction of masculinity which, in its idealized form, is muscular, virile, laborious, and heterosexual. Also related to the idea of gender-transgressive languidness was the widespread use of opium among the middle and upper classes in the late nineteenth-century United States. According to Blanchard, aesthetic tastemakers "praised opium, claiming that it released the diviner part of the artistic soul, that it allowed abandonment to idleness."[56] This abandonment to idleness, of course, went against the value placed on productivity by the dominant Protestant culture—as did the

[54] Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, 141.
[55] Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, 158–9.
[56] Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*¸ 86.

general aesthetic creed of directing one's energies toward cultivating and appreciating beauty. Especially for men, "abandonment to idleness" also signaled a kind of nonconformity to the manly values of industriousness, conquest, and national expansion personified by public figures like Theodore Roosevelt and John Philip Sousa.[57]

Figure 15: Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony, 1882

Aesthetes were thought to not only be physically weak, but emotionally and intellectually weak, prone to excessive feeling and vapidness. These traits arise from the metaphorical

[57] Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*, 36–42.

representation of space within the aesthetic sigh. The "sighing" figure in this repertoire is constituted by a larger leap than the traditional "sigh" topic in the Western classical canon—also called the Mannheim sigh, or a "crying" or "weeping" gesture often used in laments—which is a descending interval of a second and dates back to Renaissance music. This larger leap creates the impression of greater physical space. The notion that we often interpret musical relationships in terms of spatial relationships, bodily sensations, and emotional states, features strongly in the branch of music theory and cognition based in what is called *conceptual metaphor theory*. Conceptual metaphor theory, which originated in the field of linguistic anthropology, argues that the basis of human cognition is essentially metaphorical; that is, that we understand abstract things in terms of other, more immediate things.[58] Thus, applying this theory to music, numerous scholars have argued that we unconsciously understand abstract pitch relationships in terms of more concrete, spatial relationships, hence "high" and "low."[59] Because there is more "space" "inside" the exaggerated aesthetic sigh than there is "inside" the more traditional "sighing" or "crying" figure, the interval *feels* emptier (amplified, even, by the physical feeling of space inside a performer's mouth while singing), thus evoking the more abstract concept of *emptiness*, as in, empty of content. The aesthetic philosophy privileged form over content, that is, art was meant to be decorative, not informative or moral; on another level, the aesthetes were viewed by outsiders as being vapid and pretentious. Bunthorne and Wilde were both seen as "aesthetic shams," with no real conviction behind their respective aesthetic façades.

[58] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.
[59] See, for example, Janna Saslaw, "Forces, Containers, and Paths: The Role of Body-Derived Image Schemas in the Conceptualization of Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 40, no. 2 (1996), 217–43; Lawrence Zbikowski, "Metaphor and Music Theory: Reflections from Cognitive Science," *Music Theory Online* 4, no. 1 (1998); Candace Brower, "A Cognitive Theory of Musical Meaning." *Journal of Music Theory* 44, no. 2 (2000), 323–379; Lawrence M. Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Steve Larson, *Musical Forces: Motion, Metaphor, and Meaning in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); and Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

The impression of greater distance lends itself to the impression of greater effort. Referring back to Cox's mimetic hypothesis, which supposes that when we hear a sound we subtly imagine physically *making* that sound, we can extrapolate that a larger musical leap implies a physical leap that takes place across greater *space*, thus requiring greater exertion.[60] The way that we conceptualize a musical leap, according to Cox, encompasses "[t]he feelings of desire, planning, exertion, and [a] degree of satisfaction" in having accomplished it.[61] (This compounds the fact that to sing the greater leap does literally require greater physical exertion, for the aforementioned reasons having to do with breaks in the vocal register.) The heightened sense of "exertion" also implies an exaggerated or excessive display of feeling. Excessive or uncontrolled emotion was a trait associated with femaleness in the nineteenth century, exemplified by the widespread diagnosis of white women of the middle and upper classes with hysteria.[62] These attitudes resonated with cultural anxieties about music's pathogenic potential to "unleash female sexuality to the detriment of health."[63] Daniel Cavicchi writes about widespread reactions against the emergent culture of "music lovers" in the Gilded Age, where journalists and

[60] Elsewhere, Cox theorizes musical motion in terms of *action schemas*, building on the concept of *image schema* from conceptual metaphor theory. *Image schemata* are "structures that organize our mental representations at a level more general and abstract than that at which we form particular mental images" (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 23–4). One such example is the VERTICALITY schema: the concept of verticality in space, which relies on both the experience of three-dimensional space, and the sensation of gravity. The VERTICALITY schema precedes the image of an object in space—say, an up-and-down line—but rather provides us with the *structure* to understand that object as having an up-down, or vertical, orientation. See Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 22. Cox argues that certain musical schemas can become *action* schemas, in other words, a mental representation of "things that we do to realize a given musical form and figuration" and the "affective correlates of playing" or "singing in a particular manner" (Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition*, 65). My notion of "schema" is related to Cox's "action schema" in that it encompasses both a sound and the physical act of making that sound. See also Mitchell Morris's discussion of "singing along" as a practice that involves imagining and mimicking the interior physical contours of a singer's body, in Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) , 131.

[61] Cox, "Metaphor and Related Means of Reasoning," 66.

[62] On the relationship between sex, race, and the idea of "sentimentality," see Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 35–67. Schuller argues that the nineteenth-century concept of "full" sexual dimorphism being restricted to the white race as a marker of racial supremacy was informed by—and reinforced—the idea that white women were naturally susceptible to sensory and emotional disruption, as opposed to white men.

[63] James Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

cultural critics often framed enthusiastic concert audiences in terms of illness, religious fervor, and mass hysteria, whose displays of intense "musical ecstasy" (read: effeminacy) needed to be curtailed into more restrained, deliberate (read: masculine) listening practices.[64] It is no coincidence either that male music lovers—especially fans of Wagner, whose music is full of slithering chromatic harmonies and languid vocal dips—were frequently caricatured as overly-effeminate, much in the same manner as the aesthetes. A failure to display stoicism and emotional restraint was interpreted as a failure to achieve the ideal standard of white masculinity, inscribed in the dramatically expressive nature of the aesthetic sigh.

Viewed holistically, the aesthetic sigh's sonic representation of languidness, effeminacy, hysterical, and weak signals a subject who is nonproductive, sexually deviant, and fails to perform ideal masculinity.

"And I lisp…"

The second two sonic elements that appear in this repertoire—lisps and stutters—are primarily vocal mannerisms, rather than whole schemas that encompass sound, gesture, embodied sensation, and abstract entailments. Nevertheless, they do both index kinds of sexual difference associated with the aesthetes. Both are named in "Too Utterly Utter; or, The Aesthetic Girl," a song which appears to have been written for a pirated or burlesque version of *Patience*. The chorus goes: "Over sunflowers yellow as butter / I linger in aesthetic flutter / and I lisp with a sort of a stutter / for I'm too, yes too utterly utter."

The *lisp* is perhaps the vocalism that people tend to most immediately associate with queer populations, due to the widespread cultural stereotype of the "gay lisp." It is not appropriate to draw a direct one-to-one correlation here, and for several reasons—one being that

[64] See Cavicchi, *Listening and Longing*, especially 149–85.

we don't actually know what these songs are referring to when they mention a "lisp"; another being that what is called the "gay lisp" is not, by definition, an actual lisp. Several English-language studies conducted in the past ten years have investigated the widely held cultural perception that gay men lisp, and found that the "gay lisp" is actually a hyperarticulated /s/ fricative that is especially frontal, or dental.[65] Obviously, not all gay or queer men pronounce their /s/'s as such, and some straight men do, as do some people who are not men; the researchers conducting these studies did, however, find that participants listening to different speakers tended to assume that men with a hyperarticulated /s/ were queer, which speaks to the prevalence of this stereotype. The lisp is only mentioned by name once in this repertoire, but—perhaps by sheer coincidence—or perhaps not—the word "aesthetic" includes a built-in lisp, in the elision between the first and second syllables. Regardless of whether anything would have been thought of this effect in everyday speech, the musical result is that something like a lisp is audible in the vocal melody each time the word "aesthetic" appears in this repertoire.

There is evidence to suggest that there was some kind of assumed association between lisping and fairy/homosexual/invert subcultures, at least as early as the 1890s, but possibly earlier. Many of the cultural outsiders who provide anecdotal evidence in Chauncey's *Gay New York* describe the members of the fairy subculture as lisping: in an 1892 *New York Harold* article about a known fairy bar called The Slide, the reporter complains about "boys who minced up to [him] and lisped"; in 1904 the bodybuilding specialist (really) Bernard Macfadden spoke with vitriol about "the shoals of painted, perfumed, Kohl-eyed, lisping, mincing youths that at night

[65] Benjamin Munson, "Variation, Implied Pathology, Social Meaning, and the 'Gay Lisp': A Response to Van Borsel et al," *Journal of Communication Disorders* 43 (2010), 1–5; Sara Mack and Benjamon Munson, "The Influence of /s/ Quality on Ratings of Men's Sexual Orientation: Explicit and Implicit Measures of the "Gay Lisp" Stereotype," *Journal of Phonetics* 40 (2012), 198–212; John Van Borsel and Anneleen Van de Putte, "Lisping and Male Homosexuality," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43 (2014), 1159–1163; Jeremy Calder, "From 'Gay Lisp' to 'Fierce Queen': The Sociophonetics of Sexuality's Most Iconic Variable," *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality*, 2020.

swarm on Broadway in the Tenderloin section"; actor Jimmy Durante talked about a Coney Island bar he visited in 1908 where "entertainers who were all boys … danced together and lisped"; a 1933 novel describes the "street corner 'fairy' of Times Square" as "rouged, lisping, [and] mincing"…et cetera.[66]

These sources include crime gazettes, detective novels, and psychiatric reports, and therefore understand their subjects in terms of criminality and pathology. They are also pervaded by white supremacist racial logics that position white people as expert observers who can "know" something about who a person *is* based on select observable physical traits—with the goals of apprehending someone trying to pass as something they are not, or proving a person to be lesser, thus justifying the violence inflicted against them. This logic directly informed the field of sexology, which extended the racial project of sorting people into "types" based on gendered presentation and sexual behaviors. While some sexologists, such as Havelock Ellis, advocated for the rights of sexually variant folk, others had the joint goals of a) justifying continued violence against people of color, especially Black people in America, and b) "treating" sexually variant white people so that they might be rehabilitated into heteronormative white society.[67] We must therefore be cautious when accepting the validity of such anecdotal evidence. There exists also an instance of Werther-June—quoting a medical doctor, but citing them as a good authority—describing a fellow androgyne (the original author writes "young man," but Werther-June corrects them) as "beardless," with "an effeminate voice, and a distinctly feminine walk. He lisped and in speech closely approached a bashful female."[68] Oscar Wilde is described

[66] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 40, 35, 99.
[67] See Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*; Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*. On the "listening ear" and the positioning of white people as "expert listeners," see Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line.*
[68] "The 'Fairy' and the Lady Lover," *Medical Review of Reviews* (August 1921), quoted in Lind, *The Female-Impersonators*, 262–5.

as speaking with a lisp in one 1882 interview that I have read, which could be a coincidence, or could be a gesture toward his status as a member of the aesthetic movement.[69]

There is reason to believe that both the aesthetes and fairies could have been *imagined* by cultural outsiders to lisp, whether or not they actually did. Jessica Holmes writes on lisping in her article on modern-day pop singer Grimes, who is often spoken of in misogynistic, infantilizing, and sexualizing terms in relationship to her lisp (which is an actual one). Noting this web of meanings associated with that speech pattern, Holmes suggests that the labeling of a particular gay male speech pattern as a *lisp* has less to do with the sound of the /s/, and more to do with the "*perceived effeminacy* of homosexual men who exhibit this tendency" due to the "depth of the associations between lisping and femininity."[70] In other words, descriptions of these groups as "lisping" may have had a lot to do with these groups being perceived as deviating from hegemonic maleness in different ways—as audible in their speech patterns—which both members of the aesthetic and fairy subcultures did, even though the two groups did not fully overlap.

"…with a sort of a stutter"

Mullaly and Dumont's narrator not only lisps, but does so with a stutter (or something like one). While not mythologically associated with homosexuality in the same manner as the lisp, the stutter is also symbolically loaded in ways that point to ideas about sexual abnormality. A stutter is characterized by two main behaviors—"prolongation," or "failed articulation" in which speech temporarily halts, or freezes—and "repetition," specifically the "uncontrolled

[69] "Oscar Wilde," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 21, 1882, 4. Quoted in *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 72.
[70] Jessica Holmes, "The 'Manic-Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World' and Her 'Baby Doll Lisp': Grimes and the Disabling Logics of the Feminization and Infantilization of Lisping," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 1 (2019), 150. Emphasis on the first word mine; emphasis on the second in the original.

rearticulation" of a single sound, often the first consonant of a word.[71] This definition is much more concrete than that of the lisp; as Holmes points out, stuttering tends to be overrepresented in speech pathology studies (in comparison to other speech patterns, such as lisping), which is a reflection of the disproportionate "social prejudice" and "moral scrutiny" that people who stutter face "for failing to master normative speech."[72]

Besides being named lyrically, the song "Wilde, Oscar Wilde" depicts a stutter through its vocal melody, on the final line of each verse leading into the chorus on the words "managed," "utter," and "I" (see figure 16). The first syllable of each word is stretched over the better part of two beats on accented eighth notes, in a melismatic text setting that is rhythmically much slower than what comes before, which is primarily syllabic. Such an abrupt change creates the "prolongation" effect that is understood to be typical of stuttering. Additionally, despite the fact that in each verse the melisma occurs over a vowel, in all three cases the vowel either begins with a glottal stop, or is a diphthong, and thus asks for rearticulation on each eighth note (reinforced by accents). In addition to prolongation, therefore, this passage evokes repetition.

[71] Oliver, Bloodstein and Nan Bernstein Ratner, *A Handbook on Stuttering* (Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2008), 335, cited in Robert Fink, "When the Music Stutters: Notes Toward A Symptomatology," in *Over and Over: Exploring repetition in Popular Music*, ed. Olivier Julien and Christophe Levaux (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 18–19.
[72] Holmes, "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth Pop World," 146.

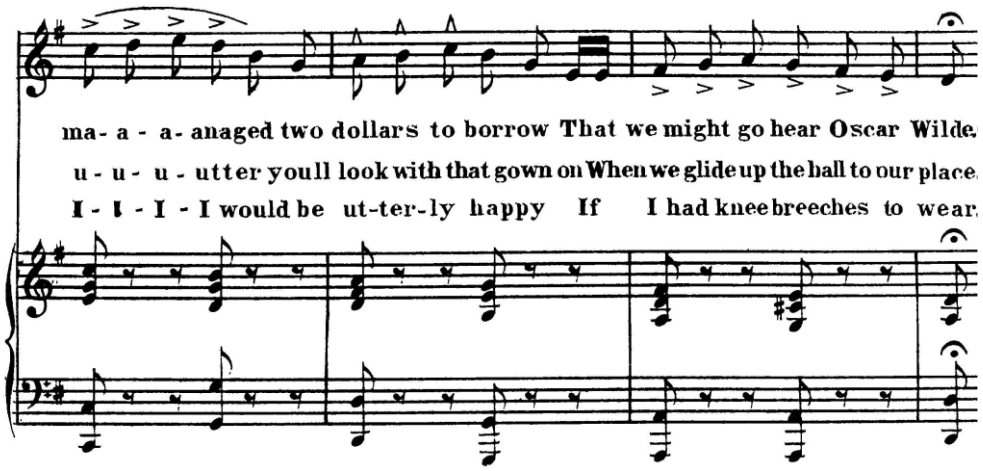


Figure 16: Stuttering figure in "Wilde, Oscar Wilde"

"Stutter songs" were in fact a long-standing sub-genre of "novelty song" in North American popular music, though the first of these songs seem to postdate Wilde's presence in the United States by roughly a decade. Songs such as "K-K-K-Katy" by Geoffrey O'Hara (1918), write a stuttering effect into the sung melody through repetition of consonants ("K-K-K-Katy, beautiful Katy / You're the only g-g-g-girl that I adore"); this particular song draws attention to it by placing the repeated consonants over triplet figures. In his study of "stuttering songs" published between 1890 and 1930, Daniel Goldmark notes that these songs present ableist depictions of the stutter as "unnatural," and sometimes even "grotesque," as well as painting their subjects as "objects of fascination."[73] Goldmark also observes that the subjects in these songs are almost always male, and are almost always placed into situations of romantic love, in which their stutter complicates or precludes their success in pursuing a love interest. Thus, not

[73] Daniel Goldmark, "Stuttering in American Popular Song, 1890–1930," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 92. The positioning of disabled subjects as "objects of fascination" is a relic of the nineteenth-century epistemological category of the "curiosity." On the relationship between the "curiosity" and emergent ideas about race, gender, and sex in the nineteenth century, see Chapter 1. On Wilde as a "curiosity," see Shannon, *The First Counter Culture Celebrity*; Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement."

only are their subjects cruelly painted as "unintelligent," "inarticulate," or "abnormal," but also "effeminate and therefore weak and vulnerable."[74]

Holmes also points out that the stigma around stuttering is heavily gendered. Stuttering, more commonly diagnosed in men than in women, "is masculinized, but in derogatory, *emasculating* ways that link stuttering with certain highly stigmatized, polarizing extremes of male sexuality such as impotence, sexual repression, and even incriminating forms of sexual perversion like pedophilia."[75] In a study on literary portrayals of stuttering in three novels—Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Yukio Mishima's *Kinkaku-ji* or *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Christopher Eagle similarly finds that stuttering is often linked to the ideas of either excessive nervousness, or sexual repression and dysfunction.[76] Following this logic, stuttering may be invoked in this repertoire of Wilde songs to signal the same qualities of impotent, degenerated, or, paradoxically oversexed (but perversely so) masculinity that were often associated with the aesthetes.

While stuttering does not have the same naturalized link to homosexuality as does lisping in our culture, its status as deviating from idealized masculine speech patterns does leave room for queer associations. And, it has been invoked in such a way. In Evelyn Waugh's book *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), the character Anthony Blanche, who is a homosexual and an aesthete, speaks with a pronounced stutter. For a much later example, consider the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), in which Tim Curry, playing the transvestite mad scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter, often speaks and sings in a manner that can be described as halting, sometimes freezing mid-word and prolonging consonants. At the beginning of the song "Sweet

[74] Goldmark, "Stuttering in American Popular Song," 101.
[75] Holmes, "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth Pop World," 149–50.
[76] Christopher Eagle, "Organic Hesitancies: Stuttering and Sexuality in Melville, Kesey, and Mishima," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 2 (2011), 201.

Transvestite," for instance, Curry announces, "He's [Riff Raff] just a little brought down, because / when you knocked / he thought you were the *c—andy* man," placing the *c* in the word "candy" long before the next beat, then drawing the consonant out before transitioning to the vowel just *after* the beat. Similarly, in the more famous line, "I see you shiver with anticip—…pation," the *p* is drawn out over several long beats while the other characters wait with, well, anxious anticipation, for Dr. Frank-N-Furter to finish. Though it is not exactly a stutter, this kind of speech does arguably have certain qualities that evoke stuttering. While these examples are relatively contemporary, they demonstrate repeated instances of stuttering—or, a stutter-like effect—as a means for depicting queer male characters over a long period of time, suggesting some assumed cultural connection—explicit or implicit—between stuttering and queer forms of masculinity.

As is the case with lisping, it is not clear whether the aesthetes were actually known for stuttering, or whether stuttering speech was a quality artificially mapped onto them because of its gendered and sexual associations. It is also notable that aesthetic speech was often parodied as being excessively repetitive, as in the popular phrase "utterly too-too," which could have reinforced the link between aestheticism and stuttering, if in fact there was one. Thinking purely about the lyrical logistics, it did occur to me that "stutter" simply rhymes with "utter"; given the density of the web of associations between speech patterns and the way the aesthetes were perceived, though, I think the connection is probably much more complex than that.

The physical and vocal gestures represented in this repertoire advance highly gendered notions of otherness, abnormality, and failure to mock members of the aesthetic subculture. It is not possible to gauge the extent to which these stereotypes are based in reality, whether most aesthetes really did behave in such a manner, whether homosexual men (or otherwise gender

nonconforming folk) behaved in such a manner, or the exact nature of the overlap between those two populations. Nevertheless, this stereotype is clearly evident in artifacts of the mainstream culture. Scholars like Sinfeld and Moe Meyer have argued that the aesthetic stereotype became emblematic of a certain brand of homosexuality through the "forced ideological mediation of the juridico-legal" intervention that was Wilde's sodomy trial.[77] But the relationship of this stereotype to homosexuality was not simply one in which the hegemonic culture assigned a certain set of traits to a minoritized sexual demographic. The next section will explore the ways in which this gestural language may have afforded queer folk—including Oscar Wilde—opportunities to engage with negative stereotypes and experiment with cultural codes as a means of self-fashioning in the face of a hostile society.

Aestheticism and Tactics of Queer Parody

In recording some of the songs in this repertoire, I practiced what Le Guin terms cello-and-bow thinking."[78] While singing and playing, Jordan and I paid careful attention to the embodied sensations that we experienced, and also to the processes through which we arrived at the performative decisions we made. Placing this data into dialogue with our own positionality as modern-day subjects who identify as gay, and with Oscar Wilde's public performance of aestheticism, will eventually lead me to a theorization of camp. For this section, I will focus on our performances of the song "Wilde, Oscar Wilde."

We recorded many takes over the course of about an hour, workshopping not only the music but also our physical performance as we went. We tried different versions of the aesthetic sigh, producing some renditions where they were seriously contemplative, in some lighthearted

[77] Moe Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde: An Archaeology of Posing," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 105.
[78] Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body*, 14.

and frivolous. (In one take, we attempted to make them as raunchy as possible but were unable to weather the entire song in this manner.) In the process, I repeatedly encountered moments of *failure.* As an amateur singer with only rudimentary vocal training, I lack the knowledge a professional singer would have of the internal mechanics needed to make a smooth transition between ranges. We experimented with my vocal delivery; I tried singing in different vocal registers, testing the effect of belting the high notes versus switching to falsetto, or using a mixed register (what we ultimately settled on). Even after I reached a point where I could consistently achieve correct pitches on either end of the "sigh," it was not ultimately possible for me to transition smoothly between registers; even our most successful takes featured a small break in the melodic line, and in the worst ones my voice cracked, squeaked, or gave out altogether. I was also conscious of the release of tension that resulted at the bottom of each "sigh," and, in fact, at the end of each phrase that ended with a downward leap. Upon watching the footage of our performances, I noticed that the physical act of singing caused me to relax my entire posture (compounded by the impulse to make myself smaller when my failed attempts to jump the octave resulted in unbecoming noises; see figure 17). With repeated relaxation I found myself naturally incorporating other body language; namely, exaggeratedly limp-wristed, swooning, and flailing gestures that read as theatrical, effeminate, and queer.

Figure 17: I slump sheepishly in my seat after an especially mediocre aesthetic sigh

Figure 18: We lean on one another, think of faint lilies, and perform "ecstasy"

Figure 19: We improvise stage directions

Our interpretation of the stage directions developed organically over time; through repetition, we both felt opportunities for queer gesture and interaction emerge, and we followed our inclination to act them out. The act of being limp and drooping encouraged us to follow the cue, "lean on one another and think of faint lilies," throughout (see Figure 18). Our exaggerated impersonation of swooning aesthetes, we noticed, lent itself to forms of touching that might not have been laudable or permissible in other contexts; in this setting, however, they are easily excused as "theatrical." In the same vein, on phrase "Oh kiss me! …" it occurred to us both to turn to one another and lean closer during the fermata, as though we were flirting with the idea—before turning away at the last moment and continuing with the rest of the line, "But say! ere we go, dear, We'd better have something to eat" (see figure 19). Several takes later, we realized that the superscript above the fermata reads "(A change of subject.)," and that our improvised play may have been exactly what was intended, despite the lack of an explicit instruction. On the whole, the dramatic excess of the melody compelled us to overact.

The kind of physical performance that the song facilitates—swooning, flailing, limp, yet over-the-top—evoked a particular mode of theatrical effeminacy that pushed us toward a camp mode of performance. *Camp* is a fraught concept with multiple (and sometimes conflicting) definitions. I understand camp to be a "strategy and tactic of queer parody," that holds the potential to mobilize these very concepts of effeminacy, artifice, theatricality, and failure toward queer self-representation in the face of a hostile or excluding dominant culture.[79] I agree with Jack Babuscio's assertion that camp tends to include four basic features—irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor—all of which emerge from the experience of living in the world as gay.[80] José Esteban Muñoz adds that "reiteration" and "citation," are central to camp; a camp performance can recuperate objects from the "everyday" and, through repetition, use them to generate new meanings.[81] These "everyday" objects can include artifacts from the dominant culture, even those that represent oppressive ideologies. Camp can respond to cultural fears and stereotypes about queer folk by interpolating and caricaturing them, "confirming that not only do queers dare to exist but they actively flaunt and luxuriate in their queerness."[82] Camp explores the interplay between a gesture and its meaning, between representation and reality, between a person and a persona, between the unserious and the utterly serious.

[79] Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.
[80] Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 118–127.
[81] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press, 1999), 128. See also Meyer's definition of *parody*, which is virtually identical. Meyer, "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," 9.
[82] Andy Medhurst, "Camp," in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), 276.

There is general consensus that Oscar Wilde and camp have a lot to do with one another, though exactly *what* they have to do with one another is subject to a range of interpretations.[83] Sinfeld traces camp directly back to Wilde, pointing out that the basic features that Babuscio identifies—irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor—have precedent in Wilde, and that camp "includes an allusion to leisure-class manners, deriving from the Wildean dandy."[84] Raymond Knapp also names Wilde as a "touchstone for later camp tastes," but argues that Wilde adopted his "camp" posturing from Gilbert and Sullivan's portrayal of the fictional aesthetic poet, Bunthorne, in *Patience.* Knapp understands camp not as a strictly queer performative or interpretive strategy, but rather as a more general "shared sensibility, a shared predilection to appreciate, nurture, and otherwise value certain theatrical elements that might be overlooked or shunned by the mainstream" (albeit a sensibility that is often embraced by queer populations).[85] Knapp argues that through "cleverly tidy plots," "visual displays," "highly idiosyncratic and/or stereotypical characters," and the "tendency for song less to prolong or elaborate the dramatic moment … than to distract from it," operetta lends itself particularly well to camp tastes, which draw attention to the musical medium, and highlight the *performativity* of performance. "The performer's role [in the operetta] … comes, in a sense, prelabeled as artificial."[86] In other words, Wilde's "camping" was in large part a mimicry of performative conventions established by the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Knapp's argument that *Patience*, which revolves around heterosexual romance, "clearly indicates [that] camp tastes could, as late as 1881, be conceived entirely from a heterosexual

[83] See, for example, Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*; Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Classics, 2018); Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility; Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde"; Knapp, *Making Light*. See also Todd Haynes' 1998 film, *Velvet Goldmine.*
[84] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*, 156.
[85] Knapp, *Making Light*, 170, 139. This is the definition provided by Susan Sontag in her well-known essay, "Notes on Camp."
[86] Knapp, *Making Light*, 172. Knapp argues that camp musical tastes stand specifically in opposition to the values of German Idealism.

perspective, even when camping Wilde" does not quite align with the way I am understanding camp as a necessarily queer performance strategy. But I do agree that Wilde was practicing a kind of queer camp performance in his committed embrace of the aesthetic stereotypes promulgated by *Patience* and the ephemera surrounding his lecture tours. Meyer theorizes that for years leading up to his trials, Wilde had been hard at work crafting a homosexual identity that did not rely on the act of sodomy to be recognized; that is, a unified subjectivity that could be articulated through the body of the individual.[87] He traces Wilde's interest in the idea to a pedagogical encounter with *Delsarte*, a French system of actor training and method of bodily comportment, to which Wilde was introduced during his 1882 tour of the United States:

> Delsarte was a semiotician whose science … consisted of the classification and decoding of bodily inscriptions based on observations of human conduct in order to determine the causal correspondence between exterior signification and essential interiority. Like Balzac, he believed that although the relationship between exteriority and interiority was absolute, total, and universal, it was also a relationship in which the two terms could act as either cause *or* effect. In a radical break with the epistemology of bourgeois liberalism (which restricted interiority to cause and exteriority to exclusive effect), both Balzac and Delsarte believed that a self-reflexive exterior signification could control and produce interior states through composition of gesture, posture, and voice … The real value of the Delsarte practices for Wilde was that exteriority, while it could reflect an already posited interiority, could also help create a completely new interiority, a new self, and a new identity.[88]

The idea of the body as an external sign that could both reflect and *affect* interior states was, Meyer argues, instrumental to Wilde's endeavor to articulate an individualized homosexual identity. The concept of *posing—"to be as artificial as possible"*—was central to Wilde's practice. "Posing" here has multiple meanings—the first being to "pose" as an artist's model; the second being period slang for cruising.[89] (Thus, the Marquis of Queensbury's infamous

[87] Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde."
[88] Ibid., 80–81.
[89] "In 'London's Models' especially, it is clear that Wilde's use of the term 'poser' was used to describe a 'type,' of which the artist's model was only one example: 'Besides the professional posers of the studio there are the posers of

accusation that Wilde was a "posing Somdomite" [obligatory *sic*] holds a potential double-meaning.) For Wilde, posing rerouted the object of desire onto his own body "to effect a collapse of subject and object, desiring and desired—a double identification with both gaze and image that dispensed with the need for the shared subject position dependent on the physical presence of a partner."[90]

Meyer argues that Wilde's embrace and performance of this set of codes came to constitute "camp" *after* they were transformed through legal means into signifiers of homosexuality. But I propose that Wilde's embrace of these signifiers—which, in America, anyway, represented a failure to adhere to idealized standards of masculinity and was worthy of ridicule—was in itself a camp performative strategy that resignified stereotypes advanced by the mainstream culture to communicate a gay subjectivity. It is not necessarily a certain repertoire of aesthetic dress, speech, and gestures that are camp, but the superimposed layers of artifice through which Wilde "posed."

The assumed artifice—or imposture—of the aesthetic movement itself provided an important cover. *Patience* exposes Bunthorne as an "aesthetic sham" early on in the operetta. ("Am I unobserved?" Bunthorne sings to the audience, "I am! Then let me own I'm an aesthetic sham!") Wilde himself is accused of being an aesthetic sham, a charlatan ("Charlotte-Ann"), a "thief," and the leader of a "silly craze" or pretentious fad. In some of the musical repertoire explored in this chapter, moments of vocal failure represent rupture in aesthetic posturing, exposing it as a pose—just like the scene in *Patience* where the dragoon guards attempt to assume an aesthetic manner but miss the mark, highlighting the unnaturalness, as Williams

---

the Row, the posers at afternoon teas, the posers in politics, and the circus posers.' Wilde goes on to … give the reader a list of locations at which one can find posers to look at: 'the running-ground at Eton, the towing-path at Oxford, the Thames swimming-baths, and the yearly circuses.'" Ibid., 89.

[90] Ibid., 98.

argues, of the aesthetes' limp, languid carriage. I have even found one instance of the music of *Patience* described in such terms; a writer for the *New York Clipper* called the music "*somewhat too aesthetic*, and probably if it had some unfortunate unknown as its author it would, in a number of instances, be deemed decidedly reminiscent and cheap, *machine-made,* in fact."[91] The equation of "aesthetic" with "machine-made" further emphasizes the element of unnaturalness. Artifice, repetition, and unnaturalness all provide a potential safe haven for people who cannot exist out in the open. As Mitchell Morris writes, "layering of performances and personae accomplishes two important things. First, it ironizes or perspectivizes all the performances entailed in the representational complex: all are partial, no single one can be reliably privileged," therefore, the "range of meanings sits mostly in the subjunctive mood. … *[S]uch instances [of multiple coding] are particularly available and attractive to audiences who experience one or another sort of representational ban.*"[92] In other words, queer folk.

Therefore, it was not *the gestures and behaviors themselves* that were camp, but rather *what Wilde was doing with them.* For the reasons outlined above, the aesthetic stereotype provides a useful palette of attitudes and gestures that lend themselves well to camp, but it is the animation of those materials that constitutes the queer performative act. At least in America, there existed an assumed connection between effeminacy, failed masculinity, and sexual deviance; Wilde's impersonation of an "aesthetic sham" was arguably a means of utilizing "reiteration" and "citation" to "enact *self* against the pressures of the dominant culture's identity-denying protocols."[93] Wilde was the most prominent public figure of the late nineteenth century who engaged in such a queer practice; however, it is likely that other queer folks were

[91] "City Summary," *New York Clipper* October 8, 1881, 470. Emphasis mine.
[92] Morris, "On Fairies (And Mothers)," 8–9. Emphasis mine.
[93] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 120. Emphasis mine.

experimenting with cultural meaning making in similar ways, but did not become famous for doing so.

Recording these songs about Wilde and the aesthetes more than a century later, I felt a strong physical pull toward a mode of queer expression. Obviously, the fact that both my accompanist and I are gay-identified men influenced our interpretation and realization of these scores. If camp performance and queer gestural language are passed generationally and internalized through repetition, it is possible that Jordan and I are already in possession of a physical vocabulary and a queer sensibility that allowed us to interpret this repertoire in the way that we did—regardless of whether or not we knew why. Sinfeld addresses this point when he concludes his discussion of camp's historical and class-based origins: "Of course, younger users today need not be aware of all this. They are camp because other gay boys are camp."[94]

In this same vein, there may have also been straight men (that is, men who were only romantically and sexually interested in women) in the 1880s who were adopting the gestural language of the aesthetes. Would those gestures, in their hands (or wrists, or eyes, or mouths…), have been read similarly to how they were read on Oscar Wilde? What about when performed by women? For any of these groups, the exaggerated nature of the sigh allows whatever is being expressed to "pass" under the cover of theatricality. The range of interpretive possibilities means that there is always plausible deniability, and that ambiguity is what allows for queer performers to communicate realities beyond what is deemed "acceptable" by the oppressive culture.

Will the Real Oscar Wilde Please Stand Up?

Oscar Wilde's play with artifice and image found a home within American entertainment culture of the late nineteenth century. When I spoke with Joy Shannon about the tendency of the

[94] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*, 156.

press to pivot between depicting Wilde as either masculine or feminine, suggesting that Americans found Wilde very difficult to place within extant gendered frameworks, she theorized that "he was received as a *curiosity* … [that] people found him odd."[95] In the same vein, Robert Volpicelli writes that Wilde's general illegibility not only worked in his favor, but also in fact folded him neatly into the format of entertainment popularized by P. T. Barnum—the "late nineteenth-century economy of mass-produced curiosities."[96] His unusual presentation and way of speaking provided for audiences the same kind of "disorienting novelty" that P.T. Barnum famously made into a business model.[97] Volpicelli argues that this pre-existing format of public entertainment was one of the factors enabling Wilde's success in the United States.

Through his unusual appearance (understood by most to be modeled after the aesthetic costumes in *Patience*) as well as his penchant for exaggerated posing, onstage and in photographs, Wilde "construct[ed] a caricature of himself that could circulate alongside his actual person. … Following from a tradition of living curiosities in which the human body was offered as a form of public entertainment, the most important aspect of this interpretive drive was Americans' unwavering interest in Wilde's physical attributes."[98] The obsession with Wilde's physical attributes, and the tendency to exaggerate and distort them in his iconography and verbal descriptions of him, linked Wilde to the freak show—a "mode of performance that purposefully commodified the idea of human aberration"—and "shuttled back and forth between representations of physical and cultural difference, often collapsing the two."[99] That the curiosity

[95] Shannon, personal correspondence with author, October 29, 2021.
[96] Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," 26.
[97] Ibid., 26, 28–29.
[98] Ibid., 32.
[99] Ibid.

was a racialized concept further contextualizes the use of racist visual tropes in Wilde's iconography.[100]

An article in the 1882 *New York Clipper* places Wilde squarely within the tradition of illusion by comparing Wilde to an "educated pig." "Educated," "learned," or "sapient" pigs, trained to perform feats like counting, telling time, and identifying concealed cards, were a popular touring attraction in the English-speaking world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *Clipper* article reads:

> With avidity did we seize on that little story which has been floating through the press to the effect that while Oscar Wilde was in the South he visited a menagerie and circus, and even took in the sideshow, where there was on exhibition an educated pig. Think of Oscar gazing on an educated pig! Think of the emotion which must have filled the pig's mind, and then read these lines
>
> ABOUT THE SIMILARITY.
>
> O pig of uncommon education,
> Of manners at once aesthetic and wild!
> Pray tell us in what consideration
> You hold the theories of Oscar Wilde.
> Does the sunflower seem to you wise or silly,
> Do you dote on the Old instead of the New?
> Does the wisdom of Bacon bloom forth in the lily,
> And are you impressed by the utter too too?
> 'Twould seem that in many respects you resemble
> The knee-breeches-wearing Oscar himself;
> For though at the mention of pork you don't tremble,
> Nor poise in the garb of a masculine elf,
> You still exhibit in public your learning—
> You're naturally Wilde, and, what is more,
> While you are a pig, a little discerning
> Shows that our Oscar is purely a *bore!*[101]

[100] Caricature was a common means of representing politicians and other public figures in the nineteenth century that flourished with the development of lithographic technology; so, to an extent, the caricaturing of Wilde as a form of visual representation was not unusual. However, the use of the language of curiosity, as well as the application of racist visual tropes, accomplishes suggesting his otherness within the plausible deniability that the discourse of caricature offers. Similar to how aestheticism didn't *have* to mean homosexuality, but evidence suggests that it usually probably did.

[101] "Introductory," *The New York Clipper*, August 5, 1882, 31.

The article exposes Wilde as humbug in two ways. First, part of the learned pig's appeal was in the discrepancy between the pig's reputation as an especially dirty, gluttonous, and stupid, and the ability of the trained animal to perform feats that not all humans can do, like card tricks and mind reading.[102] The comparison to Wilde is a reversal of the dynamic—playing on the idea that Wilde's outward careful posing, effervescent speech, and elegant (if outlandish and over-the-top) dress, is in fact masking an intellect that is, in reality, comparable to the most base and slovenly of animals. Second, the learned pig falls within a lineage of entertainments that highlight the discrepancy between what an audience sees or hears, and what they know must be true.[103]

The curiosity was, as I have argued, closely linked with impersonation in that it invited the audience to observe the subject in question and pass judgement on what, or who, they might be ("GUESS WHAT IT IS AND YOU CAN HAVE IT").[104] Until his trial, Wilde's queer performance was, at least to an extent, permissible under the plausible deniability of posturing. It was also permissible under the plausible deniability of *humbug.* Remember that one of the defining features of Barnum's exhibits was that most of them were fakes, that audiences *knew* they were fakes, and that part of the appeal was going to see the fakes and being able to determine that, yes, they were indeed fakes. Volpicelli argues that Wilde also played with public perceptions of "illusion" versus "reality," in order to "fuel public debate."[105] "[T]hrough both his

[102] G. E., Bentley Jr., "The Freaks of Learning," *Colby Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (June 1982), 88.
[103] This lineage includes optical and aural illusions such as automatons, Acoustic Temples, talking machines, and ventriloquists. See Leigh E. Schmidt, "Visualizing God's Silence: Oracles, the Enlightenment, and Elihu Vedder's *Question of the Sphinx*," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkley: University of California Press, 2001), 211–228; Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, chapter 4.
[104] "Annie Hindle, well known in vaudeville circles as a male impersonator, was married last ni*ght* ..." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 8, 1886.
[105] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 100; cited in Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, Pt. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement," 27. Shannon makes a similar argument that Wilde intentionally crafted a public image through controversy. Shannon, *The First Counterculture Celebrity.*

theatrical appearance and his careful posturing for photographs," he "participated … in constructing a caricature of himself that could circulate alongside his actual person."[106] Part of the fun was trying to decide whether or not the Oscar Wilde at the podium was the real one.

This final point reminds me of Sinfeld's characterization of camp in relation to Wilde and the performance of upper-class manners. The kind of camp Sinfeld describes

> includes an allusion to leisure-class manners, deriving from the Wildean dandy. Hence, in part, the elements of theatricality and ironic disjunction: camp includes a "sorry I spoke" acknowledgment of its inappropriateness in the mouth of the speaker. … Camp is not … grounded only, or even mainly, in an allusion to the femininity that is supposed to characterize women. That is there, but in compound with a lurking recollection of *the impersonation (that is supposed to deceive no one)* of the effeminate leisure-class dandy.[107]

As we have seen, the impersonation of upper-classness was a common trope in American entertainment in the nineteenth century.[108] This trope may have added another layer of plausible deniability to Wilde's performance—as impersonations of upper classness were usually self-conscious parody—while, paradoxically, reinforcing his status as sexually other. Then again, to a degree, no impersonation was really *supposed* to deceive *anyone*; the fun was in being deceived, while being aware of the deception. And, for some, there may have been a bit of fun—or, at least, humor—in deceiving.

Conclusion: Wildean Lore, Sound and Gesture

Sinfeld convincingly argues that a certain stereotype of the middle- to upper-class white male homosexual coalesced at the moment of Wilde's trials, from a number of different elements

[106] Volpicelli, "Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self Improvement," 30.
[107] Sinfeld, *The Wilde Century*, 156. Emphasis mine.
[108] See the discussions of the Zip Coon and swell characters in chapter 1. Brooks theorizes the *cakewalk*, a dance with "cultural roots in slave gatherings designed to reference the culture of white masters" and became a staple of minstrel shows at the end of the nineteenth century, in terms of camp (Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent,* 269–280). She cites Chuck Kleinhans, who understands the cakewalk as of kind of impersonation of white aristocracy. See Chuck Kleinhans, "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Irony," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 198.

coming together in a process of bricolage. While "official" discourses such as British law, sexology, and literature played a role in this process of identity formation, so did lay, or ephemeral sources. The musical materials that sprang up around Wilde during his 1882 tour of the United States surely contributed substantially to how, at least in America, Wilde (and by extension, certain kinds of queer folk) were, by the turn of the twentieth century, imagined to be.

The lore around Wilde was not just verbal, of course; it was also sonic and gestural, as exemplified by his representation in an 1891 impersonation manual, *Helen Potter's Impersonations* (see figure 20). Potter was a well-known impersonator in the 1870s and 1880s, performing mostly in New York where she played both male and female characters. This manual provides instructions and advice for mastering the art of impersonation, caring for the voice, and applying makeup and stage costumes, followed by a catalog of prepared speeches, and finally a long list of celebrities, politicians, and other public figures to impersonate, including Wilde. Each script includes markings that indicate "pitch, force, and time" (dynamic and tempo markings) as well as signs to indicate "short rhetorical pauses," "longer rhetorical pauses," monotone, rising or falling pitch from one word to the next, or "tremulous" voice.[109]

[109] Helen Potter, *Helen Potter's Impersonations* (New York: E. S. Werner, 1891), xxiii.

LECTURE ON ART.

A STUDY OF OSCAR WILDE.

(– –) Everything made by the hand of man | is either ˳ug°ly | or (/) ˳beauti°ful; (– –) and it might as well be beautiful as (/) ˳ug°ly. (– –) Nothing that is made | is °too ˳poor [pooah], | or °too (/) ˳trivi°al, | (– –) to be made with an idea [ideah], | of pleasing the æsthetic ˳eye.

°Americans, | ˳as a class, | °are not (/) ˳practical, (– –) though you may laugh | at the (/) ˳assertion. (– –) When I enter [entah] | a room, | I see a carpet of (\) vulgar [vulgah] (/) ˳pattern, | (– –) a cracked plate upon the (/) ˳wall, | (– –) with a peacock feather stuck °be˳hind °it. (– –) I sit down | upon a badly glued | machine-made (/) ˳chair [chăah], | that creaks | upon being (/) ˳touched; | (– –) I see | a gaudy gilt horror, | in the shape | of a (/) ˳mirror, | (– –) and a cast-iron monstrosity | for a °chande˳lier. (– –) Everything I see | was made to (/) ˳*sell*. (– –) I turn to look for the beauties of nature [nătyah] | in (/) vain; | (– –) for I behold only muddy streets | and (\) ugly (/) ˳build°ings; (– –) everything looks (\) second (/) class. (– –) By second class | I mean | that | which constantly *decreases* °*in* (/) ˳*value*. (– –) The old Gothic cathedral is firmer [firmah] and (/) stronger [strongah], | and more [mōah] beautiful ˳*now* | than it was | years | [yeahs] (/) ˳ago. (– –) There is one thing worse | than °*no* (/) ˳art | and that is | ˳*bad* °art.

(– –) A good rule to follow | in a house | is to have nothing therein | but what is useful | or (/) ˳beautiful; | (– –) nothing that is not pleasant to use, | or was not a pleasure | to the one | who (/) ˳made °it. (– –) Allow no machine-made ornaments | in the house | at (/) ˳all.

Figure 20: Helen Potter's Impersonations: Oscar Wilde

Thus, the manual provides an approximation of Wilde's speech—whether as witnessed or imagined by the author remains unknown—in a passage called "Lecture On Art." Unusually, there are no gestural indications in Wilde's script, as there are in some of the other impersonations in this manual (such as raising or lowering either hand, moving the head, etc.). An endnote provides a short biography, and further instructions for the performer:

> Costume.—A dark purple velvet sack coat, and knee-breeches; black hose, low shoes with bright buckles; coat lined with lavender satin, a frill of rich lace at the wrists and for tie-ends over a low turn-down collar; hair long, and parted in the middle, or all combed over. Enter with a circular cavalier cloak over the shoulder. The voice is clear, easy, and not forced. Change pose now and then, the head inclining toward the strong foot, and keep a general appearance of repose.
>
> This disciple of true art speaks very deliberately, and his speech is marked by transitions, as marked by the small signs (˳) (˚) throughout the text; the closing inflection of a sentence or period is ever upward.

Upon attempting to speak the script aloud myself, I found it to be stunningly undeliverable. I was reminded of the comment that Joy Shannon made to me on the subject of Wilde as a "curiosity": that "people found him odd." "Odd" is exactly how I would characterize the kind of stilted speech this script forced, monotonous in many parts, until the ends of phrases, which felt exaggeratedly florid, and punctuated frequently and awkwardly with "rhetorical pauses." Though we have access to written descriptions of Wilde's voice and manner, we do not have video or audio recording; many of the gestural and sonic aspects of how he came to exist in the popular imagination, therefore, likely derived from sources like this impersonation manual, or the songs in this collection, that require activation by a performer.

In an article on the semiotic and sociocultural content of the *lisp*, Penelope Eckert writes of the relationship between speech patterns and social identity categories. She proposes that perhaps, rather than speech patterns merely reflecting something *about* a person, they might serve as agents in the *formation* of social categories:

> We tend to talk about social change at the more macro-social level, but things that we think of as building up to, or resulting from, change are change themselves. Changes in social categories come about through gradual and meaningful changes in the personae that constitute them. The social-indexical meanings of variables carry much of the information about the social on the ground, and small changes in their use signal small social changes on the ground. Working below the limits of the symbolic (i.e. propositionally distinctive) function of sound, phonological variation has the freedom to take on a new indexical function in the moment. In this way, social change can progress by tiny steps as minute changes in personae

> build up to major changes in social categories. The construction of personae is an ideological project and changes in personae bring about social change.[110]

Along these same lines, the sonic and gestural activation of Wilde ephemera and memorabilia likely influenced the formation of social categories in the late nineteenth century as much as did Wilde himself. Things like the aesthetic sigh and its associated embodied sensations and emotive properties were quite possibly elements that influenced the way some queer folk articulated and imagined themselves—and the way that they were imagined. In other words, history is inscribed not only in these objects as texts to be "read," but also in the bodily gestures they facilitate.

[110] Penelope Eckert, "Comment: The Most Perfect of Signs: Iconicity In Variation," *Linguistics* 55, no. 5 (2017), 1205.

Chapter 3: Jennie June's Fairie Songs

Holdeth French doll from "guy" a secret;
Yes, surely she can *act!*
Only after hour's deception,
Revealeth she the fact;
When she's found that she can trust him;
Can reveal her whim:
In a burst of laughter doth disclose:
"My real, true name is 'Jim'!"[1]

The "transgender archive," writes Abram Lewis, presents an epistemological problem to the queer historian: its contents tend to "refuse" the "secular, rational, and empiricist epistemes" that govern the discipline, to the point of "exceed[ing] historical explanation."[2] Lewis is looking at materials pertaining to Angela Lynn Douglas, a trans activist and musician who founded the Transsexual Action Organization. He describes the Douglas archive as having "a certain strange and unwieldy" quality; for in addition to her activist work, Douglas was also involved in the U.S. Nazi party, believed she was subjected to mind control, accused a friend of being a reptilian, and claimed that Angela Davis had spent years impersonating her.[3] Unsavory and "unwieldy" details show up frequently in trans histories, and yet often go unremarked upon—or rationalized as mental illness—in obituaries and histories of activism. This chapter examines one such "noisy" archive—of a subject who was not transgender, but who experienced similar difficulties with gendered embodiment in h/is lifetime. H/is names were Ralph Werther, Earl Lind, Pussie, and Jennie June.

Though Ralph Werther-Jennie June was born, raised, and lived most of h/is life presenting as a white male, some of h/is earliest recorded memories in h/is autobiography are of

[1] "French Doll Baby." In Lind, *The Female-Impersonators*, 282.
[2] Abram J. Lewis, "'I Am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn't Care': The Haunting of the Transgender Archive and the Challenges of Queer History," *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014), 15.
[3] Ibid., 14.

gender difference and bodily discrepancy.[4] As a child, Werther-June had the peculiar experience of understanding h/imself to be "a girl incarnated in a boy's body."[5] S/he was first aware of h/is attraction to boys at the age of five, along with h/is preference for playing with girls and sharing in their pastimes. S/he asked playmates—girls and boys—to call h/im "Jennie," and reports that "girls did not look upon [h/im] as a boy"; meanwhile, other boys called h/im a girl in derision.[6] Only a couple of years later, Werther-June developed a purportedly "violent desire" for giving fellatio that would later spiral into an "obsession"; this desire would become something of a guidepost for h/is sexual identification, and a running theme in h/is written memoirs.[7] S/he expresses a strong aversion—visceral and sometimes moral—to anal penetration and other sexual acts involving h/is own genitals; ejaculation especially caused h/im to experience "horrible feelings" and sometimes physical illness for days following the event.[8]

H/is attraction to boys and men is inseparable from h/is feeling that he is (or should be) of a different sex than them; h/is desire to give them pleasure is often articulated with reference to the idea of femaleness. S/he describes h/imself as physically approaching female appearance, listing attributes such as h/is "instinctive gestures, poses, and habits," "shapely" calves, soft skin

[4] In h/is published memoirs, the author provides two male pseudonyms ("Ralph Werther" and "Earl Lind)" and two female pseudonyms ("Jennie June" and "Pussie"; of the two, the former is more commonly used throughout the text). On the title pages, the names Werther and June are hyphenated ("By: Ralph Werther—Jennie June ['Earl Lind']"), so I refer to h/im in this chapter as Werther-June in an effort to match h/is written self-presentation. In a transcribed conversation with a friend in *The Female-Impersonators* (178), h/is friend calls h/im "Ralph-Jennie." Throughout h/is memoirs, Werther-June more frequently refers to h/imself as "he"; however, s/he sometimes uses "she," especially when speaking about Jennie June, h/is female "personality." Werther-June understands his male and female selves as being discrete personas inhabiting a single body; during most of the week s/he lives and works as Ralph Werther (or Earl Lind), but one night a week Jennie June comes to life on a female impersonation "spree." I use the mixed pronouns s/he, h/im, and h/is to indicate that I am speaking about both personalities, and as a visual reflection of that sense of twoness. As Riley Snorton writes, to "hold and bear witness to the complexities of an assemblage of materials meant to convey a singularity of person but who themselves seemed to demand consent to be a plural being." C. Riley Snorton, "On Thon; or, Thinking Gender in the Interstice," *boundary 2* 51, no. 1 (February 2024), 67.
[5] *Female-Impersonators*, 108.
[6] *Autobiography*, 36
[7] Ibid., 38, 230.
[8] Ibid., 92.

and hair, a "feminine" voice, a broad pelvis, and breasts that are larger than that of a man. In keeping with trends in contemporary sexology, s/he hypothesizes that h/is condition is of biological origin, proposing that the brain of an androgyne is "composed of female tissue," while the body is composed of male tissue (and, in h/is case, "female tissue" is present in other parts of the body, as well).[9] In h/is three memoirs, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (1918), *The Female-Impersonators* (1922), and *The Riddle of the Underworld* (unpublished), s/he identifies h/imself as an "androgyne," a "passive invert," a "homosexual," and a "fairie."[10]

S/he attended college in New York City prior to expulsion on the charges of being an invert, and subsequently worked for an unnamed "legal journal" "of national reputation."[11] During Werther-June's first year of college, s/he began regularly moonlighting as a fairie, or female impersonator. For approximately one night a week between the ages of nineteen and thirty-one, Werther-June went out dressed in attire to signal h/is status as a passive invert. In New York City's sexual underworld s/he would cruise, meet other fairies, and sometimes give amateur performances, singing and impersonating a "French doll-baby." S/he also visited nearby military camps, where s/he was an escort to soldiers, both entertaining them and sometimes having sex with them. However, s/he never did so for money. Werther-June was heavily invested in class status and respectability; s/he understood h/is participation in the underworld as a double-life,

[9] Ibid., 20.
[10] These terms were commonly used to describe configurations of sex, gendered presentation and behaviors, and sexual inclinations at the time of writing. Werther-June cites the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's definition of *androgyne* as someone who is "neither man nor woman: a mixture of both; with secondary psychic and physical characteristics of the one as well as the other sex." (*Female-Impersonators*, 15–6; the term used to describe people who fit this description and were born female is *gynander*). The *androgyne* is an extreme case within the broader category of the *passive invert*, or an individual who experiences a degree of psychic identification with the opposite sex, resulting in attraction to members of their own sex (*Autobiography*, 20; c.f. the "active pederast" or "urning," who desires members of his own sex "as a normal man loves a woman" rather than vice versa). *Fairie* is Werther-June's distinctive spelling of the word "fairy," which is common vernacular within what Werther-June identifies as "the underworld." The *fairie*, according to Werther-June, is "a youthful androgyne or other passive invert (for they are perhaps not all members of the extreme class of androgynes) whom natural predestination or other circumstances led to adopt the profession of the *fille de joie*," or sex worker (*Autobiography*, 7; emphasis mine).
[11] *Female-Impersonators*, 89.

used a number of aliases to maintain anonymity so as not to threaten h/is professional life, and looked down upon other "low-class" fairies who did sex work. At twenty-seven, s/he was electively castrated, wishing to eliminate any possibility of ejaculation, and hoping that it might also diminish facial hair growth. The operation helped with the former; it had little effect on the latter, and triggered other medical complications. Following a horrifically brutal assault at the hands of soldiers at the age of thirty-one, Werther-June ended h/is "open career as a faerie," also citing a decreased desire for fellatio, and deteriorating looks with h/is old age.[12] S/he continued to seek out intimate relationships with men in private, one-on-one settings.

Werther-June authored h/is three memoirs with a didactic purpose. Appealing to physicians, psychologists, and legal professionals, Werther-June aimed to demonstrate that inversion is an innate, congenital condition rather than a moral failing, and argued for the humane and sympathetic treatment of homosexuals and inverts like h/imself. The memoirs contain essays on the history of androgynism as Werther-June understands it, medical theories of inversion, autobiographical writing, oral histories from fellow fairies, newspaper accounts of androgynes who were murdered, and poems and songs of Werther-June's own composition. *The Female Impersonators* contains four poems: "Emotion," "Recollection," "Memories," and "French Doll Baby." According to Werther-June, they are an attempt to "get at the real essence of things, and then to express them in an ideal manner," to present "the version of things that [h/is] subconscious or subliminal self utters."[13] S/he notes that the feedback s/he has received thus far on the poems has been overwhelmingly negative, but argues that while a general readership might not understand h/is poetry, h/is verse may speak to fellow androgynes. *Autobiography of an Androgyne* contains seven "fairie songs" with lyrics authored by Werther-June set to popular

[12] *Autobiography*, 230
[13] *Female-Impersonators*, 269.

tunes (with one set to an original air). All of the fairie songs are dedicated to soldiers that s/he knew.

Werther-June's materials present an archive of extreme abjection that has received fairly little scholarly attention.[14] S/he paints a picture of the gender-variant subject as tragic, describing

[14] George Chauncey discusses Werther-June's life and memoirs in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*, focusing mainly on the wealth of autoethnographic information the memoirs provide on the sexual underworld of New York. At the time of writing, which was just prior to the emergence of trans studies as an academic discipline, Chauncey understood Werther and other fairies to be gay men; in the preface to the 2019 edition, he notes that had he written *Gay New York* a decade later, he most likely would not have called all of these individuals men. (*Gay New York*, xxiii.) Joanne Meyerowitz uses Werther-June's memoirs as a case study for understanding sex and gender as inextricably linked, as well as intersectionally related to other factors such as race/ethnicity and class, and historically contingent. She mentions that Werther-June's narrative "works well … with recent studies of affect, especially shame." Joanne Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex with an Androyne," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011), 99. Emma Heaney provides a reading of Werther-June's memoirs in *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* that I find to be generally troubling. Heaney refers to Werther-June throughout as a "trans woman," an identification that I resist making for reasons I discuss below, tempting though it might be. She presents what could generously be called an optimistic misreading of Werther-June's experience, in a well-meaning attempt to uncover evidence that trans life in the not-so-distant past was not so bad. However generous I would like to be, though, Heaney's discussion of Werther-June seems more like a deliberate misrepresentation of Werther-June's life that that omits a great deal of suffering, has harmful implications, and makes a significant number of factual errors in the process. (See, for example, page 176, in which she quotes Werther-June's statement that, in lieu of a vagina, s/he has penetrative sex using the "next best foramen," referring to oral sex; Heaney incorrectly assumes s/he means anal sex, an activity to which Werther-June expresses a strong aversion. See also page 177, in which she mentions that Werther-June elected to have surgical castration, but that the decision was primarily motivated by a desire to curb h/is appetite for fellatio. This is true, but Heaney chooses not to mention the fact that Werther-June also hoped the operation would diminish h/is growth of facial hair, a secondary sex trait that caused h/im considerable distress. See also page 299, n1 in which Heaney identifies "Earl Lind" as Werther-June's "assigned name," despite it being clear, even on a cursory reading, that "Lind" is also a pseudonym; see pages 92–5 of *The Female-Impersonators*, which Heaney cites, for a discussion of aliases.) This assertion—that Werther-June was secure and happy in h/is identity as a trans woman with no desire for medical intervention—supports the book's larger argument that "the diagnostic insistence that trans people are uniquely defined by alienation from the body *denies the challenge to the cis understanding of sex* that is posed by trans people who claim the right to determine the sexed and gendered meanings of their own bodies, with or without medical services" (15, emphasis mine). It is quite true that medical authorities have historically privileged an understanding of transgender that centers an extreme degree of alienation from one's anatomy (see Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," which Heaney does not cite); it is also true that for many trans people, an extreme degree of alienation from our anatomy is in fact central to our experience. While this experience is not shared by every trans person, the fact it is the current prevailing narrative of transgender does not mean that, prior to the mainstream circulation of this idea, no one experienced that alienation. This conditional assumption enables claims like the one Heaney makes—for no apparent reason—that Werther-June describes being "a female brain in a male body" simply because s/he was "obliged to reference such phrases" (3). Interestingly, one stated goal of *The New Woman* is to resist the "assumption that trans women's very existence *means something* outside itself, something about the gender of a putatively cis general subject, [which] imposes a representational disjuncture between trans self-knowledge and trans *meaning*." (6). I am obliged to point out that extrapolating that Werther-June is being ideologically coerced into parroting the language of nineteenth-century sexology, rather than simply taking h/im at h/is word, is indeed presupposing that h/is "existence means something outside itself." That is to say, Heaney's reluctance to believe Werther-June's account of h/is own experiences reveals an underlying assumption that trans people must exist to "challenge … the cis understanding of sex," rather than simply existing on our own terms.

being “a girl imprisoned in the body of a boy,” “doomed to … pass her earthly existence in a male body,” and “a hopeless sexual cripple”. S/he wanders abandoned cemeteries at night, throws h/imself upon overgrown graves, and “writhe[s] in an agony of tears and moans,” begging God to “take away [h/is] perverted instinct and make a virile man of [h/im].” Over the course of both published memoirs, Werther-June conceptualizes femaleness in terms of weakness and powerlessness, often deriving satisfaction from such feelings. S/he recounts a number of brutal assaults and gang rapes and then admits to enjoying them, citing both the pleasure s/he imagines bringing h/is assailants, and also the affirmation that s/he is weak, and therefore womanlike. There is very little respite or redemption in this story; indeed, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* closes with the sobering remark: “I trust that the publication of my life story will contribute to a correct estimate of androgvnism on the part of scientists, the molders of public opinion, and the lawmakers, and to a more kindly treatment by society of those born with this curse. It is only expressing half the truth to say that they are more to be pitied than scorned. They are wholly to be pitied.”

Joanne Meyerowitz suggests that Werther-June provides ample opportunity for “feeling backward,” especially in regard to shame.[15] Werther-June does express feeling shame at being a reviled member of society and as a disgrace to h/is family; however, I am interested in exploring negative feelings in these texts beyond shame. For one thing, Werther-June says s/he feels shame, but at the same time is not too ashamed to have authored three memoirs in which s/he boasts of having performed fellatio on roughly sixteen-hundred men, devotes pages and pages to graphic depictions of bodily lesions resulting from sexually-transmitted infections, and includes a number of nude photographs of h/imself. I suspect, therefore, that bad feelings beyond shame

[15] Meyerowitz, “Thinking Sex With an Androgyne,” 99. Meyer cites Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

are at play here. I also want to push back against what I see as a current tendency in academic thought to fixate on the influence of cultural narrative and ideology on the way people who experience alienation from their assigned gender or anatomical sex (today, trans people) understand that alienation.[16] The conviction that this sense of alienation is learned, as a result of ideological coercion, implies that it can be unlearned—which leads to conclusions disturbingly similar to that of the religious American right. For this reason, I am wary of overstating the role of shame, which, as Sara Ahmed writes, "requires a witness."[17] Instead of focusing on shame, which is largely motivated by "how the subject appears before and to others" (i.e. "I am bad"), I want to focus on feelings that might be better described as "distress" or "anguish" ("This feels bad"), to continue to use Silvan Tomkins' language of affect.[18]

I suspect the reason scholars (especially scholars in trans studies) have not engaged heavily with the bad feelings in Werther-June's archive is because they have "little to offer as far as a reassurance that the negative circumstances represented in them will eventually improve."[19] This is precisely the reason I am interested in Werther-June: what can we make of this subject's bad feelings around sexual difference, if we let go of the assumption that they must "offer" us anything—in terms of hope, affirmation, resistance, or even a "challenge to the cis understanding of sex"?[20] This chapter examines musical and performative means through which Werther-June expressed and navigated through feelings of distress and states of abjection, in order to

[16] See page 157, n14.
[17] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 105.
[18] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, ed., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 109. I am grossly oversimplifying the concept of shame here for the sake of trying to make a concise point. For a discussion of ways in which shame is literally felt in and on the surface of the body, see Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103–7.
[19] Yetta Howard, *Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 22.
[20] See Heaney, *The New Woman*, 15.

communicate h/is felt reality, and to carve out moments in which life was bearable.[21] I will focus on three performance settings: the barracks, where Werther-June is performing for soldiers; the saloon, or barroom, where s/he is performing for a crowd of patrons; and in the memoirs themselves, where s/he is performing for an imagined audience of readers.

A Note on Terminology

The experiences Werther-June describes are reminiscent of those often described by some modern-day subjects who identify as transsexual or transgender, notably the feeling that s/he is a girl "trapped" in a boy's body, and the strong sense of alienation s/he feels from h/is anatomy. In spite of this, and as familiar as Werther-June's self-narrative is to me, I resist applying such contemporary terminology to h/im, as the concepts of *transsexual* and *transgender* were not yet established in U.S.-American culture at the time of h/is writing. This fact, as Clare Sears writes, "does not mean that people did not dress, live, and identify as the 'opposite' sex or have sex with others of the same sex. It does mean, however that the social and subjective meanings of these practices cannot be assumed but need to be carefully investigated."[22] Besides, Werther-June has already provided us with ample language with which we can refer to h/im. Channing Gerard Joseph puts it excellently, saying "using 21st-century identity terms rather than the terms [June] chose to define himself erases crucial historical context and puts our words in his mouth. In fact, it is an act of violence that dismisses, disrespects, and invalidates Jennie June's own autonomy to self-define while also failing to capture the nuances of his carefully chosen self-descriptions."[23]

[21] On the idea of "bearable and unbearable" lives (as opposed to Judith Butler's notion of "livable and unlivable" lives) see Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 97.
[22] Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 7.
[23] Joseph, "Who Was Jennie June?"

While I do not understand Werther-June to be a trans woman, I argue that some of the *feelings and experiences* s/he describes are similar to those described by modern-day trans authors, and therefore lend themselves to thinking through using frameworks developed out of trans experience.[24] And, despite the fact that the category *transsexual* was not invented until 1949, many of the medical and cultural narratives that *enabled* the eventual concept of transgender were already in circulation. As Jay Prosser points out, the "discourse of inversion in turn-of-the-century sexology provided the significant threshold under which the transsexual as a sex-changeable and indeed sex-changed subject could make his/her first appearance," by raising the medical possibility of a differently-sexed mind and body in a single individual.[25] Riley Snorton has also shown that the notion of "sex as an effect of flesh and gender as a discourse," and the possibilities both of sex as malleable and gender as fungible, were already constituted by the mid nineteenth century through "racial slavery's political and visual economy."[26] So, these prerequisites for *trans* were, at the time, available to Werther-June for thinking through h/is own subjectivity. On the whole, though, rather than trying to interpret Werther-June's experience of h/is own gender/sex, my focus is on performative means through which s/he is navigating and articulating those experiences.

---

[24] See, for just one example, the published memoir of punk musician Laura Jane Grace, *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016). Similarly to Werther-June, Grace recounts feeling, prior to transition, a second, female presence in her body, a presence Grace refers to in excerpted journal entries as "Her." Also like Werther-June, she describes moments in which she is able to fully become "her"; for Werther-June these moments were female impersonation sprees; for Grace, these moments were solitary ones in hotel rooms, in which she dressed in women's clothing, got high, and allowed herself to "become real": "I pull a dress down over my shoulders, following it down my body with my hands. I turn off the light. The lace is exciting to touch. Thigh-high black pantyhose held up by a black garter belt. Black silk panties hiding everything I want to forget exists … The door to my bedroom is shut and locked. I have double and triple-checked. I light up a joint and sit down on the edge of my bed, cross my legs. I inhale long and slow. The high hits, I light a cigarette and suddenly become real. I become her. … By the time I finish my cigarette, my eyes have adjusted to the dark. I stand up and look down at my body. Beautiful under the kindest light. I walk back and forth across the room. The feel of panty-hose covering my legs, the way the dress brushes the back of my thighs as I walk. These small sensations intoxicate me with want" (38–9).

[25] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 10.

[26] Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 12.

Military Barracks; or, "Baby Crying For her Brave"

In this first part I will look at Werther-June's performances at military barracks. Werther-June's habit of frolicking with soldiers began in the summer of 1894 when, upon learning that there were soldiers stationed at a fort in a town near New York City, set off on foot to meet them.[27] After successfully wooing one of the soldiers there, s/he was encouraged to try again (despite being arrested on h/is way home). The second trip lasted several weeks, and for the next decade Werther-June visited military camps with some regularity, with the goal of "mingling" with those soldiers whom s/he "most abjectly worshipped" (and abject worship s/he did).[28] Upon entering the camps, s/he would "[impersonate] a baby girl before a hundred soldiers at a time."

> I would fret after the manner of a baby and sob just for the pleasure of being caught in their arms and held there. When in the country, I sometimes feigned unwillingness to go with them, and forced them to carry me, with hands, arms, and whole body hanging limp. This was also a rare pleasure. Sometimes they would scare me in fun in order to bring from me a shrill feminine shriek—when I felt sure no officers or civilians were near. Indeed while in their company, I exaggerated cowardice, babyishness, and femininity in general.[29]

During what Werther-June calls the "second half of [h/is] open career" from 1899–1905, s/he dedicated h/imself fully to the role of "soldiers' mignon," and h/is weekly female impersonation sprees were spent at two camps s/he calls "Fort X" and "Fort Y."[30] While Werther-June claims that h/is time with the soldiers was "almost entirely devoted to innocent frolicking"—lying with the soldiers in their bunks, allowing them to play pranks on h/im, dancing with them as though s/he were "their girl," being "paraded about on their shoulders" or "tossed up in a blanket"—s/he does also report performing frequent fellatio and was either coerced into anal sex or raped frequently enough that, during this period, s/he "ultimately contracted anal and buccal venereal

[27] *Autobiography*, 111. Werther-June does not specify which town, but does claim to be able to walk twenty miles a day, despite being "a nervous wreck."
[28] Ibid., 114.
[29] Ibid., 120.
[30] Ibid., 190.

warts, syphilis, and gonorrhea from them."[31] Werther-June did not usually wear dresses; h/is impersonations were, for the most part, purely vocal and gestural. S/he "talk[ed] effeminately and babyishly" to the soldiers, "outwoman[ing] woman for their entertainment."[32] In addition to shrieking and sobbing, s/he also makes frequent reference to cooing and gasping.

S/he also wrote songs for the soldiers, which s/he performed for them and gifted them on broadsides. Of these songs, Werther-June says:

> My songs, in a treble voice, contributed much to my popularity. The soldiers were much diverted, eagerly grasped up the hectograph editions, and treasured and sang them. … The songs formed a large element in my fairie career, as well as describe some of my adventures. Humans, when in love, are inspired to poetize. Some of my own outpourings follow.[33]

The first song, "A Corporal, A Private, and Me," tells the story of a seaside encounter between Werther-June and two military men that ends in a threesome. The song "Baby Crying for Her Brave," dedicated to one "Sergeant B. Frank," is a lament in which a sad and lonely Werther-June ("Baby") pines for her soldier consort, singing "Baby's dying, naught can save her / Pining for her brave / Naught can save but his caresses / For which she doth rave." "My Fierce Murphy" is also a parody of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," adapted to portray a relationship between Werther-June and a soldier who repeatedly abuses h/im, before changing his mind and asking for h/is hand in marriage. "Wild Arthur McCann" and "A Man that Is a Man" are both paeans to individual soldiers set to the popular songs "Sweet Rosie O'Grady" and "The Last Rose of Summer," respectively. "A Night on the Hillside," set to "The Old Oaken Bucket," is a bittersweet ballad recounting a romantic encounter in which Werther-June lies in the arms of one

[31] Ibid., 203–4, 190–1.
[32] Ibid., 191.
[33] Ibid., 217.

of h/is soldiers, who calls h/im his "wife" and "baby sweetheart."[34] "The Aughty-Aughth for Mine," set to the Irish song "The Wearing of the Green," is dedicated to all the men of the company with which s/he associated, substituting "aughty-aughth" for the actual number "in order to spare the company notoriety." In all of these songs, Werther-June declares h/is love to the men of Fort X, while also presenting h/imself in various states of abjection.

Note that "babyishness" is a running theme in these songs, but is also one that pervades Werther-June's interactions with soldiers and h/is memoirs more generally. Meyerowitz calls Werther-June's portrayal of h/imself as a baby the "most puzzling piece" of *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, writing that, while it is clear babyhood has some strong link to effeminacy, the nature of that link is not entirely clear. In this section I will attempt to tease out potential meanings of this relationship.[35] First I will look at ways in which Werther-June's "fairie songs" afford opportunities to enact the qualities of babyishness or effeminacy when singing these songs for soldiers. Then, I will discuss them in relation to the thematic material and other aspects of Werther-June's autobiography. Finally, I will offer a few speculations about what this model of babyish effeminacy might be expressing, on a meta level, about Werther-June's experience as an androgyne.

[34] "The Old Oaken Bucket" is the title of a poem by Samuel Woodworth, written in 1817. The poem has been set to music by multiple composers, but most settings seem to be based on a tune by one F. Kaillmark. Hymnary.org identifies this tune in fifty-one hymnals: https://hymnary.org/tune/how_dear_to_my_heart_kiallmark#media. The melody is also the subject of several pieces for solo piano, arranged as a theme and set of variations.
[35] Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex with an Androgyne," 102–103.

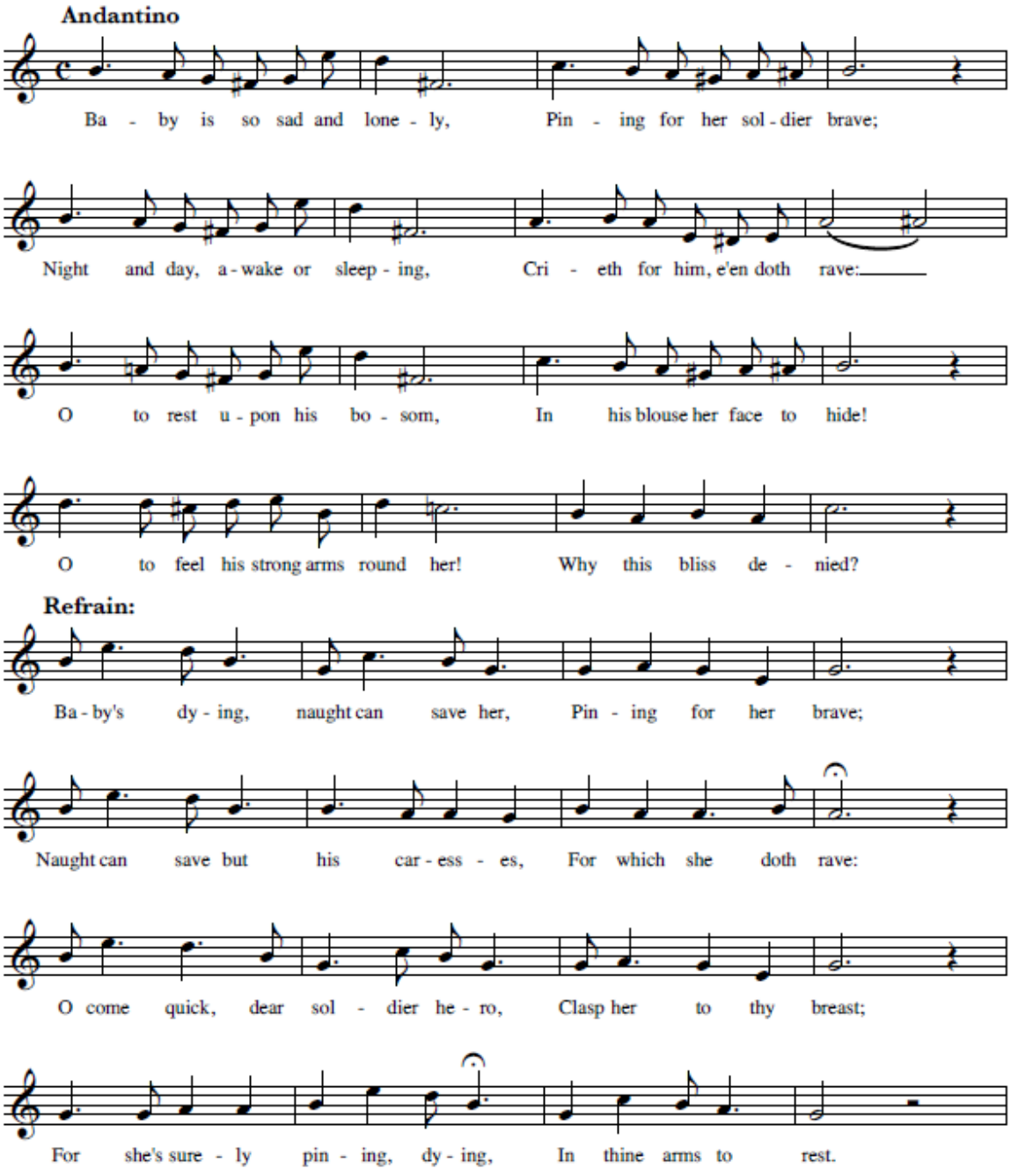


Figure 21: "Baby Crying For Her Brave"

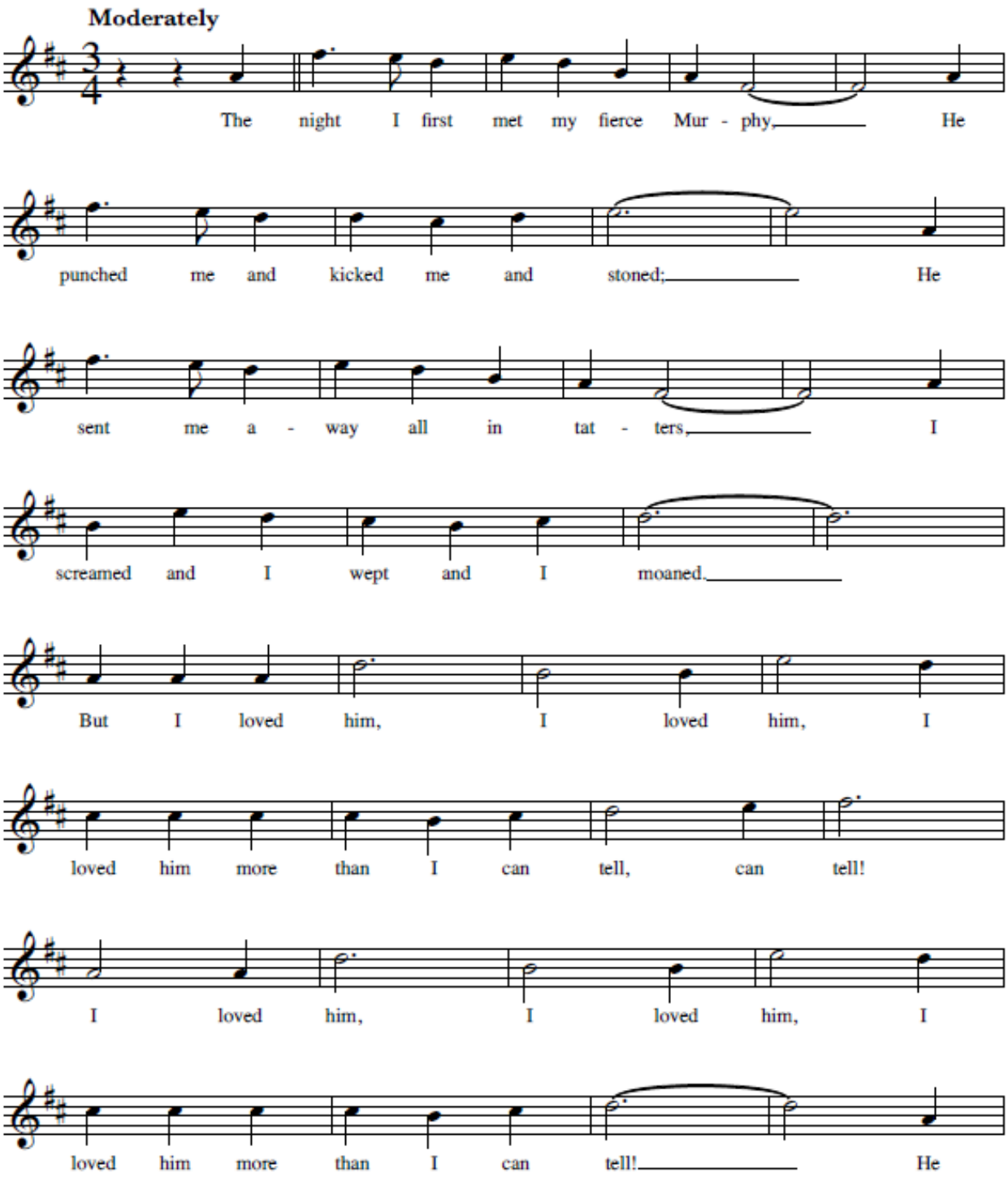


Figure 22: "My Fierce Murphy"

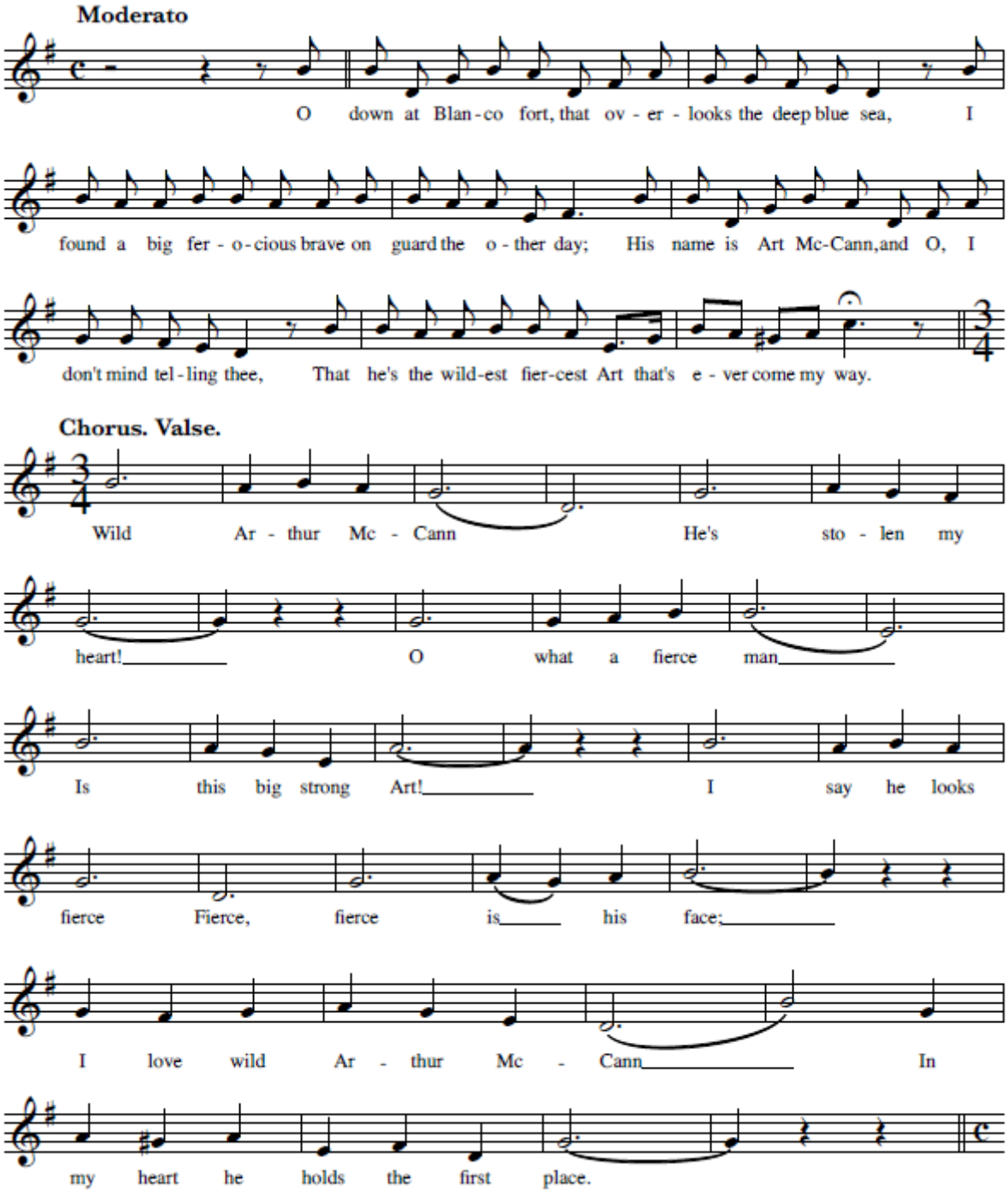


Figure 23: "Wild Arthur McCann"

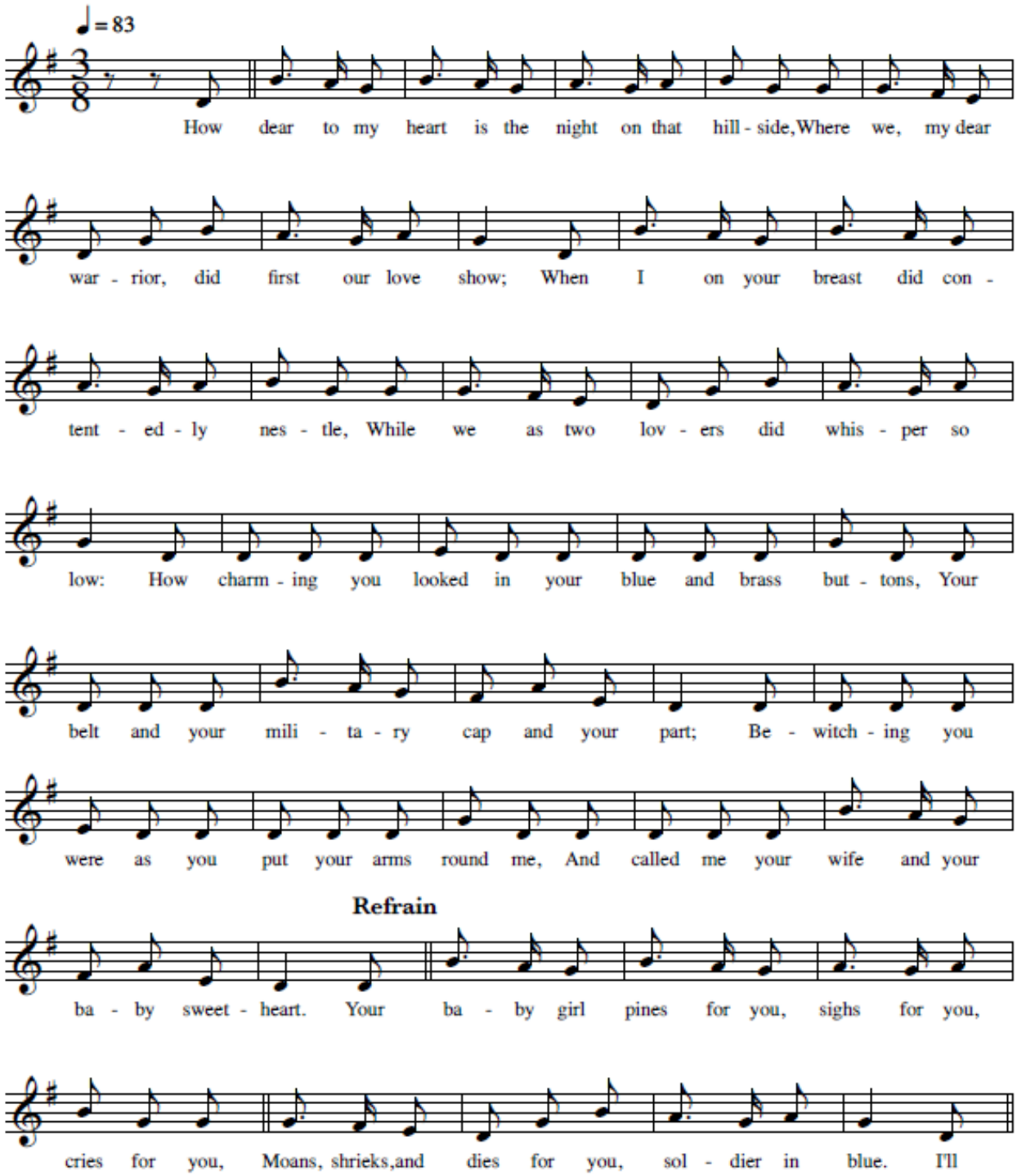


Figure 24: "The Night On the Hillside," 1/2

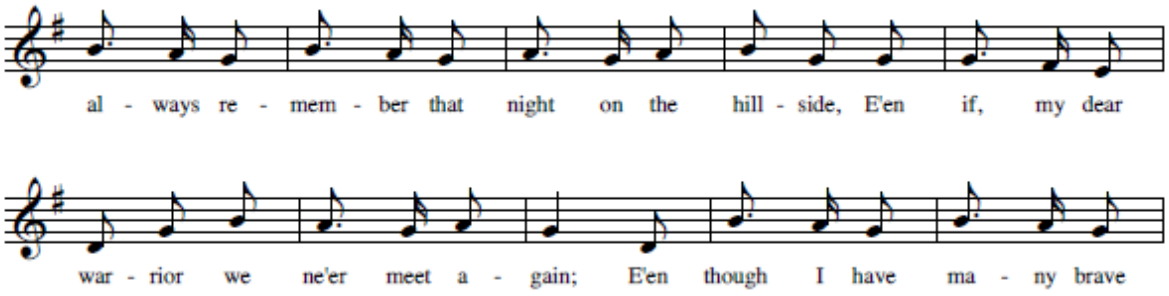


Figure 25: "The Night On the Hillside," 2/2

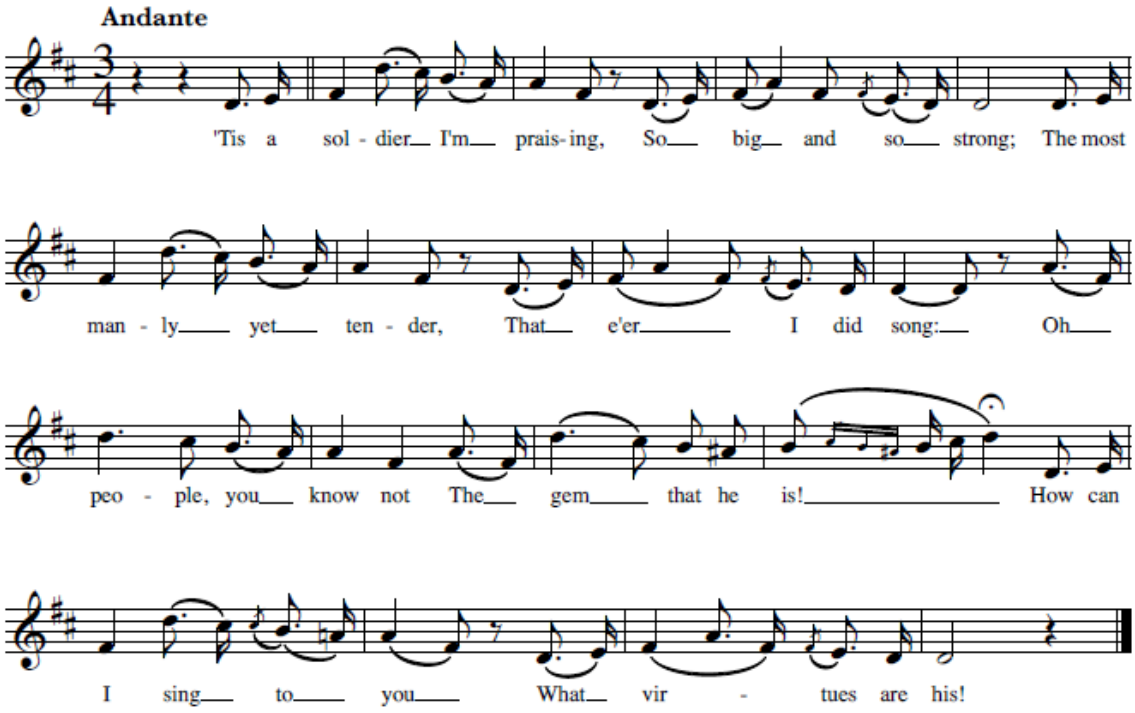


Figure 26: "A Man that is a Man"

Because Werther-June was performing unaccompanied for the soldiers, my analysis focuses on the sung melodies. "Baby Crying for Her Brave" heavily features leaps and chromatic harmonies. Take, for example, the first two measures, which include an upward leap of a major sixth followed by a slower, downward leap of a minor sixth on the word "lonely" (see figure

21).[36] Measures three and four contrast that with a tight chromatic turnaround on "for her soldier brave." As discussed in chapter 2, large melodic leaps can carry connotations of excessive, uncontrolled displays of feeling, qualities that are associated with both women and young children. Downward leaps specifically often represent sighs, and additionally cause a physical relaxation in carriage on the part of the singer. As these songs were performed in person for the soldiers to whom they were dedicated, these moments would have presented an opportunity for Werther-June to swoon and faint in the soldiers' laps. Similar melodic figures appear in "My Fierce Murphy" (large upward leaps at the beginning of each line; see figure 22), "Wild Arthur McCann" (sighing motifs on "Wild Arthur Mc-*Cann*," and especially "O what a fierce *man*"; see figure 23), "The Night On the Hillside" (sighing motifs on "dear to my," "heart is the," "were as," "'round me"; a large upward leap on "wife"; see figures 24 and 25), and "A Man that is a Man" (large leaps on "soldier," "manly," "Oh people," "The gem," and "I sing"; see figure 26).

Chromatic passing and neighboring tones also present an opportunity to perform babyishness in that they are diminutive, especially in comparison to the surrounding larger intervals. In measures three and four of "Baby Crying For Her Brave," the leap on the word "lonely" is answered in the consequent phrase, "Pining for her soldier brave," by a tighter contour comprised mostly of half steps. Whereas the large leaps suggest histrionics and encourage dramatic bodily movements in the performer, the smaller intervals, in my experience of singing the songs, encourage more subdued bodily comportment. Chromatics require greater precision and therefore ask the untrained singer to remain still in order to vocal control. This dynamic is especially pronounced in quicker passages; for example, the song "A Man that is a Man" features the chromatic melisma at the end of the third phrase, "Oh people, you know not

[36] My infinite gratitude goes out to Cara Batema for setting these lyrics to melodies and formatting the scores. In almost all cases, the text and music aligned intuitively. The published sheet music from which we worked is included in the bibliography.

the gem that he *is!"* The shrinking intervals encourage the singer to take up less space, or to physically shrink, contributing to the diminutive characterization the song is trying to accomplish. Rising semitones are also a common musical representation of desire or yearning (used famously in the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* by Richard Wagner, who was often associated with homosexuality in men).[37]

French Doll-Baby

Babyishness is not a mere accessory to Werther-June's identification; rather, it is central to the way s/he understands h/is sexuality, especially in the way in which s/he interacts with men. This tendency is not unique to h/is time at the barracks; since childhood, "when under sexual excitement, even to a slight degree," s/he tells us, "I displayed the mental traits of a baby."[38] S/he characterizes the Jennie June persona as a "French doll-baby," or "baby-girl," a "frivolous and coquettish" alter-ego that "dwelt in h/is brain since infancy" "side by side with [h/is] scholar spirit."[39] S/he caricatures the French doll-baby in the following stanzas of a poem printed in *The Female-Impersonators*:

> Young bloods prom'nade Fourteenth Street's pave—
> Each eve out for a lark;
> Their eyes "peeled" for French doll babies;
> With whom they sigh to spark;
> Why admire the fraidcat babies,
> Who weep easily?
> The helpless crippled sex e'en *seek!*—
> Harebrained gentility! . . . .
>
> Cheeks a beauteous red through rouge puff;
> Pink powder (pretty, pretty ! ! !) 'pon nose;
> One inhales as she nigh minceth,

[37] Fraser Riddell, *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature at the* Fin de Siècle (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 25, 28.
[38] *Autobiography*, 119
[39] *Female-Impersonators*, 90, 102.

Such soothing scent of rose!
Locks—so silklike—reach to shoulders'
Gown of "art" design;
Coquette extreme must she be sure;
All signs she doth combine.[40]

The French doll-baby spirit embodies a collection of pejorative attributes that are often mapped onto white femininity; she is stupid, emotional, weak, pretty, and flirtatious. Some of Werther-June's ideas recall older, middle-class Victorian ideas about white femininity as being marked by "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity," what Barbara Welter calls "the cult of True Womanhood."[41] This is especially evident in Werther-June's repeated desire to become a wife to a husband, and h/is strong disdain for sex work. These traits clash somewhat bizarrely with Werther-June's obsession with fellatio, and h/is daringness in approaching potential lovers; sexual autonomy was, however, far more common among women of the working class, and Werther-June's impersonation sprees were happening in working-class spaces where comingling between people of different sexes, and sometimes races, was common.[42] Werther-June describes this contradictory set of traits in terms of class: "The second half of my open career was possible because while having the coquetry and craze for venery of the depraved fairie, I had also the refinement, outward modesty, and general rectitude which are to be expected in an androgyne brought up as a puritan and graduated at a university."[43] This combination of traits is rather confusing; we are asked to accept them, though, as another facet of Werther-June's "plural being."

Weakness—physical and mental—is invoked again and again as an intrinsic aspect of femaleness. In h/is poem, "French Doll-Baby," he refers to androgynes as "fraidcat babies who

[40] Ibid., 280.
[41] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1966), 152.
[42] Cockrell, *Everybody's Doin' It*, chapters 5 and 6.
[43] *Autobiography*, 189–90.

weep easily," and "the helpless crippled sex." When speaking to the soldiers, s/he says, "Girls are not brave. They are not rough. They are not strong. You are brave, rough, and strong, and that is why I love you. I love fellows for the same reason you love girls—because they are my opposites. The weak love the strong and the strong, the weak."[44] A fairie friend called Angelo-Phyllis, whose oral history is included in *The Female-Impersonators*, recounts entering a women's clothing store in New York in search of a dress. He-she says that he-she used "the usual hoax of amateur theatricals" in order to convince the female store clerk that he-she was a woman, adding that "women are so dense as to believe it!"[45]

The quality of weakness leads naturally to susceptibility to overpowering and violence, which elides frequently with babyishness in these texts, as demonstrated in the following exchange with a potential partner:

> "I love fighters. If you and I had a fight, who do you think would win?"
> "I could lick a dozen like yer together."
> "I know you could. I am only a baby."
> "Hah hah! A baby!"
> "Say, you have a handsome face."
> "Me hansome! Stop your kiddin."
> "Really you are handsome. I am going to tell you a secret. I am a woman-hater. I am really a girl in a fellow's clothes. I would like to get some fellow to marry me. You look beautiful to me. Would you be willing to?"

Werther-June understands babyishness as having something to do with being easily overpowered by men. Throughout h/is memoirs, s/he includes a range of scenarios that detail being overpowered, most typically in the form of assault (often graphically violent, and sometimes sexual), and sometimes in the form of choreographed rituals, which s/he calls the "Ceremony of Enslavement" and "Ceremony of Adoration." In these rituals, Werther-June lay face-down on the floor and, in the former, allowed a male consort to place a foot upon h/is head

[44] *Autobiography*, 148.
[45] *Female-Impersonators*, 202. Werther-June refers to Angelo-Phyllis as "he-she."

and declare Werther-June his "slave"; in the latter, Werther-June held and kissed the male consort's feet, proclaiming h/is love and adoration, and enumerating ways in which the consort was physically and mentally superior.[46]

Weakness underpins all of fairie songs, and is depicted the most explicitly in the song, "My Fierce Murphy":

> The night I first met my fierce Murphy,
> He punched me and kicked me and stoned;
> He sent me away all in tatters,
> I screamed and I wept and I moaned.
> But I loved him, I loved him,
> I loved him more than I can tell, can tell!
> I loved him, I loved him,
> I loved him more than I can tell!
>
> He was the next time even fiercer,
> He snatched me up, threw me outside;
> But while I was held in his clutches,
> My face in his blouse I did hide.
> I loved him, I loved him,
> That moment I was in his arms, strong arms! … [etc.]
>
> The third time he said he'd me marry,
> This wonderful, wonderful brave!
> I then was so robbed of my reason,
> I nothing did but for him rave.
> I loved him … [etc.]
>
> I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying,
> For love of this wonderful brave;
> I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying —

[46] *Autobiography*, 98. Werther-June's "Ceremony of Enslavement" may be related to a hypothesis presented earlier in the memoir, that inverts in ancient Greece were "slaves devoted to unmentionable uses" by "the warrior and ruling sex," especially given the central role ancient Greece had in the way white male homosexuals understood themselves around the turn of the twentieth century. See *Autobiography*, 70. It was also possibly drawing upon the idea of "white slavery," which was the term most frequently used to refer to prostitution during the Progressive Era, adopting the language of racial slavery. The concept of "white slavery" both built upon and advanced cultural myths of white femininity as uniquely pure, innocent, weak, and in need of protection—ideas that are clearly apparent in Werther-June's memoirs. See Jo Doezema, "Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women," *Gender Issues* 18 (Winter 1999): 23–50; Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Alex Smolak, "White Slavery, Whorehouse Riots, Venereal Disease, and Saving Women: Historical Context of Prostitution Interventions and Harm Reduction in New York City During the Progressive Era," *Social Work in Public Health* 28, no. 5 (2013): 496–508.

Will he not show mercy and save?
Dying — dying —
I see yawn for me the dark grave, dread grave!
Dying — dying —
Will he not show mercy and save?

This song portrays a scene Werther-June paints many times in h/is memoirs: an assault at the hands of a potential suitor. In these lyrics, s/he explores the relationship between being physically abused and deriving some pleasure or perceived intimacy from the exchange (an early predecessor, perhaps, to Gerry Goffin and Carole King's "He Hit Me").[47] Notably, in the second stanza, s/he enjoys the brief moment between being snatched up and thrown in which s/he is suspended in Murphy's strong arms, face pressed desperately to his shirt. Following two stanzas of physical abuse, Murphy proposes to h/im, and "robbed of [h/is] reason," Werther-June is overcome with happiness. The grim juxtaposition of physical abuse and all-consuming, selfless devotion edges into the realm of the absurd. This contradiction is also heightened by the discrepancy between the violent lyrics and the cheerful, familiar tune of "My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean." Werther-June seems to understand the absurdity and intentionally lean into it; in fact, the contradiction contributes to h/is self-portrayal as undiscerning and at the mercy of h/is own emotions (hysterical, even), a trait that was also associated with white womanhood in the nineteenth century.[48] So, not only is s/he physically weak, then, s/he is also mentally weak.

Weakness, while a site of pain, also becomes a site of pleasure in a number of ways. For one, Werther-June emphasizes weakness as a visible and palpable marker of gender difference between h/imself and h/is male partners. It also lends itself to a kind of eroticization. Writing about the "baby doll archetype" in modern-day popular culture, Jessica Holmes identifies the

[47] And an earlier line from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1956): "I didn't make it up, Mother. Honest, there was a strange man here, and he hit me hard. I heard the sound of it, Mother, but it didn't hurt. It didn't hurt at all. It was just as if he kissed my hand." Thanks to Raymond Knapp for pointing out this reference.
[48] As opposed to white manhood, which was discursively constructed in terms of intellectual mastery over the senses and the emotions. See Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*.

archetype as "phantasmatic construction of femininity" in which "the baby doll ultimately figures as a toy, a plaything, a prop, a *passive object* constructed for male control and consumption, where female sexual desire is defined through its subservience to male paternalism, domination, and coercion."[49] Holmes is talking about the twenty-first century, but the attributes of model she describes align with elements of Werther-June's "French doll-baby," especially "body language, behavioral cues (e.g. thumb sucking), and … *vocal gestures* associated with girlhood in its infantile stages."[50] The "baby doll" label, Holmes writes, "centers on the very same double-bind" associated with the concept of cuteness, in which the distinction between the "tenderness and eroticism associated with cute" and "belittlement and violence" can grow murky.[51] Sianne Ngai frames cuteness as both "aestheticization" and "*eroticization of powerlessness*, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes a desire to belittle or diminish them further … not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them."[52]

This construction of a femininity that eroticizes powerlessness is, I imagine, allowing Werther-June to do several things. To be clear, I am presenting these ideas as speculations, not authoritative interpretations. I believe Werther-June when s/he states that babyishness *was* an innate trait of h/is, and not something s/he was "putting on." But, I wonder if it may have also worked in service of a certain repertoire of expressive techniques—techniques that were desirable both to h/is audience, and to h/im as a technology of gender. My intention is not to put words in Werther-June's mouth, but rather to point out opportunities I see in these texts and songs for engaging with and working through places of personal and social abjection. I am moved to do so because s/he explains that s/he included poetry in the memoirs on the off-chance

[49] Holmes, "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth Pop World," 142–3.
[50] Ibid., 142–3.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3, cited in Holmes, "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth Pop World," 142. Emphasis mine.

that "possible androgyne readers may be able to appreciate" it—despite the fact that h/is "sexually fully-fledged" reviewers believed s/he had a "'screw loose' intellectually, as well as being 'sexually and anatomically 'a freak of Nature.'"[53] While I am not an androgyne by definition, I am something close, and I certainly meet both criteria so generously supplied by the reviewers. If it's alright with you, then, Jennie, I'll happily take you up on the offer.

Weakness and powerlessness are traits often mapped onto white femininity, which Werther-June incorporates into h/is impersonations and articulations of gender. But powerlessness also maps onto experiences Werther-June describes on a more holistic level; that is, the feeling of being "trapped" in a body that feels uncomfortable or troublesome, causes you to be misinterpreted or mistreated, does not allow you to move through the world in the way you wish, or all of the above—and the unrealizable desire for circumstances to be different.[54] S/he expresses the latter desire a number of times, and in a number of different forms. S/he asks god to "take away [h/is] perverted instinct and make [h/im] a virile man," and also to "change [h/is] body this moment by a miracle," to "turn [him] into a girl"; most frequently though, s/he simply begs acquaintances, the police, the church, lawmakers, physicians, and anyone reading to just be

[53] *Female-Impersonators*, 270.

[54] I am taking care here (and throughout) not to project modern narratives of sex/gender difference onto Werther-June's circumstances. That being said, s/he does state: "The fact that I was a boy—or rather that my body was that of a boy, because in mind I was thoroughly a girl—occasioned me an immense amount of regret and chagrin, and continued to do so down to the age of forty," and then goes on to describe contemplating self-castration with h/is father's razor in order to approximate more closely the anatomy of a girl (*Autobiography*, 41). Readers may note that this statement is reminiscent of the "wrong-body narrative" of trans experience that has been made the subject of extensive unpacking in trans studies. The narrative in question was conventionalized as such due to transgender patient's negotiations with medical professionals, and the diagnostic criteria that came to determine patient's eligibility for gender affirming care (See Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back"). Research into sex hormones was only just beginning at the time of Werther-June's publication, and the possibility of sex reassignment surgery did not yet exist; therefore, the aforementioned diagnostic criteria would not have been a factor in Werther-June's self-understanding. See Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *The Estrogen Elixir: A History of Hormone Replacement Therapy in America* (Baltimore: The Hohns Hopkins University Press, 2007), chapter 1; Stryker, *Transgender History*, chapter 2. This actually means nothing about Werther-June's testimony. What I am trying to say is that I am not arguing for or against interpreting Werther-June's statement as feeling "in the wrong body," but rather avoiding putting h/is statement in relation to the idea of a conventionalized "narrative" altogether.

nice, and to stop punishing androgynes for the way nature created them.[55] None of these desires come to fruition, though, something Werther-June seems to accept: "in general we androgynes, possessing the long-suffering feminine psyche, are resigned to being ground to powder by the hypocritical world. It is better to suffer than to inflict suffering."[56]

At their core, Werther-June's memoirs are describing a desire for things to be different—whether that mean a different body, a different mind, different sexual inclinations, or different socio-cultural circumstances, or all of the above—and a recognition that, at least right now, things are not different. And they don't look like they're going to be changing any time soon. Andrea Long Chu theorizes that "desire, in itself, is often, if not always, an experience of powerlessness. Most desire is nonconsensual; most desires aren't desired."[57] Chu examines this dynamic as it manifests in sissy porn, which Chu characterizes as dramatizing "heterosexuality, especially in its coercive form," as "an aesthetic form calibrated to reflect the basic heteronomy of desire—that is, the fact of desire's originating outside the subject."[58] This staged exaggeration of heterosexual relation appeals to what Chu calls the "often tragic … desire not to be trans"—or, "a desire's desire not to exist"—that some trans people experience.[59] Speaking in much more general language, we could call this a desire for some satisfactory relationship between one's

[55] *Autobiography*, 46, 67.
[56] *Female-Impersonators*, 52.
[57] Andrea Long Chu, "Pornographic Spectatorship, or, Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?," presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, March 29–April 1, 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a9b1c0812b13f48e686fdc4/t/5a9c17e1f9619a449856c4fe/1520179170246/Chu-Did+Sissy+Porn+Make+Me+Trans%3F+%28QD2%29.pdf, 7. Sissy porn is a genre that "has circulated on the internet, and specifically the microblogging platform Tumblr, in the form of videos, still images, and animated GIFs since around 2013. The majority of these videos and images are cribbed from mainstream heterosexual porn (and/or shemale porn […]). The women in these images (some cis, some trans) are then re-presented to spectators as formerly *male* subjects who have been feminized, or 'sissified,' through being forced to put on makeup, wear lingerie, and sexually submit themselves to 'cock,' usually (but not always) represented by 'real men' to whom sissies are expected to open their holes in worshipful surrender. Characteristically, sissy porn directly addresses its spectators in the second person: bossy captions explicitly inform spectators of their desires (usually some variation of 'You want to suck cock' or 'You love to be fucked in the ass') and instruct them to understand their addiction to the genre as constitutive of their own feminization" (5).
[58] Ibid., 10.
[59] Ibid.

anatomical sex, felt or desired sex, and place in society, but one that we don't have to *want*, because we always already had it; in other words, exactly what Werther-June is describing.

It is in this light that I want to consider Werther-June's dramatized presentation of a weak, submissive, and abject version of femininity, which always exists in diametric (heterosexual) relation to h/is "virile" male consorts. My reading is that this emphasis on powerlessness might have to do with assumed properties of femaleness, but, even more than that, it has to do with the feeling of wanting things to be different—and wishing the conditions were such that you didn't have to want it. The French doll-baby persona affords a way for Werther-June to not only (paradoxically) own this powerlessness, but to eroticize it in a way that makes h/is condition, at least for the moment, more bearable—and even pleasurable.

The eroticization of powerlessness speaks to another running theme in Werther-June's fairie songs, that of *dying*. "Dying" is mentioned in three of the seven songs, and in the others, a milder version of unconsciousness—fainting, or swooning into a soldier's arms or at his feet—appear in its place. "My Fierce Murphy" climaxes with Werther-June proclaiming, "I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying / For love of this wonderful brave … Dying, dying, I see yawn for me the dark grave, dread grave … Will he not show mercy and save?" identifying Murphy as both the cause of h/is plight and h/is only hope for salvation. "Baby Crying for Her Brave" also centers dying, as does the song to which Werther-June's lyrics are set. "Hello Central" by Chas K. Harris tells the story of a young girl attempting to contact her deceased mother through the telephone. The original lyrics read:

> Papa I'm so sad and lonely
> Sobbed a tearful little child.
> Since dear mama's gone to heaven,
> Papa darling you've not smiled.
> I will speak to her and tell her
> That we want her to come home;

Just you listen and I'll call her
Through the telephone:

Hello Central, give me heaven
For my mama's there;
You can find her with the angels
On the golden stair;
She'll be glad it's me who's speaking
Call her, won't you please;
For I want to surely tell her
We're so lonely here.

In h/is lyrical parody, Werther-June resignifies the figure of the young girl to mean h/is French doll-baby self, pining for not h/is mother, but a military lover. Moreover, it is not the missing love object who has died, but Werther-June, who is dying repeatedly throughout the song:

Baby's dying, naught can save her,
Pining for her brave;
Naught can save but his caresses,
For which she doth rave:
O come quick, dear soldier hero,
Clasp her to thy breast;
For she's surely pining, dying,
In thine arms to rest.

Were she able, surely would she
Hasten quick to reach thy side ;
To thee knit, cemented, mortised,
Would she e'er henceforth abide:
Clinging, O so fast and closely,
Would she lose herself in thee;
No more two, but ever, always,
With thee ONE to be.

In both songs, "death" points toward annihilation and lack, either incomplete and therefore dying without h/is soldier, or desiring to disappear entirely and become one with h/is soldier. A similar sentiment is expressed in "The Night on the Hillside," which goes, "Your baby girl pines for you, sighs for you, cries for you / Moans, shrieks, and dies for you, soldier in blue."

Dying is also, obviously, a metaphor for orgasm. (This meaning is even suggested by the melody of "My Bonny," the chorus of which places the word "dying" on repeated upward leaps of a fourth, miming an ascent to climax.) This connection raises another possibility in eroticizing powerlessness. Leo Bersani raised the transformative potential in the abdication of power associated with penetration, putting receptive sexuality in terms of death and annihilation when he famously described the "seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman."[60] To be penetrated, Bersani argues, holds the potential for achieving "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self," leading to a theorization of the sexual as "moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self ."[61]

Here I am not concerned with the act of anal penetration—which Werther-June generally tried to avoid—but rather how s/he was engaging with the abstract idea of powerlessness by other means. Werther-June's fixation on death and annihilation can be read as oriented toward the same goal, the dissolution of a self that is, more often than not, an exhausting self to be forced to occupy. Perhaps repeatedly "dying" offered Werther-June a moment or two of respite from h/is position as an androgyne. S/he suggests as much, recounting an interaction with a male companion in a saloon: "I am bewitched by my wooer, who uses to me the most indecent language I ever heard, and right in the hearing of all those assembled. I do not act rational. I do not wish to act rational. I wish to act like a baby girl. I am in high spirits, and the men visitors are

[60] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter 1987), 212.

[61] Ibid., 217, 218. Bersani's analysis has been critiqued for its "masculinist bias"; Mandy Merck points out that "A cursory reading of his rendition of rectal sex reveals a heroic rhetoric of 'danger,' 'demolition,' and 'sacrifice' … that is nowhere attributed to vaginal penetration. Might it be Bersani's view that male 'femininity' is butcher than its female equivalent, precisely because the subject's masculinity is at stake?" Mandy Merck, *In Your Face: 9 Sexual Studies* (New York: New York University Press), 157; cited in Guyen Tan Hoang, *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 13. Hoang points out that "Bersani's thesis … rests on a surrendering of male privilege that women do not possess."

much amused at my conduct."[62] The transition into girlhood is understood as a welcome abandonment of rationality. Additionally, dissolution creates the opportunity for reconfiguration, to become something else; it could be that death was instrumental in Werther-June's transformation from h/is day-to-day scholar persona into the French doll-baby.

The Fourteenth Street Rialto; or, "Female Impersonate Intoxication!"

The second performance context I will look at includes the establishments of New York's sexual underworld, where Werther-June moonlit as a female impersonator. As George Chauncey has shown, by the 1890s, there were a number of establishments along the Bowery and surrounding area that catered specifically to fairies, or "male degenerates," and the men who associated with them.[63] Many such establishments were saloons frequented mainly by people of the working class, but were also a popular slumming attraction for middle- and upper-class people (like Werther-June), who visited them as an escape from the relatively restrictive social norms in their everyday circles.[64] Fairies like Werther-June were more likely to be tolerated in these working-class spaces than in middle- or upper-class spaces, in part because they served as an "informal source of entertainment."[65] Sometimes this simply meant circulating among patrons, amusing them with their conduct; at other times, as Werther-June relays, this meant providing an impromptu musical and/or spoken performance.

To pinpoint the emergence of "female impersonator" as a term used to define a gendered category is beyond the scope of this project (and likely impossible). However, as I argued in

[62] *Autobiography*, 156.
[63] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, chapter 1.
[64] Ibid., 44. On the nineteenth-century construction of the "slum" as a racialized and sexualized urban space that middle- and upper-class white people associated with immorality, see Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chapter 1.
[65] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 58.

chapter 1, I believe the dual use of the term points to some elision between the way people were thinking about staged transformation on one hand, and gender/sex difference on the other. Certainly some of the patrons of the establishments Werther-June visited understood h/im in those terms; in the passage I examine below, one of the guests says, "O you Jennie June, give us an impersonation of a prima donna!" recalling the "prima donna" female impersonator of the blackface minstrel show. Furthermore, some of the elements of Werther-June's narrative are easily contextualized within broader trends in nineteenth-century entertainment. Although what Werther-June is doing is not exactly like staged impersonation, I argue that it draws upon many of the same logics that inform, and are informed by, professional staged impersonation. First I will point some of these logics out, and discuss ways in which I observe these logics of sex, gender, race, and performance reflected in the way that Werther-June talks about the condition of being an androgyne.

For about eighteen months of h/is fairie career, beginning in 1894, Werther-June's weekly female impersonation sprees took place at the Fourteenth Street Rialto, a theater district between Third Avenue and Broadway, which was one of the major centers of night life at the time.[66] This is h/is "high-class fairie" period, in which s/he spends one night a week on female impersonation sprees. H/is spots included "pool-rooms, gambling joints, beer gardens of ill repute, [and] worse resorts," though elsewhere s/he reports frequenting a "refined and luxurious" parlor in a venue that s/he calls "Hotel Comfort" (a pseudonym).[67] H/is associates included "youthful actors … race-track book-makers, wealthy adolescents who spent their evenings sipping gross pleasures,

[66] According to Werther-June, Paresis Hall, on Fourth Avenue several blocks south of Fourteenth Street, was the "headquarters for avocational female-impersonators of the upper and middle classes" (*Female-Impersonators*, 146). S/he h/imself did not frequent "the Hall" (the name preferred by androgynes, as "paresis" came from the medical term for brain degeneration resulting from syphilis), though s/he did make several visits during which s/he was introduced to a group of androgynes who had formed a club called the *Cercle Hermaphroditos*. See *Female-Impersonators*, 146–169, and parts four and five.
[67] *Autobiography*, 106; *Female-Impersonators*, 109.

and high-fliers of the feminine persuasion."[68] S/he did not usually wear female attire, but rather dressed in a "distinctive manner," to signal h/is status as a fairie; one such outfit may have included "a blue suit, with boxplaited, belted coat (Norfolk style); dark red necktie; white gloves; and patent-leather shoes."[69]

In *The Female-Impersonators,* Werther-June provides a detailed account of one such episode. Upon arrival at the "Hotel Comfort," s/he mingles with friends and other patrons of the venue until s/he "attract[s] the eyes and ears" of all the guests, some of whom "recognized [h/im] as a female impersonator."[70] At this point, s/he is prompted by a member of the crowd to "impersonate a prima donna"; once the necessary "appreciative and responsive audience of youthful Lotharios" has accumulated, s/he obliges them:

> Hypnotized by the adulation of those whom I looked upon as demigods, as well as by the well-disposed attention of the other hundred-odd guests attracted by my unique, yet fairly modest, behavior, I broke into the "Old Oaken Bucket"—a song affording unusual opportunity to display my masculine-feminine tones: below middle A, baritone; from A upward, alto; with an occasional soprano and tenor modulation thrown in just to excite wonder. I fancy my singing voice is unusual in its variety of possible modulation as a result of my body both being male and female. In my singing voice particularly, these two elements are ever striving for the upper hand. One stanza each of several songs in vogue followed: "After the Ball Was Over" [*sic*]; "Sweet Rosy O'Grady"; "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me"; etc.

---

[68] *Female-Impersonators,* 118. In 1896, Werther-June was outed, by a former physician, to the president of h/is university, and consequently expelled. "Outcast from society" and unemployed, s/he moved to the Bowery to find affordable housing, beginning h/is career as a "low-class fairie." S/he emphasizes that, even during this period, s/he was averse to sex work, though s/he did accept money from paramours if it was offered. Because s/he was no longer living a double life as a university student, s/he was free to move about in h/is female persona six days a week (s/he abstained on Sundays), and was known most commonly on the streets as Jennie June. S/he mentions that the ability to spend six days a week as Jennie June almost makes up for living a life of extreme poverty. See *Autobiography,* 139–147. Heaney also discusses Werther-June's class bias against the "low-class fairies" s/he encountered during this period, though she reaches for different conclusions that the ones I am trying to lay out here. See *The New Woman,* 175 (please note that the block quote from *Autobiography* appears on page 155 of the source text).

[69] *Autobiography,* 122. During this period s/he also began painstakingly removing all hair from h/is body with a safety razor so that s/he was "as glabrous as statuary," an "operation [that] had to be repeated about once every two months." S/he performed a similar "operation" on h/is face, which involved letting facial hair grow out for a full week before pulling it out with wax, leaving h/is face "as devoid of hair as any woman's" (*Autobiography*, 124).

[70] *Female-Impersonators,* 111.

> Next I recited a dialogue, my naturally bland, sentimental, and caressing voice now aping a cry-baby species of mademoiselle, and now a stern, hoarse-voiced he-man. Now I burlesqued feminine airs and cadences; and now strove after the most virile and dare-devil effects.
>
> I was, while the focus for all eyes, conscious only of the joy of being alive and in the midst of an admiring group. I experienced a feeling of exultation that for a brief spell I was looked upon under my real character—a bisexual. I was intoxicated with delight because emancipated—though only for a few moments—from a hated dissimulation and disguise, and enabled to be myself. Assuredly another personality than that of my every-day book-work self was in possession of my body and faculties.[71]

In this passage we can note several differences between what an "avocational female-impersonator" like Werther-June is doing, and what a professional female impersonator does. First, s/he understands "female impersonator" to be a descriptor of h/is identity, rather than h/is occupation, and does not receive payment for h/is performances.[72] Second, h/is performance is not bounded, either spatially (as there is no stage) or temporally. The performance does not have a clearly-demarcated "beginning," as s/he has been acting in a way meant to attract attention since long before s/he started singing. And, s/he is not assuming a character for the purposes of this set; the "personality" on display in this moment is the female spirit that "dwelt in [h/is] brain

[71] *Female-Impersonators*, 111–12. "Bisexual" was commonly used during this period to describe someone part-male and part-female. The modern-day understanding of "bisexual" (as "attraction to more than one gender," "attraction to two genders," or "attraction to both one's own and other genders") is most closely matched by the nineteenth-century term "psychical hermaphrodite." See Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 230.

[72] Werther-June provides a near-identical account of a performance in an article written for *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology*—with several notable differences. For one thing, s/he is clad in in female attire—including an evening gown, a woman's wig, and makeup—a scenario never described in h/is memoirs. The given setting is a "low-class cabaret" which includes a "large, gaudily decorated, and elaborately lighted hall," filled with small tables and a space in the center cleared for performers. Additionally, in this account, "[f]or his last number, he impersonates a prima donna, as she struts about the operatic stage, and renders several selections in falsetto, more like an alto than a soprano. "[A]s he makes his final bow, quarters and dimes roll to his feet over the floor from every direction—the tribute from those who had decidedly enjoyed his female-impersonation." Ralph Werther-Jennie June, "The Female-Impersonator," *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology* 15, no. 6 (June 1919), 241–245. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these differences—and Werther-June's possible motivation for these editorial decisions—in full. One element that stands out is that the account in the *Journal of Urology and Sexology* bears greater resemblance to a performance that one might see in a variety theater or vaudeville setting; so, it is possible that Werther-June tweaked the description to be closer to something h/is imagined readership might recognize. It is also possible that Werther-June's fixation on class distinction and respectability is at play, and was therefore attempting to present a persona closer to someone like Julian Eltinge—a professional female impersonator who was generally well-respected as a performer—but who was perhaps more naturally inclined toward the vocation.

since infancy." S/he is also not in female costume, and remains in the same attire throughout the set.

As discussed in chapter 1, sexual difference and the possibility of gender transformation were being articulated as spectacle in the late nineteenth-century United States via the curiosity, the blackface minstrel show, and the male or female impersonator. Werther-June's narrative recalls the trope of spectacular transformation, even describing it as such. Elsewhere, s/he calls h/is impersonation an "art" and describes how h/is audiences "marvelled" at h/is similarity in appearance to a woman, language that is clearly reminiscent of that which describes professional impersonators who toured with variety circuits.[73] S/he describes the spoken part of h/is set as alternating between h/is "naturally bland, sentimental, and caressing voice," that of "a cry-baby mademoiselle," and " a stern, hoarse-voiced he-man." The portions that are sung include both "feminine airs and cadences," and "the most virile and dare-devil effects," the latter suggesting an acrobatic performance meant to amaze h/is audience.[74]

The kind of vocal performance Werther-June describes draws upon both tropes of sexology linking physiological characteristics to interiority, and tropes of popular musical entertainment that stage gender transformation as spectacle. H/is set opens with a one-person dialogue between two characters, male and female; s/he does not change costume, but affects the transformation through vocal tone and timbre alone. The same technique featured in the acts of double-voiced singers of decades prior, such as Dora Dawron, who wore a costume that was half-male, half-female, and sang duets with herself using markedly different registers. Recall that the blackface minstrel performer and female impersonator William Lingard also included songs

[73] *Female-Impersonators*, 100, 103.
[74] Ibid., 112.

in his repertoire that showcased different "voices"—displaying his vocal prowess and highlighting the spectacular, illusory nature of his female impersonations.

Voice is listed numerous times in several of the landmark texts in sexology as a symptom of abnormal sexuality, alongside other physical markers like genitals, hair distribution, head circumference, skeletal structure, dental measurements, etc.[75] According to these texts, possessing vocal qualities like that of the opposite sex is an indicator of inversion, or physical and psychic proximity to the opposite sex. For Werther-June, this switching back and forth is a performance of h/is self-identification as part-male and part-female, or as having a second, female personality inhabiting h/is male body. S/he writes, "I fancy my singing voice is unusual in its variety of possible modulation as a result of my body being both male and female."[76] Werther-June is therefore not only performing a kind of interior gendered subjectivity as we would understand it; the double-voiced performance is enacting literal physical hermaphrodism, which is intrinsic to how Werther-June understands h/is own sexual difference.

In the above passage, Werther-June mentions two tunes that also appear in h/is repertoire of fairie songs: "Old Oaken Bucket" ("A Night on the Hillside") and "Sweet Rosy O'Grady" ("Wild Arthur McCann"). Both these songs lend themselves to such a hermaphroditic performance. "Old Oaken Bucket," according to Werther-June, "afford[s] unusual opportunity to display [h/is] masculine-feminine tones: below middle A, baritone; from A upward, alto; with an occasional soprano and tenor modulation thrown in just to excite wonder."[77] The melody ranges a diminished seventh, spanning from the raised fourth below the tonic to the major third above.

[75] See, for example, R. von Krafft-Ebing and Charles Gilbert Chaddock, *Psychopathia Sexualis, 7th Edition* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 1908), 220, 235, 254, 262, 265, 284, 295, 304, 307, 309, 316, 325, 334, 340, 353, and 354; Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion* (London: Wilson and MacMillan, 1897), 11, 12, 96, 97, 124, 143, 171, 172, 177, 204, and 266.
[76] *Female-Impersonators*, 111–12.
[77] Ibid., 111–12.

The verse follows an AABA format; in the B section, the melody remains static on the dominant, then leaps up to the sixth, then the tonic, and then the third (see figure 28). This disjunct melody amplifies the disparity between Werther-June's lower and upper ranges.

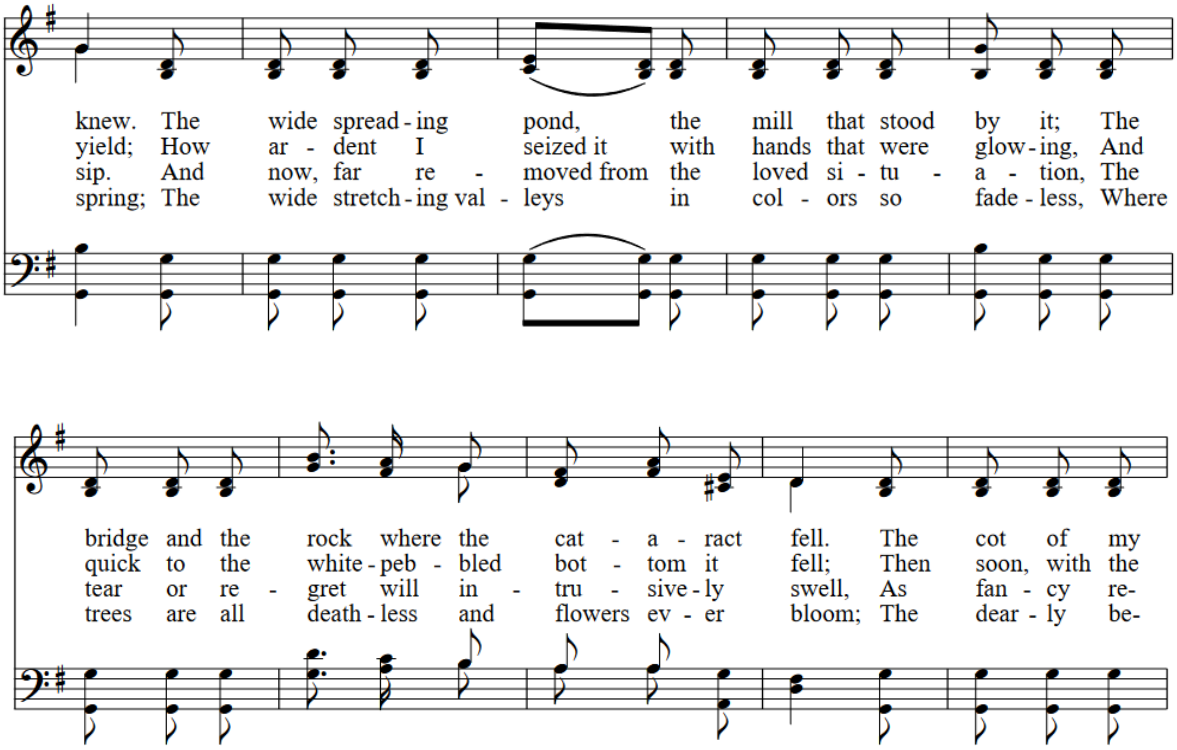


Figure 27: "Old Oaken Bucket"

"Sweet Rosy O'Grady" also provides an opportunity for theatricalized gender-crossing. The metric shift between the verses—which are in four, evoking marching and militarism—and refrains—in three, evoking waltzing, and music for the parlor—also suggests a contrast between "weak" and "strong" (see figure 28). The contour of the melody is also quite different between the verses—which are rhythmically regular, comprised of eighth notes, and disjunct on every other line—and choruses—which feature longer held notes and a more conjunct, lilting melody. By alternating between these two styles, Werther-June has the opportunity to emphasize different "voices" throughout the song. This alternation potentially maps onto gendered roles ("strong" meter, regular rhythm, disjunct melody = "masculine"; "weak" meter, irregular rhythm, lilting

melody = “feminine”), lending itself to an androgynous performance. (This contrast could have contributed to the characterizations in Werther-June’s eventual parody, “Wild Arthur McCann.” The lyrics of this song emphasize the physical and mental contrast between Werther June, who depicts h/imself as weak and subservient—“I do adore prostrate upon the ground”—and the soldier, who is “big,” “ferocious,” “strong,” and “brave.”)

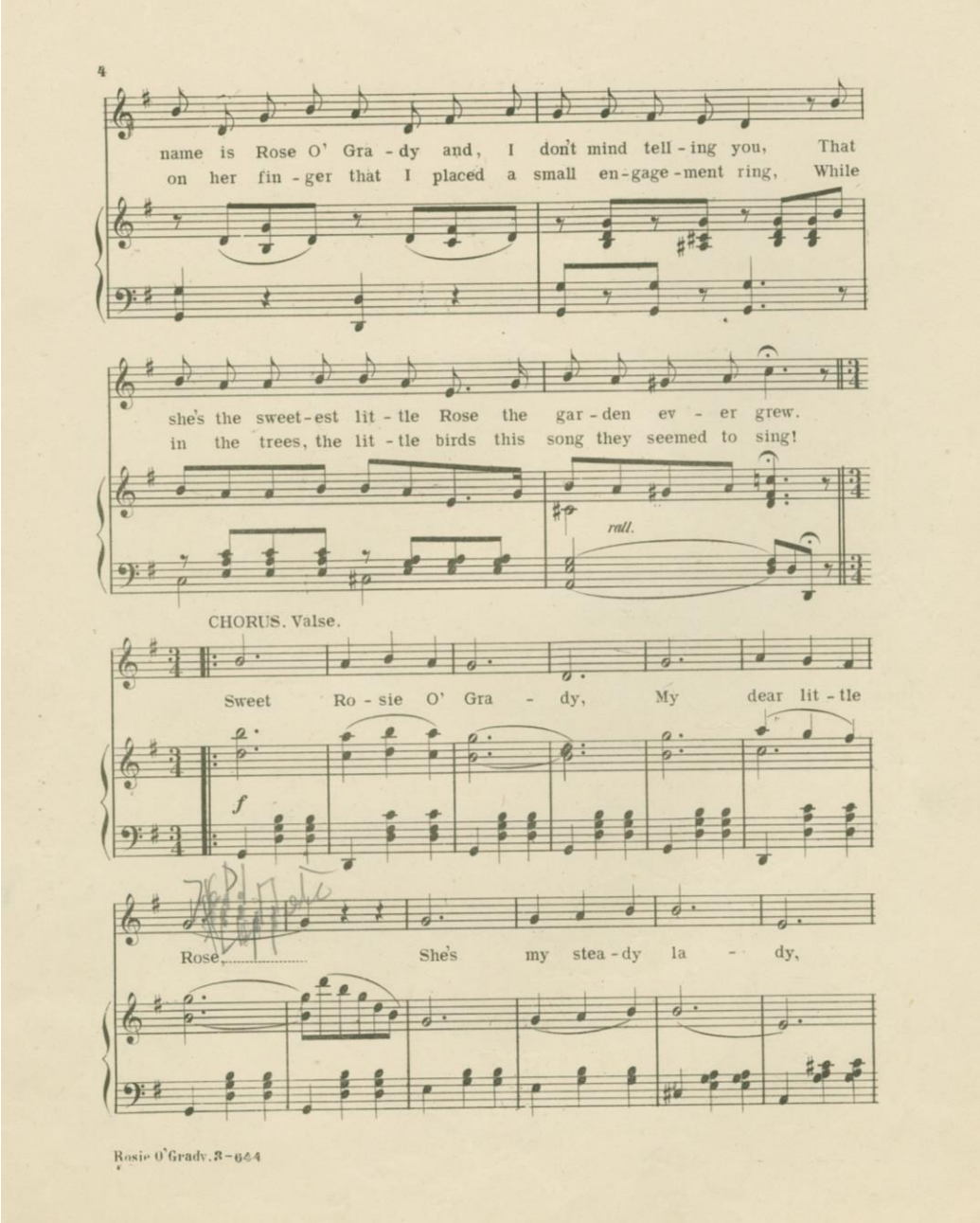


Figure 28: “Sweet Rosy O’Grady”

As established in chapter 1, the entertainment categories of the curiosity, the blackface minstrel show, and the male or female impersonator also establish a mode of reception in which observers fix their subject with an authoritative interpretive gaze, in order to pass judgments about that subject's ontology. I argued that this interpretive mode came to have some bearing on how sexual difference and gender transformation are represented in popular culture, and how gender-variant people have been ideologically constructed in the hundred-some years following. At several points in Werther-June's memoirs s/he suggests the presence of such a gaze. H/is early childhood memories are marked by other children and adults not "look[ing] upon h/im as a boy," often teasing h/im or punishing him for h/is failure to conform to gendered ideals, but simultaneously forcing h/im to occupy a male role because of h/is anatomy. In other words, outside observers pass judgments on what s/he "really" is.

Despite the misery it causes, s/he also, at times, buys into the idea. Drawing on the structures of sexology and racist pseudosciences such as phrenology, Werther-June identifies physical markers by which an outside observer might identify h/im. Typical "feminesque physical stigmata" of the fairie, as s/he calls it, can include "natural beardlessness," "the possession of female breasts," "female skeletal shape, particularly an over-long spine, short legs, and broad pelvis," and "natural soprano voice. Etc."[78] More than once s/he recounts being subjected to observation and interpretation:

> Later one [of the soldiers] who meets me for the first time asks: "Do you call yourself a girl? In all my life I never vidi puellam cum peni [saw a girl with a penis]!"
> "I know I am only part girl. I have a girl's mind and breasts and my body otherwise is much like a girl's."
> "If you don't believe Jennie is a girl, just feel of her breasts."
> Several stick their hands into my bosom. "He's got a girl's breasts all right."
> They ask me to sing, listen attentively, and then remark: "That is a high tenor. It has an effect on the voice all right."

[78] *Female-Impersonators*, 100. Enormous thanks to Mary Somerville for assisting me with these Latin translations.

> "Are you and I of the same sex?" I ask, taking pleasure in our physical and psychical contrasts.
> "No, Jennie, you are a baby, and we are the big, big braves."

In this invasive scenario, the soldiers look upon Jennie June, and question the possibility of h/is existence. They then turn to their other senses to pass judgment. First they use their touch, depicted as hard and probing like a speculum. Then they listen; h/is voice satisfies them, and they remark that "it" (androgynism) has an effect on the voice, reflecting the assumed connection between gender difference, sexual behavior, and physical features that was central to contemporary sexology (which must, if Werther-June's account is correct, have made it into the common vernacular by this point). Werther-June not only finds their assessment affirming, but pleasurable; the passage is tinged with eroticism, spotlighting genitals, breasts, and voice as sites of sexual difference.

S/he draws not only on the language of medicine and psychiatry, but also popular entertainment culture, for example, making the self-aggrandizing (and highly specific!) claim to be "one of the half-dozen most remarkable sexual *curiosities* of [h/is] generation."[79] The nineteenth-century language of imposture is legible in the last stanza of Werther-June's poem, "French Doll-Baby," which reads:

> Holdeth French doll from "guy" a secret;
> Yes, surely she can *act!*
> Only after hour's deception,
> Revealeth she the fact;
> When she's found that she can trust him;
> Can reveal her whim:
> In a burst of laughter doth disclose:
> "My real, true name is 'Jim'!"[80]

This poem invokes the idea that people who present as a gender other than their anatomical one (people who cross-dress, or pass) are pretending to be something that they are not. But this

[79] *Female-Impersonators*, 83. Emphasis mine.
[80] Ibid., 282.

narrative does not match Werther-June's other accounts of female impersonation; Jennie June is not an "act," but rather Werther-June's "real character." However, while this scenario may not literally represent h/is experience, I believe it says something *about* h/is experience. The emphasis on *act* and the peal of laughter suggests that s/he finds some humor in the situation. Moreover, s/he is asserting agency; h/is discerning audience is not even granted a name, but given the generic label "guy," and *s/he* decides when "guy" learns h/is male alias. I think Werther-June is taking the idea of imposture and—not quite making fun of it—but making fun *out* of it.[81]

My theory is that impersonation—that is, performing for an audience—allows Werther-June to engage with and manipulate this interpretive mode. If h/is whole life, people have been looking upon h/im and passing judgments on whether s/he is a male or a female, impersonation presents an opportunity for Werther-June to dramatize that process, and to make it happen on h/is own terms. Werther-June invokes this interpretive gaze when s/he narrates performing, describing being at "the center of all eyes," of an audience who "listens attentively." For "a brief spell," s/he is "looked upon under my real character—a bisexual." In this setting, and also in the aforementioned interaction with the soldiers, Werther-June is subjected to observation and interpretation, but unlike at university, with h/is family, or with unsympathetic physicians, s/he successfully uses h/is agency to show and tell h/is audience that s/he is what s/he says s/he is. Similarly to the exchange with the soldiers, Werther-June takes erotic pleasure in performing and being received in such a way, speaking of being "intoxicated," "conscious only of the joy of

[81] Christopher Isherwood, "From *The World in the Evening*," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 51. "The 'swishy little boy' [with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich] is not underlyingly serious … his seriousness is apt to be right on the surface. But to get camp about it, who said that seriousness can't be fun as well?" Morris, "On Fairies (And Mothers)" 9.

being alive."[82] S/he is "emancipated … from a hated dissimulation and disguise, and enabled to be [h/imself]"; in other words, we might consider the "female-impersonate intoxication" to be another dissolution of self—one that allows another self to cohere in its place.

In chapter 1, I discussed the history of the idea of "impersonation" as an entertainment format, and its etymological and ideological relationship to the concepts of imposture, illusion, and deception. I provided two dictionary definitions of *impersonate* (or *personate*) that were operative in the late nineteenth century:

> **Impersonate**, *v.t.* **1.** To invest with personality. **2.** To ascribe the qualities of a person to; to personify. **3.** To represent the person of; to personate.
> **Personate**, *v.t.* **1.** To assume the character of; to counterfeit; to feign. **2.** To disguise; to mask. [83]

Again, when Werther-June is performing as an avocational female impersonator, s/he is not impersonating in the sense that s/he is assuming a false persona, or disguising h/imself as something s/he is not. But s/he is impersonating in a different sense of the word—the first definition, "to invest with personality," or, to person-ify, to bring to life. One way that Werther-June accomplishes this is through musical performance: in the exchange with the soldiers ("it has an effect on the voice alright") and during h/is impromptu set at the Hotel Comfort.[84]

---

[82] "The erotic is a measure between *the beginnings of our sense of self* and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. … Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the *open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy.* In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience." Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 41–48. "The music … which I truly 'love' … seemed to me beautiful because it had to do with intensity of experience. [I]t is about *the transcendent joy of being alive, not dead, and aware of the difference*." Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd ed.*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 69. All emphasis mine.

[83] Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1872), 367, 534. Similar definitions also appear in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1898) and *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1930).

[84] See, also, the following excerpt from Angelo-Phyllis's oral history: "When, after half-an-hour, the bugle sounded retreat, how overwhelming, how unearthly, how infinite and divine, its notes! The bugle-call, because closely associated with the clash of arms and with that type of human who shine as demigods, always lifts me up into an unutterably blissful female-impersonate and cross-dress intoxication. I seem to be raised to the very zenith of the universe as THE SUPREME WOMAN, THE FAIRIE QUEEN, and to have all the fighting men that ever lived

I would like to consider this use of sound or performance as a transformational technique vis-à-vis a statement Susan Stryker made about transsexuality in a conversation with Sandy Stone. Here, Stryker describes gender as "the language through which you communicate the reality of your identifications and desires to other people … a language of movement and smell and sound … a very full language with many realms and registers"; transsexuality, she theorizes, is "an instrumentalization of that language."[85] Note that she says *an* instrumentalization of that language, not *the* instrumentalization. There are a number of ways we might articulate or communicate a gendered self, medical sex change being just one of them. Werther-June even suggests as much when s/he writes, quoting Edward Carpenter, that the "nerve system of many an urning [or androgyne] is the finest and the most complicated *musical instrument in the service of an interior personality*."[86] This statement resonates considerably with Stryker's, in its language of instrumentality, interiority, and sound. Rather than using this similarity to extrapolate some kind of essential sameness, or teleology, I wonder what we can learn about gender difference, and change, by reading them side by side? Werther-June was not seeking out medical transition in the way it is understood today, but was, in some material sense, articulating an understood gendered interiority using means appropriate to h/is culture and social reality.

---

bowing low in worship of my feminine attributes. During the minute that the bugle-call resounds and reverberates, I live infinitely! I live out a whole eternity!" (*Female-Impersonators*, 212).

[85] Susan Stryker, "Another Dream of Common Language: An Interview with Sandy Stone," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 2016), 303–4. This is, obviously, just one way of understanding sex, gender, and transsexuality, and represents a line of thinking about transgender that is "built on narratives that are governed by fictions of the liberal humanist ontological self." See Shiv Datt Sharma, "Provincializing Trans Studies," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (February 2023), 10. Stryker herself defines gender otherwise elsewhere; in *Transgender History*, for example, she defines gender as "the social organization of bodies into different categories of people," specifying that in "the contemporary United States, this sorting into categories is based on sex, but historically and cross-culturally there have been many different social systems of organizing people into gender" (15) I am not citing these descriptions of gender and transsexuality as definitive, but rather as a provocative statements that allow us to think through performance and transformation in interesting ways.

[86] *Female-Impersonators*, 17. Carpenter uses the word "urning," which Werther-June specifies means the same thing as "androgyne" in this context. Emphasis mine.

One such way was through female impersonation. Shana Redmond writes that "[m]usic is a method. Beyond its many pleasures, music allows us to do and imagine things that may otherwise be unimaginable or seem impossible. It is more than a sound; it is a complex system of mean(ing)s and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment."[87] Music's relational nature is part of what makes it such a potent method for communicating gendered reality, which is also relational. Holly Watkins echoes Redmond's suggestion that music has a special capacity for articulating things that might be. Sounds in nature, she writes "result from both physical events and the intentional actions of living beings"; therefore a *drip*, a *boom*, or an *exhale* might signal another presence that is animate or inanimate.[88] Music, she states, "retains that ambiguity; music is the art of possibly animate things."[89] For Werther-June, musical performance allowed h/im to articulate the fact that s/he had another, female, self trapped inside h/im (something that s/he was told repeatedly was unimaginable, or meant that s/he was insane), but also to make this other self animate, to bring her to life.

The Memoir; or, "The Androgyne's Throat"

> The throat, for gay men, is a problem and a joy: it is the zone of fellatio … With my imaginary laryngoscope, with my mirror, I am looking into the queer throat to inspect the damage.[90]
>
> —Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*

The final performance context I will look at are the memoirs themselves, because I believe the tone, pacing, and texture of the memoirs—that is, their musical or sonic aspects—are

[87] Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora.* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.
[88] Holly Watkins, *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.
[89] Ibid., 3.
[90] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 156, 158.

also communicating something about Werther-June's experience. I am thinking about these memoirs as autography, which Yetta Howard, citing H. Porter Abbot, identifies as a label for "self-writing" that "does not necessarily correspond with writing about oneself in a linear, event-laden fashion, but instead characterizes a mode of writing the 'self.'"[91] Werther-June's memoirs fit this description; while they are often linearly-oriented, they do also skip between childhood and adulthood, make diversions into history, contemporary science or anthropology, include poetry and song, and occasionally venture from English into Latin. In this way, I argue that "recounting[s] [of] physical and mental incidences" in these memoirs "emerge as experientially aesthetic events for the reader and writer" that do more than convey a narrative, but also serve as a means of articulating a self.[92]

Werther-June writes with two stated goals: first, to appeal to the fields of sexology and psychiatry, in order to educate medical professionals; and second, to garner sympathy for the androgyne, which will hopefully lead to better treatment by fellow humans. Noise, the voice, and the throat are deeply implicated in both areas; I will explore how they are working in each, and then put them into conversation (so to speak), to see if it tells us something about the way Werther-June using h/is authorial voice to articulate situations of extreme abjection, in turn expressing something about h/is lived reality.

Recall that voice is often cited as a symptom of sexual inversion, alongside other physical characteristics. See, for example, the definition of *Androgyny and Gynandry* provided in *Psychopathia Sexualis*: "Forming direct transitions from the foregoing groups are those individuals of contrary sexuality in whom not only the character and all the feelings are in accord with the abnormal sexual instinct, *but also the skeletal form, the features, voice, etc.*; so that the

[91] Howard, *Ugly Differences*, 60–1.
[92] Ibid.

individual approaches the opposite sex anthropologically, and in more than a psychical and psycho-sexual way."[93] Elsewhere, Krafft-Ebing cites a physician who examined six hundred inverts and found "frequent approaches to the female form, as well as incomplete grown of hair, delicate complexion, and higher voice."[94] Ellis, in *Sexual Inversion*, lists "brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflection of the voice, etc." as indicators that a woman "ought to have been a man."[95] He adds that "[n]ot only is the tone of voice often different, but there is reason to suppose that this rests on a basis of anatomical modification"; one physician "examined the larynx in twenty-three inverted women, and found in several a very decidedly masculine type of larynx" (97).

The idea that voice represented interiority was not particular to sexology. Years earlier in the antebellum period, white Americans began imagining certain sonic qualities—such as *noisy*, *rough*, or *uncultivated*—to be racialized as Black, ideas that were then reinforced through texts such as runaway slave ads and the minstrel show.[96] This new form of racialized and racist listening "offered white elites a new method of grounding racial abjection in the body while cultivating white listening practices as critical, discerning, delicate and, above all, as the standard of citizenship and personhood."[97] In other words, white listeners positioned themselves as expert listeners with the ability to place another person into a racial category according to aural cues—similar to the interpretive mode that Young and Volpicelli suggest emerge from the curiosity, and which I expand upon vis-à-vis impersonation in chapter 1. Nina Sun Eidsheim argues that the development of scientific racism and its obsession with measuring body parts, together with the "medicalization of vocal pedagogy" and the more general myth in Western thought that the voice

[93] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 304, emphasis mine.
[94] Ibid., 261–2.
[95] Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 96.
[96] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line.*
[97] Ibid., 5.

"reveal[s] the true nature of the body," led to the voice being "objectified, entrained, and used as a 'measure' of race."[98] This medicalized relationship between the voice and interiority was also implicated in the contemporaneous popularization of elocution manuals, which some physiologists believed could alleviate disorders such as *neurasthenia* through the fostering of confident and regulated speech patterns, thus "solidifying a correlation between a healthy body with a clear voice and a healthy, intellectual, and ethical nation."[99] Thus, vocal integrity and control were not only linked to interiority, but also normative citizenship.

In several instances, Werther-June appeals to the idea that vocal irregularities are a marker of difference—not just differentiation, but specifically *difference*. In *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, Werther-June declares that the voice is "one of the chief criteria by which to determine abnormal sexuality," stating that:

> I have been told that my speaking voice is a very uncommon one, having the "fullness of a woman's voice," and that it often "breaks and changes, sometimes in the middle of a sentence; from being masculine, it suddenly changes timbre and becomes decidedly feminine." I have myself observed sometimes when in conversation with a young man with whom I was in love that my voice would involuntarily change from a bass to a treble. My voice has also been described as "soothing, sentimental-sounding, gushing, bland, and caressing." I have been told that when I talk, involuntarily—and to myself unconscious—movements of the lips take place not necessary for articulation, and that the same movements take place occasionally even when I am not talking.[100]

The vocal qualities here include inconsistency, breaks, lack of control, and surplus—or unproductive—movement. In chapter 2 I discussed ways in which moments of vocal failure,

---

[98] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 17. See also Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 338–65.

[99] Denise Weisz, "Negotiating Nervousness: How Elocution Manuals Shaped the American Public Body in the Nineteenth Century," *Resources for American Literary Study* 42, no. 1 (2020), 25. A similar line of thinking contributed to the development of the phonograph, which Alexander Graham Bell originally intended as a tool for "contain[ing] the cultural problem of deafness by training the deaf to pass as hearing people through their speech" (Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 40). Bell was part of a camp believing that a person's humanity was measurable through their capacity for speech, and therefore that signing was a mark of an uncivilized person.

[100] *Autobiography*, 11. S/he makes a similar remark in *Female-Impersonators*, 86.

including breaks, lack of control, and nonnormative speech patterns such as lisps and stutters, may have represented failure to conform to normative masculinity. The connection Weisz points out between "clear voice," "healthy body," and "intellectual … ethical nation," and the racialization of "cultivated" voice as white that Stoever identifies further elucidates the relationship between vocal "breaks" and normative speech. Wayne Koestenbaum maps "prudences of voice" onto sexual practice, considering both homosexuality and voice in terms of waste: "The body called 'homosexual' is one place where the sexual system sputters, digresses, leaks; where an error in bookkeeping (a wasted sum) comes to light; where housekeeping fails."[101] Things like breaks and heavy vibrato signal lack of control and excess expenditure, which Koestenbaum maps onto cultural imaginings of "excessive" (or, non-heterosexual, non-reproductive) sexuality. In other words, a failure to fit into the "healthy, intellectual, and ethical" national body that Weisz describes.

It is possible that the breaking voice of the androgyne also represents sexual intermediacy through its association with adolescence. Ellis mentions the voice in reference to adolescence in ancient Greece, suggesting that the Greeks, "[s]ensitive to every form of loveliness, and unrestrained by moral or religious prohibition … could not fail to be enthusiastic for that corporeal beauty, unlike all other beauties of the human form, which marks male adolescence no less triumphantly than does the male soprano voice upon the point of breaking [*sic*]."[102] Through Ellis's somewhat weedy prose, we might gather that the breaking male soprano voice is representative of the youthful beauty of adolescent boys that was considered desirable in male-male relationships in ancient Greece. Similarly to Roger Freitas's argument that the voice and body of the eighteenth-century castrato "carried a potent erotic charge" as an "arrested boy"—

[101] Koestembaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 172.
[102] Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 245.

frozen in a state of youth and therefore effeminate sensuality—Werther-June's cracking, unwieldy voice could have pointed toward a pubescent body in a state of incomplete sexual dimorphism.[103] Throughout, Werther-June describes h/imself as "childlike" and having "aged slowly," even declaring: "Indeed in some respects I have never ceased to be a baby mentally."[104] Though s/he does not explicitly state that h/is androgyny is a result of h/is arrested development, s/he does write of them in terms of one another, for example, when s/he steps into h/is "French Doll-Baby" persona. "Childlikeness," s/he writes, "is a common characteristic of androgynes."[105] S/he even frames sexual acts in terms of underdevelopment, recounting: "Whenever I have seen an infant nursing, I have been seized with a desire for fellatio cum viro of about my own age, and have sometimes even experienced an attack of babyish actions, as panting or cooing in satisfaction, or swayed the head or other parts of the body."[106]

Here, vocalisms emanate as a result of other sensations—or imagined sensations—in the throat. The throat is of equal (if not greater) importance to the voice in the way Werther-June presents h/is story; in fact, blowjobs are a central pillar of *Autobiography of an Androgyne*. According to Werther-June, h/is earliest memories are those following being weaned, in which h/is "strong baby's instinct for the nipple" shifted to instead target "the best substitute that came in [h/is] way"—the penis.[107] By age ten s/he had developed a "violent desire" for fellatio (giving, never receiving) which became an "obsession" by early adulthood.[108] This desire—together with, and inextricable from, the desire to be recognized as a woman—led Werther-June to pursue "female impersonation sprees" once a night throughout h/is twenties, often placing h/imself into

[103] Roger Freitas, "The Erotics of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato," *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 202–4.
[104] *Autobiography*, 14–15.
[105] Ibid., 119.
[106] Ibid., 15
[107] Ibid., 29.
[108] Ibid., 38, 230.

dangerous situations that resulted in assaults or arrests. S/he understands the urge to perform fellatio as deeply connected to h/is androgynous nature, stating that since nature made h/im "a girl without a vagina," instinct led h/im to "use the next best foramen."[109] By framing h/is desire as both congenital and as addiction, s/he sets up later descriptions of sexual encounters—some consensual and some nonconsensual—to inspire sympathy for the androgyne, h/is second stated purpose in writing.

This next part will focus on Werther-June's written portrayals of sex. *Autobiography of an Androgyne* deploys a variety of writerly tones, ranging from confessional to clinical. A significant portion of h/is story deals with sensory details—taste, smell, and touch—and bodily contact, and it is at these points where Werther-June's authorial voice is most polyphonous. See the following passage, in which s/he recounts h/is time at school, daydreaming about:

> Sensual thoughts now began to creep into my mind more and more. Interest in my studies was declining. In the class-room I was absent-minded, and when called upon, would be confused, and hardly able to reply to the professor's questions. Even here I would be thinking of the soft satin-smooth cutis in inguine [skin in the groin] of my late guest which I had found gratissima tactioni, praesertim labiali et linguali [most pleasing to touch, especially touch of the lips and tongue], and would regret that it was always to be denied to me to touch again on viro [on the man] this marvellously fine integument. I pined for the repetition of other similar pleasures which I had for the first time tasted in their fulness only a few weeks before, such as pillowing caput super abdomen aut femure nudo adolescentis [pillowing the head above the abdomen or bare leg of the adolescent], the fascinating sight membri virilis ejus erecti [of his erect and virile member], and the extremely smooth surface glandis, gratissima tactioni et digitorum et oris [of his glans, most pleasing to touch with fingers and mouth].[110]

Like many other passages in the text, this one presents a peculiar combination of intimate descriptions of sensations and desires with the detached, clinical effect of transitioning to Latin

[109] "Nature created me puellam sine vagina [a girl without a vagina], and then drew me toward the sturdy sex as few of the gentle sex are drawn. In such a case, what is more natural than to use the next best foramen? Furthermore, instinct pointed out the makeshift. It came just as natural to me utor ore [to use my mouth] as for physical women to use what Nature has provided them." Ibid., 90–1.
[110] Ibid., 59.

when describing sexual acts or organs. The latter technique, present throughout the memoir, is probably modeled after writing in the field of sexology, and stands out in strong contrast to Werther-June's personal tone. As some writers have suggested, it may be an effort to maintain some level of respectability or decency.[111] I also believe that the Latin may be serving as a distancing technique, both because it is often used to depict traumatic episodes of assault, and because Werther-June expresses having difficulty grappling with body parts and sexual acts (mentally and physically) from time to time. In other words, Latin may be allowing h/im to say things that would otherwise be too painful or uncomfortable to put into (English) words.

Approaching the text as a material object, the switch from English to Latin affects a visual disruption, evoking a kind of texturedness in which body parts are made up of different stuff than the surrounding text.[112] The result is a kind of heightened tactility, amplified by textural descriptions such as "soft satin-smooth," "pleasing to touch," "pillowing the head," and "extremely smooth surface." Here, body parts rub up against Werther-June's primary authorial voice, much in the same way that the phallus literally rubs against Werther-June's throat while giving oral sex. Sometimes these encounters are frictional to the point of injury, as in the following passage, which leaves Werther-June with permanent throat damage:

> All other methods [of oral sex] were taught me [*sic*], for example, passive fellatio, which occurred at least as often as active because my companion preferred it, while I preferred the active. In the passive, I was completely so, and would often lie flat on my back. He would conduct himself the same as in normal coitus, often cum minibus conjunctis post caput meum, quoad habuit emissionem [with hands joined behind my head until he ejaculated]. During this action on the part of the majority, I suffered the greatest physical discomfort and saepe strangulatus sum

[111] Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex With an Androgyne," 99; Heaney, *The New Woman*, 176.

[112] Renu Bora distinguishes between "texture," or "the surface resonance or quality of an object or material," and "texxture," which he defines as "an intimately violent, pragmatic, medium, inner level (at first more phenomenological than conceptual/metaphysical) of the stuffness of material structure." For what I hope is the sake of simplicity I am using *texture* here to mean both the surface and the substantial parts of the text, since they are directly related to one another, though I am keeping Bora's definitions in mind throughout. Renu Bora, "Outing Texture," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 98–99. Thanks to Erin Fitzpatrick for directing me to this source.

> [often I was choked]. Dorsum oris [The back of my mouth] has been often rendered sore, and the uvula was elongated, necessitating truncation because the elongation caused a chronic cough. I know of another invert who had to undergo the same operation. But I counted it happiness to suffer thus and endure pain when inflicted by a strong, brave, and young blood.

I believe that the use of Latin when depicting damage and/or assault works toward pushing the reader into the place of extreme abjection that Werther-June is describing. Not only is the subject matter painful or hard to take in, but the writing itself is difficult to navigate, leaving the reader with the sense that something is "off," as in, for example, the following description of an assault:

> A few minutes after we arrived in the young man's quarters in a furnished-room house, the other five burst in. They proved to be as heartless a gang as I had ever met, although belonging to the prosperous class of society. Micturiverunt super meis vestibus atque me coegerunt facere rem mihi horribilissimam (balneum ani cum lingua, non aliter quam meretrices faciunt). Me coegerunt recipere tres eodem tempore, fellatio, paedicatio, atque manustupratio. Ultimum mihi imperatum cum adolescens non potuit facere inter femora eodem tempore. [They pissed on my clothes and forced me to do a deed most horrifying to me (a bath of the anus with my tongue, not different from what whores do). They forced me to receive three at the same time, oral, anal, and masturbation. The final command to me the youth could not do between my legs at the same time (*sic*).] Later one who had difficulty in achieving the desired results me coegit ad fellationem unam semihoram [forced me to perform fellatio for half an hour] continuously, repeatedly punching me in the head and face because I did not do better by him. Again for a half hour continuously me coegerunt ut supinum cubem atque usi erunt ore meo sicuti cunno, sic me strangulantes horribiliter. Cum priapus concurreret meas dentes, they would punch me in the face, atque mandabant ut desisterem eos mordere [they forced me to lie down supine and they used my mouth like a cunt, thus horribly choking me. When the erect penis met my teeth, they would punch me in the face and they would order me to stop biting them]. This was one of my three very worst experiences of sexual abuse. The physical suffering and discomfort were extreme, but I was so fascinated by the savagery and the beauty of my tormentors that I experienced a species of mental satisfaction, being willing to suffer death if only I could contribute to their pleasure.[113]

I argue that in these passages Werther June uses text, in its visual and auditory elements, to "[represent] sexual practices and sexed bodies as various types of sonic incoherence."[114] During

[113] *Autobiography,* 134–5.
[114] Howard, *Ugly Differences*, 13.

these "ugly" scenes of sexual assault, the transitions in and out of Latin are both visually and (if read aloud) audibly jarring. Furthermore, they affect a tone that is almost nonsensical; the use of clinical language to describe acts of extreme sexual violence manifests for the reader as cognitive dissonance, or metaphorical "noise."

Douglas Khan defines noises as things that "exist where they shouldn't or don't make sense where they should."[115] The "noisiness" of the text sonically illustrates the narrative aspects of the text that are already painful or confusing: the ambivalence about body parts and sex, the assaults, and especially Werther-June's repeated admissions that, on some level, s/he enjoyed the assaults. The latter is especially challenging to sit with; on top of the extreme masochism, s/he also expresses that the experience of being physically dominated affirms h/is feeling of femaleness.[116] Like the qualities of babyishness, weakness, and stupidity articulated in the fairie songs, this sentiment both speaks to period understandings of womanhood, but also perhaps speaks to Werther-June's general feelings of distress about the circumstances of h/is existence and treatment by society. The "obstruction of language" provided by the transitions to Latin "produces markedly cacophonous aesthetics of sexuality" that palpably articulate the complexity and pain with which Werther-June navigated the world sexually.[117]

In *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser explores narrative as a technique for making legible for clinicians the "split" of transsexual life. ("I was a woman, I write as a man. How to join this

[115] Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the* Arts (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), 21; cited in David Novak, "Noise," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 126. On the rhetorical construction of "noise," especially as antithetical to "music," see Novak, "Noise"; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), chapter 3.

[116] "Associates have said they only hoped they would ultimately secure a wife who would adore them as I. I sometimes found pleasure in my companion being vexed with me and striking me. I would playfully slap him until he was provoked to give me a blow meant seriously. With heartless associates who were bent merely on the pleasure spasmi [orgasm] and would choke and otherwise maltreat me into submission to paedicatio [anal sex], I often enjoyed being thus forced. Occasionally I even insisted that friendly ones rapere [kidnap me] for the pleasure of struggling to get away and feeling their conquering strength" (*Autobiography*, 98–99).

[117] Howard, *Ugly Differences*, 14.

split? How to create a coherent subject?")[118] While Ralph Werther-Jennie June was not transsexual, s/he does repeatedly refer to a feeling of two-ness that resonates with the "split" that Prosser describes. And, clinicians make up a significant part of Werther-June's intended audience. The difference is Werther-June is not writing with the goal of qualifying for medical care, but rather garnering empathy and proving that h/is condition is innate, rather than a result of moral failure. Furthermore, the male and female spirits inside Werther-June do not organize themselves into a linear narrative, as in the written memoirs Prosser examines.[119] Rather, the male university student and the French doll-baby coinhabit a single body—often to the distress of both parties.

For one of Prosser's interlocutors, the experience of transsexuality was so traumatic that he found it impossible to put into words, and avoided speaking about it at all costs. Prosser asks how we might "re-member the body one would forget—indeed, the agnosic body one is not?"[120] The word *agnosic* is evocative. Werther-June shares a number of experiences that evoke an agnosic body: varying descriptions of a body that is in some significant part female (h/is estimations range from thirty-three to eighty percent), extreme aversion to being touched in certain ways, periods in which s/he suffered "paroxysms of melancholia,"[121] and lifelong

[118] Prosser, *Second Skins,* 102. Building on Sandy Stone's formative essay, "The Empire Strikes Back," Prosser argues that "transsexuality is a matter of constructing a transsexual narrative before being constructed through technology. The transsexual's capacity to narrativize the embodiment of his/h condition, to tell a coherent story of transsexual experience, is required by the doctors before their authorization of the subject's transition" (9).

[119] This is not to say that transsexuals necessarily understand themselves as having moved linearly "from" one gender or sex "to" another (though some do). Prosser is specifically discussing the way his interlocutors represent themselves in their autobiographies (written or oral).

[120] Prosser, *Second Skins*, 109.

[121] "During this winter of '91-'92, paroxysms of melancholia occasionally came upon me at night. When I felt their approach, I could not stand it to remain in my room, where I must be noiseless, but went out to a deserted spot in a large park near which I lived, where I would shriek repeatedly. All my muscles seemed to be rigid, and my fists were clinched. I would dig my finger-nails into my palms, and wave my arms wildly. Within a few minutes, my strength would be completely gone. I looked upon these paroxysms as fits of insanity, and feared I would become permanently and violently insane. I now attribute these attacks largely to unsatisfied, involuntary yearnings for the mate which Nature had designed me to have." *Autobiography*, 54.

"chronic hyperaesthesia."[122] Putting it plainly, s/he says, "[a]n androgyne is usually a bundle of nerves."[123] I believe that the difficulty in translating such an agnosic body into narrative is palpable in *Autobiography of an Androgyne* and *The Female Impersonators*, and that the cacophony of the text—as well as h/is fairie songs—communicate something about what it means to be (in) that body which exceeds verbal description.

Conclusion: Jennie June's Strangeness

The contents of Ralph Werther-Jennie June's archive "range from amusing to simply confusing to macabre—from benign to downright fatal."[124] H/is autobiographical writing is rife with self-destructive desires, masochism, misogyny, near-death experiences, lengthy descriptions of mental illness and venereal disease, and expressions of sexuality so extreme they border on absurdity.[125] *Autobiography of an Androgyne* draws to a close at the author's forty-fifth year, having long abandoned h/is career as a female impersonator, only rarely sexually active, and suffering from health problems most likely stemming from castration: "I am rather feeble, almost a semi-invalid, averaging two days a week when I am in a state of mental and physical

[122] "For each minute of bodily contact with a counterpart that I have enjoyed, I have had to pay one hour of resultant serious suffering, physical or mental. My mind and body have, however, always been hypersensitive to all stimuli and impressions. A few swallows of tea or coffee after one p.m. would make me lie awake half the night. A slightly tainted article of food which would have no effect on most people would prostrate me mentally and physically for hours afterward. A business worry would cause me to lie awake for hours. When spending the night in bed with one to whom I was attracted, I generally lay awake the whole night, and for this reason, I usually sought a separate place to sleep in." *Autobiography*, 94. Werther-June's possible neurodivergence (an idea that is also historically and culturally contingent, as well as racialized and gendered) falls beyond the scope of this project. On the retrospective diagnosis of historical figures, see Osamu Muramoto, "Retrospective Diagnosis of a Famous Historical Figure: Ontological, Epistemic, and Ethical Considerations," *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 9 (2014), 1–15; Sari Althuser and Cristobal Silva, "Early American Disability Studies," *Early American Literature* 52, no. 1 (2017), 1–27; and Axel Karenberg, "Retrospective Diagnosis: Use and Abuse in Medical Historiography," *Prague Medical Report* 110, no. 2 (2009): 140–5. Thanks to Hyeonjin Park for directing me to these sources.

[123] *Female-Impersonators*, 17.

[124] Lewis, "'I Am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn't Care,'" 21.

[125] E.g., "I had to escape to the slums to find opportunity for fellatio in order to save myself from fellatio cum cani magno [with a large dog]. The involuntary desire for fellatio was irresistible and I would have sacrificed everything for it." *Autobiography*, 174.

collapse."[126] Werther-June intimates that s/he knows how the memoirs come across, suggesting: "Perhaps these fancies about names are proof of insanity. A medical reviewer of my *Autobiography of an Androgyne,* who devoted only five minutes to over 70,000 words, declared me 'clearly insane.'"[127]

Lewis writes that the archive of early transgender activism is "extremely noisy," a characterization that I would like to parse out a bit here.[128] Noise, David Novak points out, is not so much a sound as it is a "metadiscourse of sound and its social interpretation."[129] *Noise* designates "things that exist where they shouldn't or … don't make sense when they should," that which "resists interpretation," that which is sequestered off from public space, "for subjectivities of difference that break from normative social contexts."[130] When Lewis calls the archive of early transgender activism *noisy,* he is referring to content that we cannot make sense of, things that are unsightly or indecent, things have been excised from public narrative. Under the touch of the rationalizing historian, such unsavory details are generally either ignored, narrativized, or explained away as mental illness in order to be folded into a coherent "history," undermining the epistemological authority of Douglas herself. But the "unincorporated materials," those noisy details, continue to linger and constitute what Lewis understands to be a ghostly presence. Citing Avery Gordon's theory of haunting, he proposes that we might understand this noise as "diagnostic of a 'state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known'"; in other words, "symptomatic of the destructive forces in which … infelicitous subjects were caught."[131]

---

[126] *Autobiography,* 244.
[127] *Female-Impersonators,* 94.
[128] Lewis, "'I Am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn't Care,'" 21.
[129] Novak, "Noise," 126.
[130] Ibid., 126, 130.
[131] Lewis, "'I Am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn't Care,'" 24.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Werther-June's story is full of noise that we can hear and feel: musical, theatrical, and textual. But it is also full of the kind of noise that Lewis describes—hard to grapple with and, ultimately, impossible to really "know." Throughout this chapter I have danced awkwardly with Werther-June's identification as an extreme androgyne, in relation to my own identification as a transsexual. In the end I was not able to think about them entirely separately from one another, because of how intensely elements of h/is narrative resonated with me (even some of those elements that might appear "noisy" to the sexually fully-fledged reader). There were also, however, elements that didn't quite resonate, that felt irreconcilably "off" (or, if you'll forgive it, "out of tune"). I was moved by Lewis's final call to the queer historian to "cultivate openness to irreducible alterity," and to create space for "heightened receptivity to queer's strangeness."[132] After all, Jennie June was a strange person; in honor of that, I tried to let those dissonant parts remain dissonant, but listen to them all the same.

In my (long, paranoid, and, I believe, somewhat unsuccessful) effort to avoid rationalizing away Werther-June's experiences in terms of things that are familiar to me, I was at least emboldened by the knowledge that the objects under study were all self-conscious performances. The fairie songs, the impromptu female impersonation routines, and the memoirs themselves were all written for, and delivered to, an audience. At least on some level, then, Werther-June was consenting to be interpreted. I have tried to focus on the questions: How is Werther-June exercising agency in these moments of interpretation? And what does s/he want me to know? I believe h/is centering of performance and interpretation in these memoirs points to something crucial about the androgyne experience; I am, however, not quite sure what that is. I do know that Werther-June mentions the natural affinity that androgynes have for acting, bookending h/is account of an impersonation routine in a "repulsive-looking 'Saloon'" with the

[132] Ibid., 21.

following remark: “Whoever has visited such a performance must acknowledge that this type of human being are born actors, or actresses, whichever term may be preferred. They themselves prefer the latter.”[133]

[133] *Autobiography*, 156.

Conclusion: "Let Me Entertain You"

Let me welcome you, ladies and gentlemen
I would like to say hello
Are you ready for some entertainment?
Are you ready for a show?[1]

Todd Haynes' 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine* tells the story of a fictional glam rock musician based heavily on David Bowie, Brian Slade (played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers), through the eyes of a queer fan, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale). The bisexual, androgynous Slade has an affair with the Iggy Pop- and Lou Reed-coded Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), before publicly faking his own death and disappearing from the public eye. One of the major themes in the film is the tension between celebrity persona, musical performance, and private life; while Slade and Wild perform their relationship publicly on stage, Slade is evasive about his sexual identity to the press ("I should think that if people were to get the wrong impression of me, the one to which you so eloquently referred, it wouldn't be the wrong impression in the slightest…I mean, everybody knows most people are bisexual"), all of which is, of course, excusable under the pretense of acting. Equally central is the queer mode of reception. *Velvet Goldmine* follows Stuart in the 1980s, as he tries to reconstruct Slade's life story and solve the mystery of his death; the narrative is constructed through a collage of memories—Stuart's own, as well as Slade's past lovers, friends, and colleagues—musical performances, and fantasy sequences.

In one such scene, Slade appears as a ringleader on a pedestal amidst a room of secondary characters and extras in ornate costumes that hearken to the eighteenth-century French court, the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement, disco, and the character Columbia from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Surrounded by flashing cameras and beckoning journalists, they speak of the importance of beauty and opulence above all else. In front of this crowd, Slade is

[1] Freddie Mercury, "Let Me Entertain You," *Jazz* (EMI/Elektra 1978).

confronted with a barrage of questions about his views on life and art, and he answers in Wildean character ("Brian! Is it your belief that all dandies are homosexual?" "Ha! Nothing makes one so vain as being told one is a sinner") to waves of approving laughter. Then, from the back of the room, Curt Wild, enters, approaching with a tray of drinks. "And they tell you it's not natural," Slade proclaims while Wild joins him on the pedestal. As the crowd's disbelieving laughter fades into silence, Slade and Wild kiss. Which brings us back to imposture.

In this dissertation I have looked at a number of situations where questions of identity, impersonation, and imposture converge in ways that have something to do with gender, sexuality, and race. The first chapter traced the development of *impersonation* as a staged genre that relied on stock character types marked by race, class, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference. Noting the similarities between the ways that white female and male impersonators were talked about, and the ways that white gender-passing people were talked about in journalistic discourse, I argued that the mass entertainment fixation on illusion and transformation contributed to the idea that people who cross-dress or pass are pretending to be something that they are not. This interpretive gaze persists in U.S.-American entertainment, and also in the way transsexual and transgender people today are conceptualized in mainstream discourses. Even more generally, I believe that as the figure of the white invert developed, s/he was conceived of in terms of imposture, contributing to hegemonic narratives that queer folk are performers or entertainers (complicated by the fact that we often are).

Oscar Wilde's highly-publicized conviction for gross indecency certainly had a lot to do with this narrative. The way Wilde was collectively imagined and remembered played as significant a role in this process as did Wilde himself, especially in the era before video recording. In my second chapter I explored ways in which this imagining might have taken place

through performing songs that caricatured Wilde and the aesthetes, demonstrating the role of music and gesture in transmitting histories that are not inscribed elsewhere. I also found the heightened, theatrical mode that these songs encouraged was resonant with camp performance, which encompasses a set of techniques often associated with Oscar Wilde. This connection led back to impersonation, and the ways in which Wilde's impersonation of his own public figure fit in easily with an entertainment culture that already expected him to be impersonating *something.*

Ralph Werther-Jennie June also practiced female impersonation, though h/is version of female impersonation differed from stage impersonation. Werther-June's experience of sex was one marked by degrees of discrepancy. S/he felt h/imself to be physically part-male and part-female, though possessing the mind of a girl. Despite this conviction, s/he was forced to assume a male role growing up; at the same time, s/he was ridiculed and bullied constantly for failure to achieve normative boyhood and manhood. Although Werther-June's experience resembles modern-day narratives of transgender in many ways, in other ways, it doesn't. H/is life predated the possibility of medical transition; therefore, s/he did not understand h/is subjective experience as one that could be expressed through changing h/is sex (whether or not s/he may have wanted to if presented with the option—which we have no way of knowing). H/is condition was that of being, as s/he wrote, a "bisexual"—two sexes in one person. One way that s/he did express this experience, however, was through female impersonation. The way in which s/he writes about impersonation—making use of the languages of curiosity, spectacle, and illusion—demonstrates that h/is self-narrative of sex was as steeped in h/is surrounding culture as our self-narratives are steeped in our culture. H/is understanding of h/is own sexual difference is neither more old-fashioned, nor more enlightened, than ours; it is simply different.

Werther-June's materials also speak to the complicated relationship between professional staged impersonation, "lay" impersonation (by which I clumsily mean a set of songs consciously performed for an audience in a situation where there is no stage and money is not changing hands), and feminine embodiment and expressive practice that takes places outside the context of a "set." As Jules Gill-Peterson points out, a 1960s study of female impersonators entitled *Mother Camp* reveals that professional drag queens whose performances ended when they left the stage were "revered, performing in defiance of a collectively shared stigma on stage"; meanwhile, street queens who were "never off stage" were treated harshly in local scenes, because they "reinforced the stigma of effeminacy without the safety of being onstage."[2] The gendered and class dynamics at play here are different than the ones in Werther-June's social context. However, they resonate with Werther-June's division of h/is fairie "career" into a "high-class fairie" period (weekly impersonation sprees, attending university and working for the rest of the week) and a "low-class fairie" period (a time of relative poverty after expulsion from university, during which s/he was free to pass as female six days a week—on Sundays, s/he abstained).

S/he further complicates the on- versus off-stage distinction by presenting a modified narrative of one of h/is impersonation set for an article in *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology.* In this version, s/he performs in full drag, in a "low-class cabaret" for an audience who showers h/im with coins at the end of h/is set. While this account aligns h/im more closely with professional stage impersonators, it also fabricates the detail that s/he was paid for the performance, to which Werther-June was always adamantly opposed, presumably out of a reluctance to be associated with sex work. Furthermore, this narrative implies that professional

[2] Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Transmisogyny* (London: Verso, 2024), 67–8. I only became aware of this source one day before submitting this dissertation to my committee, and am likely missing other useful insights that I look forward to incorporating in the future once I have the chance to read more carefully.

impersonators are also fairies off the stage. These dynamics will be worth parsing out further in an expanded version of this project.

The performative tropes and identity discourses I have explored in this project have persisted in American and British popular musical entertainment and are clearly visible in rock music of the 1970s through its staging of race and gender, its spectacular nature, and the range of interpretive possibilities it affords. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, rock and roll is constructed through layers and layers of ambiguity, impersonation, and imposture: including incorporation of blues techniques, a genre that was developed as a form of expression and critique in the face of violent censorship from an oppressive culture; the white cultural theft of that music; the embodied aesthetics of race that Matthew Morrison asserts is central to the development of American popular music; and the legacies of female and male impersonation (in American variety/vaudeville, and English music hall).[3] It is this many-layered nature that has made rock music a convenient alibi for those performers and audiences who are not sexually normative.[4]

[3] White theft of Black music and performative practice in rock music took place and expressed itself in myriad ways. For some sources on this topic, see: Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Judith Peraino, "Mick Jagger as Mother," *Social Text* 33, no. 3 (September 2015): 75–113; Jack Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016); Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); and Patrick Burke, *Tear Down the Walls: White Radicalism and Black Power in 1960s Rock* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2021). This process of appropriation is made possible by the structures Matthew Morrison identifies in "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse." For a recent discussion of Mick Jagger's appropriation of Black performance practice as a means of articulating a queer stage persona, see Stephanie Doktor, "On the Failure of White Feminism: When PJ Harvey and Björk Covered the Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2024), 144–152.

[4] Little Richard, for instance, sang, "Well I saw Uncle John with bald-headed Sally / He saw Aunt Mary coming and he jumped back in the alley"; Freddie Mercury called his band Queen ("It's just regal, darling") and sang "Give me every inch of your love"; presumably in response to Robert Plant ("I'm gonna give you every inch of my love") who also sang, "Oh, Gabriel, let me blow your horn" (it's an old gospel song—or, a version of one) and "Trouble-free transmission, helps your oils flow / Mama, let me pump your gas, Mama, let me do it all / Fully automatic, comes in every size / Makes me wonder what I did before we synchronized"—claiming that *he* was just copying Robert Johnson, who, of course, sang about cars all the time.

Velvet Goldmine explores this idea by tracing, through montage, a direct lineage from Oscar Wilde to glam rock, by way of English music hall and Little Richard. The lineage it depicts, however, is fraught. The film opens with the arrival of the infant Wilde, who, we are to understand, came to earth from outer space; we are then shown a primary school Wilde standing up in class and declaring, while his classmates want to be a farmer or a tram driver, "I want to be a pop idol." Fast forward one-hundred years. Through the passing of a green gem (a reference to the green carnations Wilde and his social circle are said to have worn to identify themselves as homosexuals) Wilde's legacy is passed on to a second child, one hundred years later, identified as one Jack Fairy. Fairy, while not a major role in the film, is something of a spectral presence throughout, never speaking, but always looming with his hat and cigarette, as if watching over the scene, referred to once as the one who "started it all." Haynes has claimed that Fairy

> is meant to be the Little Richard of glam rock … He represents a kind of instinctive need to camp it up, something that came to him as a young child. … Little Richard, against all the odds of the period he grew up in—the conservatism and segregation around him—erupted spontaneously as a shrill spectacle that you could not ignore. … Jack Fairy remains kind of the lost originator of the whole glam thing. … He doesn't get the same kind of attention as Brian, but he becomes a source of inspiration. He's the "real" thing, of which, of course, isn't real.[5]

This was a fascinating statement for Haynes to make. To me, Fairy does not come across as a Little Richard cognate at all, not least because Little Richard was not a wraith-like, androgynous white English man; he was a Black American man who, prior to being one of the architects of rock and roll, performed as a female impersonator under the stage name Princess Lavonne. But also, (and this is perhaps easy for me to say as a twenty-first century viewer), Little Richard has never been a silent, brooding presence in rock music, if in comportment alone. The stage (and offstage public) persona Little Richard innovated that became so central to rock music was loud,

[5] Oren Moverman, "Superstardust: Talking Glam with Todd Haynes," in *Velvet Goldmine: A Sceenplay by Todd Haynes* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), xvi–xvii.

flamboyant, and theatrical, enough so that his over-the-top campiness received a pass in 1950s America.

Later on in the film, Little Richard does make an appearance—but only as the object of impersonation. As Slade's former manager, Cecil, recounts the story of Slade's upbringing, we flash back to Slade as a child in a music hall, watching a female impersonator sing in a dame role.[6] Afterwards, Slade creeps backstage and steals a glimpse though the cracked door of a dressing room and witnesses said female impersonator performing fellatio on one of the other male actors, a sight that Cecil notes "made a dramatic impression" on young Slade. In the next shot, Slade is dressed in a 70s-era disco suit, a pompadour wig and drawn-on pencil mustache doing a ten year old's impersonation of Little Richard singing "Tutti Frutti"—swapping out the recorded lyrics for the original, censored ones, "tutti frutti, good booty"—before the unimpressed stares of his parents.[7] And thus, we understand Slade's origin story.

As I have suggested, and as this montage demonstrates, *Velvet Goldmine* is not really so much about the particulars of glam rock, as much as it is about a history of performative conventions that have pervaded queer strains of popular musical entertainment since the nineteenth century, a lineage in which Little Richard played a formative role. And this is why Jack Fairy does not work as "the Little Richard of glam rock"—because Little Richard is "the Little Richard of glam rock." While Little Richard is cited several times in the film, he only ever appears in the guise of being impersonated by a white person (which white rock artists did constantly in the 1970s). Through portraying this genealogy of glam rock, *Velvet Goldmine*

[6] Theatrical crossdressing has a long history in English music hall that overlaps with American impersonation. The "dame" is a traditional role in English pantomime, in which a male actor plays an older or ugly woman, usually in a heightened, camp style of delivery. On English music hall see J. S. Bratton, *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

[7] According to drummer Charles Connor, "Tutti frutti, good booty / if it's tight, it's alright / if it's greasy it makes it so easy…" "'Tutti Frutti' Original Lyrics," Drumsmack T.V., November 19, 2014, accessed March 17, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aP2fzGGvDX4. There are a couple of other rumored versions floating around. I have also heard, for instance, "If it don't fit, don't force it."

establishes a narrative of queerness in rock music being about both white people and imposture, while erasing the physical presence of the Black artists upon whose work this genre is founded.

This dissertation has examined the relationship between constructions of race, gender, and sexuality; performative and receptive modes such as impersonation and camp; and queer expression and representation in U.S.-American culture of the nineteenth century. I believe that this work offers insights into the ways in which these dynamics persist in modern-day entertainment, and, as demonstrated in chapter 1, modern-day electoral politics. Over the course of this project I have developed techniques for studying musical repertoires and performance contexts whose impacts on subsequent genres of anglophone popular music are clearly evident, but are underrepresented within musicological scholarship, because their nature is at odds with many of the older the ontological assumptions underpinning the field. For most of the songs I discuss, there is no authoritative "text" in the form of either a score, recording, or transcription. There typically exists no record of how a song was performed, only clues that allow us to speculate on how it might have been realized. Many of these songs are not texts, but *pretexts*. In other words, they are useful because they afford performers an opportunity to enact something they might not be able to represent otherwise—sometimes a false character, sometimes their own character, and sometimes, their own character under the pretense of being a false one.

As Freddie Mercury, clad in a Mineshaft t-shirt and leather, sang in 1979 to stadiums of people who did not know that he was gay, "We're only here to entertain you!"

Appendix: Oscar Wilde Songs

Songs about Oscar Wilde

McGinnis, Japonica Reginald and E. E. Rexford. Wilde, Oscar Wilde. Cincinnati: John Church and Co., 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

The Oscar Songster. [ca. 1895.] Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Rosenfeld, M. H. "Oscar, Dear!" Cincinnati: F. W. Helmick, Music Dealer and Publisher, 1882. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Songs about Aestheticism

Bendix, Theo. And Geo. H. Jessop, "The Aesthetic Maiden." Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Carter, Billy. "The Aesthetic Dude." New York: Willis Woodward and Co., 1883. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Jonghmans, E. and Harry Adams. "The Flippety Flop Young Man." London: Francis Bros. & Day, 1882. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Mullaly, W. S. and Frank Dumont. "Too Utterly Utter: or, The Aesthetic Girl." Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1881. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Straight, Ned and Geo. Cooper. "Utterly Too Utter." New York: Frederick Blume, 1881. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Dances

Baker, Charlie. "Oscar Mazurka. Cincinnati: F. W. Helmick, Music Dealer and Publisher, 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Blake, Chas D. "Lily Redowa (To Oscar Wilde). Boston: White, Smith, and Company, 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Christie, Edwin. "The Lily and Sunflower Polka." Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Converse, E. “The Sunflower Waltz.” Pittsburgh: Richard Prosser, 1882. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Coote, Charles Jr. “Oscar’s Schottische.” Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 18[??]. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Coote, Charles Jr. “Sunflower Polka.” Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 18[??]. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Gianneti, Maurizio G. “Too All But; Waltz.” Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1882. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Henry, Amy. “Forget-Me-Not Waltzes.” Boston: W. A. Evans and Bro., Publishers, 18[??]. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Heyer, O. “Jolly Utter Galop.” Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1882. IN Harmony: Sheet Music from Indiana. Indiana University.

Loumey, Aug. “The Lily and Sunflower: Aesthetic Polka.” Philadelphia: Lee and Walker, 1882. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Snow, F. H. “Oscar Wilde Galop.” Philadelphia: Philip Armstrong and Co., 18[??]. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Strelezki, Anton. “Aesthetic Waltz (To Wild Oscar). New Orleans: A. E. Blackmar & Co., 1882. IN Harmony: Sheet Music from Indiana. Indiana University.

Uschman, Carl. “Dream of the Lily Waltz.” Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 18[??]. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Other

Christie, Edwin and Oscar Wilde. “Loved For Evermore.” Chicago: National Music Co., 1883. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Kellie, Lawrence and Oscar Wilde. “Oh! Beautiful Star.” London: Robert Cocks & Co., 1892. Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Schulyer, Georgina. “The Secret of the Sunflower.” New York: G. Schirmer, 1882. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Wilde, Oscar. “Oscar Wilde’s Serenade.” New York: Brentan Bros., 1882. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES

Novels and Memoirs

Every, Edward Van. *Sins of New York as "Exposed" by the Police Gazette.* New York: F. A. Stokes Co., 1930.

Gardner, Chas. W. *The Doctor and the Devil: Midnight Adventures of Dr. Parkhurst.* New York Gardner & Co., 1894.

Grace, Laura Jane. *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout*. New York: Hachette Books, 2016.

Lind, Earl. *The Female-Impersonators: A sequel to the Autobiography of an androgyne and an account of some of the author's experiences during his six years' career as instinctive female-impersonator in New York's underworld.* New York: The Medico-Legal Journal, 1922.

Lind, Earl (Werther, Ralph). *Autobiography of an Androgyne.* New York: Medico-legal journal, 1918.

Elocution Manuals

Fenno, Frank H. *The Science and Art of Elocution; or, How to Read and Speak.* Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Company, 1878.

Fenno, Frank H. *The Speaker's Favorite; or Best Things for Entertainments for Home, Church and School.* Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Company, 1893.

Fertich, W. H. *An Instructive Elocution: Designed Especially for Teachers and Private Learners*. Muncie, Ind., The Author, 1876. https://www.loc.gov/item/11016244/.

Potter, Helen. *Helen Potter's Impersonations.* New York: E. S. Werner, 1891.

Swett, John. *School Elocution: A Manual of Vocal Training in High Schools, Normal Schools, and Academies.* New York: American Book Company, 1884.

Medical Texts

Ellis, Havelock and John Addington Symonds. *Sexual Inversion.* London: Wilson and MacMillan, 1897.

Krafft-Ebing, R. von, and Charles Gilbert Chaddock. *Psychopathia Sexualis, 7th Edition*. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 1908.

Werther, Ralph [Jennie June]. "The Female-Impersonator." *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology* 15, no. 6 (June 1919): 241–245.

Westphal, Carl. *Die conträre Sexualempfindung, Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes*. *Archiv f. Psychiatrie* 2 (1870): 73–108.

Dictionaries

Webster, Noah. *A Dictionary of the English Language.* Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam & Co., 1872.

Webster, Noah. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: A Dictionary of the English Language.* Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam & Co., 1898.

Webster, Noah. *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language.* Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam & Co., 1930.

Sheet Music, Scores, and Songsters

The Annie Hindle Songster. New York: Frederic A. Brady, Publisher, 1869. Music Division. The Library of Congress.

The Canadian Rose Bud Song Book: Containing All the Popular Songs of the Day. Toronto: A. S. Irving, [1869].

Gilbert, W. S. and Arthur Sullivan. *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride. Vocal score.* The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, 2010.

Lingard, William H. *William H. Lingard's "On the Beach at Long Branch" Song Book.* Dick & Fitzgerald Publishers, [1868].

Lingard, William H. "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines." Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1868. Baylor University Digital Collections.

Lonsdale, T. S. and W. G. Eaton. "Oh, The Fairies." Herman Darewski Music Pub. Co., 1879.

Mack, E. "Mozart's Celebrated Oxen Waltz." Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1868. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Nugent, Maude. “Sweet Rosie O'Grady.” New York: Jos. W. Stern & Co., 1896. New York Public Library Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-16f1-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

The Oscar Songster. [ca. 1895.] Oscar Wilde & le Fin de Siècle: Wildeiana. UCLA Clark Reference Library.

Rosenfeld, M. H. “Oscar, Dear!” Cincinnati: F. W. Helmick, Music Dealer and Publisher, 1882. Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection. Johns Hopkins University.

Straight, Ned and Geo. Cooper. “Utterly Too Utter.” New York: Frederick Blume, 1881. Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885. Library of Congress.

Woodworth, S. “The Old Oaken Bucket: A Favorite Scotch Song.” New York: Richard A. Saalfield, [1834]. *Historic Sheet Music Collection*. 1149. https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sheetmusic/1149

Secondary Sources

Ace, [James R.] “A Character Singer In Male Attire: Annie Hindle in America, 1886–1868.” MA thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2017.

Adams, Rachel. *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Agawu, Kofi V. *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Ahmed, Sarah. *The Promise of Happiness.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Allanbrook, Wye Jamison. *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart:* Le Nozze di Figaro *and* Don Giovanni. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Althuser, Sari and Cristobal Silva. “Early American Disability Studies.” *Early American Literature* 52, no. 1 (2017): 1–27.

“An Introduction to the Aesthetic Movement.” The Victoria and Albert Museum. Accessed January 20, 2023. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-the-aesthetic-movement.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities.* London: Verso, 1983.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Babuscio, Jack. "Camp and the Gay Sensibility." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 117–135. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. Originally in Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film*, London: British Film Institute, 1977.

Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde.* London: Serpent's Tail, 1988.

Bean, Annemarie. "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy." In *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, 245–256. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Bean, Annemarie, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Bentley, G. E., Jr. "The Freaks of Learning." *Colby Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (June 1982): 87–104.

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter 1987): 197–222.

Billard, Thomas J. "'Passing' and the Politics of Deception: Transgender Bodies, Cisgender Aesthetics, and the Policing of Inconspicuous Marginal Identities." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication*, edited by T. Docan-Morgan, 463–477. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Blanchard, Mary Warner. *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Bloodstein, Oliver and Nan Bernstein Ratner. *A Handbook on Stuttering.* Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2008.

Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Bora, Renu. "Outing Texture." In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 94–127. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Bratton., J. S. *Music Hall: Performance and Style.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986.

Brodkin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Brower, Candace. "A Cognitive Theory of Musical Meaning." *Journal of Music Theory* 44, no. 2 (2000): 323–379.

Broyles, Michael. "America's First Waltz-King." In *Researching Secular Music and Dance in the Early United States: Extending the Legacy of Kate Van Winkle Keller*, edited by Laura Lohman. London: Routledge, 2021, 110–27.

Burga, Solcyre. "Tennessee Passed the Nation's First Law Limiting Drag Shows. Here's the Status of Anti-Drag Bills Across the U.S." *Time,* March 5, 2023. Accessed April 2, 2023. https://time.com/6260421/tennessee-limiting-drag-shows-status-of-anti-drag-bills-u-s/.

Burke, Patrick. *Tear Down the Walls: White Radicalism and Black Power in 1960s Rock.* Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2021.

Calder, Jeremy. "From 'Gay Lisp' to 'Fierce Queen': The Sociophonetics of Sexuality's Most Iconic Variable." *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality,* 2020.

Cavicci, Daniel. *Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum.* Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Chauncey, George Jr. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. Reprint. New York: BasicBooks, 2019.

Chu, Andrea Long. "Pornographic Spectatorship, or, Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?" Paper presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, March 29–April 1, 2018. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a9b1c0812b13f48e686fdc4/t/5a9c17e1f9619a449856c4fe/1520179170246/Chu-Did+Sissy+Porn+Make+Me+Trans%3F+%28QD2%29.pdf.

Cleves, Rachel. "'What, Another Female Husband?': The Prehistory of Same-Sex Marriage in America." *The Journal of American History* 101 (March 2015): 1055-1081.

Cockrell, Dale. *Everybody's Doin' It: Sex, Music, and Dance in New York, 1840–1917*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

Cohen, Ed. "Posing the Question: Wilde, Wit, and the Ways of Man." In *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond, 35–47. London: Routledge, 1996.

Connor, Steven. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Cook, James W. *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Cooper, John. Oscar Wilde in America, 2022. Accessed August 1, 2022. https://www.oscarwildeinamerica.org/

Cox, Arnie. "Embodying Music: Principles of the Mimetic Hypothesis." *Music Theory Online* 1, no. 2 (2011). https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.2/mto.11.17.2.cox.html.

Cox, Arnie. *Music and Embodied Cognition,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.

Crawley, Ashon T. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299.

Cusick, Suzanne. "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight." In *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition,* edited by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 67–84. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Dailey, Victoria. "The Wilde Woman and the Sunflower Apostle: Oscar Wilde in the United States." Los Angeles Review of Books, February 8, 2020. Accessed November 7, 2020. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-wilde-woman-and-the-sunflower-apostle-oscar-wilde-in-the-united-states/.

Doezema, Jo. "Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women." *Gender Issues* 18 (Winter 1999): 23–50.

Doktor, Stephanie. "On the Failure of White Feminism: When PJ Harvey and Björk Covered the Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction.'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 103–161.

Donovan, Brian. *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887–1917.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Duberman, Martin, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncy, Jr., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1989.

Duggan, Lisa. *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Durden, Michelle. “Not Just a Leg Show: Gayness and Male Homoeroticism in Burlesque, 1868–1877.” *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 3, no. 2 (March 2004). Accessed February 1, 2020. https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/thirdspace/article/view/durden/3147.

Eagle, Christopher. “Organic Hesitancies: Stuttering and Sexuality in Melville, Kesey, and Mishima. *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 2 (2011): 200–218.

Eckert, Penelope. “Comment: The Most Perfect of Signs: Iconicity In Variation.” *Linguistics* 55, no. 5 (2017): 1197–1207.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera.” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 641–71.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. “Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre.” In *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg, 338–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Eidsheim, Nina. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Faderman, Lillian and Stuart Timmons. *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009

Feder, Sam, Laverne Cox, and Amy Scholder. *Disclosure*. 2014.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Fink, Robert. “When the Music Stutters: Notes Toward A Symptomatology.” In *Over and Over: Exploring repetition in Popular Music*, edited by Olivier Julien and Christophe Levaux. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 14−35.

Freeman, Lisa A. *Antitheatricality and the Body Public.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Freitas, Roger. “The Erotics of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato.” *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 196–249.

Friedman, Ryan Jay. “‘Mike Fright’: Racial Ventriloquism in the Hollywood Talkies.” In *Media Ventriloquism: How Audiovisual Technologies Transform the Voice-Body Relationship,*

edited by Jaimie Baron, Jennifer Fleeger, and Shannon Wong Lerner, 83–96. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Garlen, Julie C. and Sarah L. Hembruff. "Children as 'Difference Makers': Viral Discourses of Childhood Innocence and Activism in #Blacklivesmatter." *Children's Geographies* 21, no. 5 (2023): 929–943.

Gill-Peterson, Jules. *A Short History of Transmisogyny.* London: Verso, 2024.

Gilman, Sander L. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1, "'Race,' Writing, and Difference" (Autumn 1985): 204–242.

Ginsberg, Elaine K., "The Politics of Passing," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity,* edited by Elaine K. Ginsberg, 1–18. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Glaser, Jennifer. *Borrowed Voices: Writing & Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Imagination.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Glazer, Lee. "Aestheticism in Anglo-American Culture." *Nineteenth Century Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 195–202.

Goldmark, Daniel. "Stuttering in American Popular Song, 1890–1930." In *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music,* edited by Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, 91–105. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Goodman, Matthew. *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York.* New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit." In *The Monster Theory Reader,* edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 272–286. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

Hamilton, Jack. *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Hart, Jerome. *In Our Second Century.* San Francisco: The Pioneer Press, 1931.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Stories of Social Upheaval.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019.

Heaney, Emma. *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory.* Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

Heap, Chad. *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Hoang, Guyen Tan. *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Hobbs, Allyson. *A Chosen Exile: A History of Passing in American Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Hofer, Matthew and Gary Scharnhorst. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews.* Champaign and Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2013.

Holmes, Jessica. "The 'Manic-Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World' and Her 'Baby Doll Lisp': Grimes and the Disabling Logics of the Feminization and Infantilization of Lisping." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 1 (2019): 131–156.

Howard, Yetta. *Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

Isherwood, Christopher. "From *The World in the Evening*," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader,* edited by. Fabio Cleto, 49–52. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Izenberg, Gerald. *Identity: The Necessity of a Modern Idea* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Johnson, John. "Havelock Ellis and his 'Studies in the Psychology of Sex.'" *British Journal of Psychiatry* 134 (1979): 522–27.

Johnson, Mark. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Joseph, Channing Gerard. “The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave.” The Nation. January 31, 2020. Accessed November 20, 2020. https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball/.

Joseph, Channing Gerard. “Who Was Jennie June?” OutHistory.com. October 10, 2022. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/wwjj/wwjj2.

Joseph, Channing Gerard. *House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens—and Changed the World.* Forthcoming from Crown and Picador.

Kahn, Douglas. *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001.

Karenberg, Axel. “Retrospective Diagnosis: Use and Abuse in Medical Historiography.” *Prague Medical Report* 110, no. 2 (2009): 140–5.

Katz, Jonathan Ned. *The Invention of Heterosexuality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Kaye, Richard A. “Gay Studies / Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde.” In *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, edited by Frederick S. Roden, 189–223. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Kennaway, James. *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Kleinhans, Chuck. “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Irony.” In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer, 182-201. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Knapp, Raymond. *Making Light: Haydn, Musical Camp, and the Long Shadow of German Idealism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. New York, Simon and Schuster Inc., 1993.

Le Guin, Elisabeth. *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Lewis, Abram J. “‘I Am 64 and Paul McCartney Doesn’t Care’: The Haunting of the Transgender Archive and the Challenges of Queer History.” *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014): 13–34.

Lewis, Lloyd and Henry Justin Smith. *Oscar Wilde Discovers America: 1882.* Benjamin Blom: New York, 1964 [1st ed. 1936].

Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider*, 41–48. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Reprint, 2013.

Larson, Steve. *Musical Forces: Motion, Metaphor, and Meaning in Music.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

Loughridge, Deirdre. *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Mack, Sara, and Benjamon Munson. "The Influence of /s/ Quality on Ratings of Men's Sexual Orientation: Explicit and Implicit Measures of the "Gay Lisp" Stereotype." *Journal of Phonetics* 40 (2012): 198–212.

Mahar, William J. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture.* Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Mahon, Maureen. *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Manion, Jen. *Female Husbands: A Trans History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

McConachie, Bruce A. *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.

Medhurst, Andy. "Camp." In *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt, 274–293. London: Cassell, 1997.

Mendelssohn, Michèle. *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Counterculture.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Mendelssohn, Michèle. *Making Oscar Wilde.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Merck, Mandy. *In Your Face: 9 Sexual Studies.* New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Meyer, Moe. “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp.” In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Meyer, 1–22. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Meyer, Moe. “Under the Sign of Wilde: An Archaeology of Posing.” In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Meyer, 75–109. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. “Thinking Sex with an Androyne.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011): 97–105.

Monelle, Raymond. *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Monod, David. “Double Voiced: Music, Nature and Gender in Performance.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015): 173–193.

Monod, David. *The Soul of Pleasure: Sentiment and Sensation in Nineteenth-Century American Mass Entertainment.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Moon, Krystyn R. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Moore, F. Michael. *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television: An Illustrated World History.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1994.

Moore, Katrina Thompson. “The Wench: Black Women in the Antebellum Minstrel Show and Popular Culture.” *The Journal of American Culture* 44, no. 4 (December 2021): 318–335.

Morris, Lloyd R. *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life from 1850 to 1950*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

Morris, Mitchell. *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Morris, Mitchell. “On Fairies (And Mothers).” In *Music & Camp,* edited by Philip Purvis, and Christopher Moore, 3–15. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2018.

Morrison, Matthew D. “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 781–823.

Most, Andrea. *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Moverman, Oren. “Superstardust: Talking Glam with Todd Haynes.” In *Velvet Goldmine: A Sceenplay by Todd Haynes*, ix–xxxi. New York: Hyperion, 1998.

Mullin, Katherine. *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Muñoz, José Esteban. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 (1996): 5–16.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press, 1999.

Munson, Benjamin. "Variation, Implied Pathology, Social Meaning, and the 'Gay Lisp': A Response to Van Borsel et al." *Journal of Communication Disorders* 43 (2010): 1–5.

Muramoto, Osamu. "Retrospective Diagnosis of a Famous Historical Figure: Ontological, Epistemic, and Ethical Considerations." *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 9 (2014): 1–15.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Novak, David. "Noise." In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 125–138. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Nyong'o, Tavia. *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Obadike, Mendi. "Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound." PhD diss., Duke University, 2005.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States.* Third edition. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2010.

Papke, David Ray. *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830–1900.* Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987.

Pennington, Stephan. "Willmer Broadnax, Midcentury Gospel, and Black Trans/Masculinities." *Women and Music* 22 (2018): 117–125.

Pennington, Stephan. "Transgender Passing Guides and the Vocal Performance of Gender and Sexuality." *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness,* edited by Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley. Oxford Handbooks Online, 2019.

Peraino, Judith. "Mick Jagger as Mother." *Social Text* 33, no. 3 (September 2015): 75–113.

Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style.* New York: Schirmer, 1980.

Redmond, Shana L. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora.* New York: New York University Press, 2014.

Riddell, Fraser. *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature at the* Fin de Siècle. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Robb, Graham. *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.

Robinson, Kerry H. *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children's Contemporary Lives.* New York: Routledge, 2013.

Rodger, Gillian. "Male Impersonation on the North American Variety and Vaudeville Stage, 1868–1930." PhD diss., University of Pittsburg, 1998.

Rodger, Gillian. "He Isn't A Marrying Man: Gender and Sexuality in the Repertoire of Male Impersonators, 1870–1930." In *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, edited by Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, 105–133. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Rodger, Gillian. *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Rodger, Gillian. *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Rogin, Michael. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Saslaw, Janna. "Forces, Containers, and Paths: The Role of Body-Derived Image Schemas in the Conceptualization of Music." *Journal of Music Theory* 40, no. 2 (1996): 217–43.

Savage, Barbara Dianne. *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Schmidt, Leigh E. “Visualizing God’s Silence: Oracles, the Enlightenment, and Elihu Vedder’s *Question of the Sphinx*.” In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, edited by David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, 211–228. Berkley: University of California Press, 2001.

Schor, Paul. *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Schiffer, Davida Jae. “Researching While Trans: Being Clocked and Cooling Cistress.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 51, no. 5 (October 2022): 700–725.

Schuller, Kyla. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Sears, Clare. *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky and Adam Frank, editors. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

Shannon, Joy. *The First Counterculture Celebrity: Oscar Wilde’s 1882 North American Tour.* North Bend, Oregon: Plain and Simple Books, 2011.

Shannon, Joy. Personal correspondence with author. October 29, 2021.

Sharma, Shiv Datt. “Provincializing Trans Studies.” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (February 2023): 10–15.

Sinfeld, Alan. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Skains, R. Lyle. “Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology.” *Media Practice and Education* 19, no. 1 (2018): 82–97.

Smith, Christopher J. “Blacks and Irish on Riverine Frontiers: The Roots of American Popular Music.” *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2011): 75–102.

Smolak, Alex. “White Slavery, Whorehouse Riots, Venereal Disease, and Saving Women: Historical Context of Prostitution Interventions and Harm Reduction in New York City During the Progressive Era.” *Social Work in Public Health* 28, no. 5 (2013): 496–508.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Snorton, C. Riley. “On Thon; or, Thinking Gender in the Interstice.” *boundary 2* 51, no. 1 (February 2024): 59–75.

Solie, Ruth A., ed. *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp.* London: Penguin Classics, 2018.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.

Stedman, Jane W. *W. S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and His Theatre.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Stein, Roger B. "Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in Its American Cultural Context." In *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, edited by Amy Horbar, 23–51. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Stevens, John D. *Sensationalism and the New York Press.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (May 1992): 150–176.

Stryker, Susan. "Another Dream of Common Language: An Interview with Sandy Stone." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 2016): 294–305.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Revised edition. New York: Seal Press, 2018.

Sullivan, Louis. *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990.

Thomson, Rosemarie Garland, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body.* New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Ullman, Sharon. "'The Twentieth Century Way': Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 4 (1995): 573-600.

Van Borsel, John, and Anneleen Van de Putte. "Lisping and Male Homosexuality." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43 (2014): 1159–1163.

Volpicelli, Robert. "Curiosity: Oscar Wilde, P. T. Barnum, and the Culture of Self-Improvement." In *Transatlantic Modernism and the US Lecture Tour*, 25–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Waksman, Steve. *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Watkins, Elizabeth Siegel. *The Estrogen Elixir: A History of Hormone Replacement Therapy in America.* Baltimore: The Hohns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

Watkins, Holly. *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Weisz, Denise. "Negotiating Nervousness: How Elocution Manuals Shaped the American Public Body in the Nineteenth Century." *Resources for American Literary Study* 42, no. 1 (2020): 23–61.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1966): 151–174.

Wilde, Oscar. "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." *Chameleon*, December 1894. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 1205–6. New York: Harper Collins, 1989.

Wilde, Oscar. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews.* Edited by Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Williams, Carolyn. *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Young, Kevin. *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News.* Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017.

Young, Kevin. "More Truth (Season 4, Episode 11)." *Scene on Radio*, May 27, 2020. Story reported by Lewis Raven Wallace, with host/producer John Biewen and collaborator Chenjerai Kumanyika. Interviews with David Mindich, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Kevin Young. Series edited by Loretta Williams. Accessed January 17, 2023. https://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e11-more-truth/.

Zbikowski, Lawrence. “Metaphor and Music Theory: Reflections from Cognitive Science.” *Music Theory Online* 4, no 1 (1998). http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.98.4.1/mto.98.4.1.zbikowski.html

Zbikowski, Lawrence M. *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.