

THE TARTAN LADIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TARTAN AND GENDER THROUGH QUEEN VICTORIA AND THE SCOTTISH SUFFRAGETTES

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On September 18th, 1908, a group of Scottish Suffragettes proudly wearing draped tartan shawls, posed for a photo (fig. 1). With W.A Thorburn describing the Scottish tartan as a specifically male textile, this act obviously has some import.¹ However, what significance underlies these politically radicalized women's decision to wear this cloth, in this way, at this point in history? This question is at the centre of my investigation regarding the gendering of tartan from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. My paper examines tartan in several contexts, such as: early Jacobite portraiture; Queen Victoria's use of tartan to promote her femininity and domesticity; and the Scottish suffragettes' appropriation of the cloth as part of their military persona. Together, these instances refute Thorburn's convention of the tartan as exclusively male. My analysis will use both Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance and her recognition of the subversive qualities of drag to examine how different women of varying socio-economic and political affiliations engaged with and the acted out the wearing of tartan and the kilt. I argue that the act of cross-dressing by two kilted suffragettes reveals the performativity of gender, and that through an understanding of tartan as cross-dressing the textile becomes liberated from a gender binary.

THE JACOBITES AND EARLY FEMALE TARTAN PORTRAITURE

During the Jacobite Rebellion in the mid eighteenth century, tartan became a subversive indicator of extremist political leanings. Led by Charles Edward Stuart (alias 'Bonnie Prince Charlie'), who had a claim to the throne through his grandfather King James II and VII, the Jacobite Uprising of 1745 sought to restore the house of Stuart to the British throne, and ultimately failed. Historian Hugh Cheape explains that with the rise of anti-Union and anti-English sentiment in Scotland at this time, tartan, a cloth traditionally worn and created in the Highlands, was transformed into a patriotic symbol, and soon became the unofficial uniform of the Jacobites and their supporters.²

Following the Jacobite Rebellion's failure in 1745, the subsequent Act of Proscription by the British Government forbade the bearing of arms north of the Highland line, as well as the wearing of tartan, along with other elements of Highland dress.³ The Act was repealed in 1782.⁴ Art Historian Vicky Coltman argues that the English government's outlawing of tartan proves that they were aware of the textile's symbolic power to inspire insurrection and rebellion.⁵ However, this proscription of the use and wearing of tartan did not extend to women, and thus neither did the perceived threat.⁶

Before the failed uprising in 1745, the presence of tartan in portraiture became a way of showing support for the Jacobite cause; however, this symbol was employed almost exclusively in male portraits.⁷ One of the few female portraits portraying tartan from this period is Allan Ramsay's *Portrait of Flora MacDonald*, painted in 1749, which shows Bonnie Prince Charlie's ally draped in the red and black MacDonald tartan. Both the tartan and the white roses in Flora MacDonald's hair and on her dress signal her allegiance to the Jacobite cause, and together produce a bold political statement.⁸ And her tartan sash is draped and pinned in the style of a military cloak.⁹ In his analysis of the painting, Art Historian Robin Nicholson suggests that this use of tartan specifically in a woman's portrait illustrates how tartan had already taken on gendered connotations in the eighteenth century. The tartan emphasizes the subject's "strength and stoicism," which are traditionally understood as male characteristics.¹⁰ Nicholson argues that MacDonald's femininity is "offset by the angular lines of the tartan," as the soft contours of her female body are contrasted with the harsh lines of the tartan fabric.¹¹ This painting is an early implication of the notion that femininity and tartan are irreconcilable.

QUEEN VICTORIA AND THE ROMANTIC AND DOMESTIC TARTAN

Following the 1745 uprising, the Scots were depicted visually as bloodthirsty savages by the British.¹² However, by the 1820s, their image had been completely rehabilitated, thereafter, they were portrayed as romantic heroes, largely due to the influential work of Scottish writer and poet, Sir Walter Scott.¹³ Scott stage-managed King George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822, and it was in the pageantry of this visit that he promoted an idealized vision of the Scottish as a noble and peaceful people.¹⁴ Scott covered both the city and the people of Edinburgh in tartan, with those attending in Highland dress,

introducing this textile as a homogenously Scottish identifier.¹⁵ This identity, however, was an exaggerated fabrication from Scott's vision, wherein tartan was a costume to be 'put on' by the people of Edinburgh. Scott was also influential in gendering tartan as a specifically male signifier: Scottish Literature Professor Kenneth McNeil explains that this performance of Scottishness during the 1822 visit was one that was specifically male, at a key moment when the country's national identity, too, was becoming tied to a male Highland character.¹⁶ This figure was fierce, strong, and loyal, a mighty and intimidating man. The kind of Scottishness promoted by both Scott's 1822 pageant and literary works is also seen in the paintings of Sir Edwin Landseer. Landseer's 1850 painting *The Highlander* shows a Highlander wearing a tartan kilt, carrying an eagle which he appears to have just killed, an act which speaks to his skill at hunting and mastery over his environment. Here Landseer also promotes a version of Scottish masculinity founded in heroism and power that became popular as part of a kind of escapist fantasy for post-Industrial Revolution England, whose new sociocultural landscape did not allow for a more traditional performance of masculinity.¹⁷ And, as the most popular artist in Britain at the time, Landseer was essential in constructing a vision of Scotland that celebrated a heavily romanticized image of the wild and fierce masculinity of the Highlander.¹⁸

Both Scott and Landseer were influential in shaping Queen Victoria's understanding of Scotland, she read Scott's works growing up, and was also a great patron of Landseer.¹⁹ Although Victoria was incredibly influential in promoting an essentially masculine vision of Scotland, her use of tartan in both her dress and her Highland home illustrates an alternative relationship forming between tartan and gender.²⁰ In the past, Highland women wore plaid dresses - called *arisaid*s - whose use of plaid in female fashion increased with the promotion of the Jacobite cause.²¹ Victoria also only ever wore tartan in an acceptably feminine manner: Kenneth McNeil remarks that she adopted her own version of Highland fashion by wearing a tartan shawl with a softer colour pattern.²² Art Historian Johnathan Faiers explains that Victoria's use of tartan in this context makes it nothing more than an accessory, which kept with the Victorian emphasis on the 'ultra-feminine' style of dress.²³ While Victoria's sash appears similar to that which adorned Flora MacDonald in her portrait, it is inherently different. Flora's patterned sash is a bold statement of her political support to the Jacobite cause, and is directly tied to the masculinity of the military campaign. Contrariwise, Victoria's

sash is far removed from any political affiliation, and as result, becomes a safe and harmless pattern to be worn. Therefore, in Victoria's context, the use of tartan by a woman accentuates the wearer's femininity, as it carries no heavy masculine connotations. Queen Victoria also popularized the use of tartan and plaid in English female fashion: tartan-trimmed cloaks and bonnets, and plaid dresses became wildly popular in the United Kingdom.²⁴ All of these uses of tartan are thoroughly feminized, and carry none of its former political associations of the Jacobite era.²⁵

Victoria's use of tartan did not end at her dress, but extended to the décor of her Highland home of Balmoral. The use of tartan within the home as an element of interior decoration has some historical precedent: the Tullibardine Room in Blair Castle was decorated by the Atholl family in tartan furnishings in remembrance of their son, who died fighting with the Jacobites.²⁶ Yet this still carries with it a maleness and rebelliousness that contrasts with Victoria's own established use of the pattern at Balmoral. Victoria and Albert covered their home in tartan following their acquisition of the castle, implementing the textile in carpets, curtains, upholstery, and cushions. Lord Claredon, a minister visiting the castle, even remarked on the total oversaturation of the tartan that occurred at the estate.²⁷ In this instance its use emphasized a specifically domestic space, which established a significant connection with Victoria, who understood Balmoral to be the place in which she could become the ideal woman and wife.²⁸ McNeil observes that in her Balmoral journals, Victoria presented herself as a woman who, within "the private domestic domain," emphasized subordination to her husband, while Carla Prince further remarks that, when in the Highlands, Victoria described herself as "a woman, a wife, a mother."²⁹ Here Victoria thus emphasized her immersion into the role of wife and mother while occupying the domestic space that was Balmoral. Why would Queen Victoria, who occupied a position of power over even her own husband, seek a space in which she could perform the expected femininities of the ideal Victorian woman? To aid in answering this question, I bring the work of gender theorist Judith Butler, who asserts that femininity is "a mode of enacting and re-enacting perceived gender norms."³⁰ By this logic, in using tartan as a delicate accessory or interior design pattern, Victoria is taking part in the *performance* of her expected femininity. In this instance, tartan has become an integral element of her expected gender role.

While Victoria uses tartan in a distinctly non-masculine way, her use of the textile to enhance her femininity only affirms the gender binary. Her appropriation of tartan is not due to an intention of subverting traditional notions of femininity by exploring tartan's masculine associations; rather, tartan became part of her performance of the typical and expected version of femaleness that her station as monarch made complicated. Victoria herself was something of a gender contradiction, holding an immeasurably powerful position as the British Empire's female sovereign at a time when severe gender limitations and overt patriarchy restricted the ascent of women's institutional power. As a cloth signalling male power, Victoria could have used tartan to explore and advance her own nuanced version of femininity, yet she chose to enhance its traditionalist notions instead.

THE SUFFRAGETTES AND TARTAN

Queen Victoria's use of tartan in an excessively feminized fashion, within the domestic space of her home, illustrates the residual maleness that clung to tartan as a pattern and a cloth. It needed to be feminized because, in its regular form, it still signalled masculinity. It is this maleness, specifically within a military metric, that was appropriated by the Scottish suffragettes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Maureen Martin explains that the "masculine mystique" of the Highland character "allowed very little room to think about Scottishness in terms of female experience and concerns."³¹ Faiers similarly observes that tartan's "angularity and strict geometry" worked towards its promotion as a specifically male textile.³² Furthermore, Queen Victoria used tartan as a mere accessory to an already submissive version of femininity, notions that had little to do with the power and heroism that tartan symbolized when used by men.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Scottishness remained essentially masculine within the grids of the tartan itself, alienating both femininity and female expression. The answer to this problem for the Glasgow School, a collective of artists working at the end of the nineteenth century looking to push the boundaries of conservative art, was to simply not use these signifiers to depict femininity in their art.³³ For example, Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh's *The May Queen* emphasizes femininity through its use of softer, curving lines, a stark contrast to tartan's harsh

angularity. The Glasgow School's solution was a complete abandonment of any symbolism associated with Scottish maleness in order to explore femaleness and femininity. This surely cannot be the answer, as it assumes that tartan, a traditionally male pattern, can never truly represent or explore femaleness, and continues to alienate the female from an important signifier of Scottish identity. I argue that it is in the suffragettes' use of tartan that avoids simply recreating traditional gender norms while using of an important and symbolic part of Scotland's heritage.

While Queen Victoria's use of tartan evokes a more romantic vision of Scottishness, the suffragettes very clearly evoke the military legacy of the Scottish tartan. Historian Robert Clyde explains that during the nineteenth century, Highland dress and tartan became popular as a result of the Highland regiments' exploits and victories in the imperial enterprise.³⁴ Art Historian J.W.M. Hichberger observes that although the regiments were statistically a minority within the British imperial army, it was the Highland soldiers, in their kilted uniforms, that dominated nineteenth century artistic and literary depictions.³⁵ McNeil explains that the popularity of this type of portrait was largely due to "the stunning visual spectacle" that these uniformed soldiers provided for the British public.³⁶ Robert Gibb's painting, *The Thin Red Line*, exemplifies this sense of spectacular imagery, with the portrait of the soldiers is brimming with heroism and bravery. In *The Thin Red Line*, the soldier's red coats and tartan kilts make for a highly dramatic scene. The Scottish soldier was understood to embody a masculine ideal to aspire towards by exuding qualities of ferocity, fearlessness, and loyalty.³⁷ These mighty men are both awe-inspiring and frightening. All images of Highland regiments contain the visually stunning Highland uniform with either kilt or trews, tartan trousers. British Imperial Historian Matthew Dziennik explains that Highland dress' specifically military emphasis, "provided wearers with access to various types of masculinity."³⁸ In this sense, the wearer of the uniform, physically embodies the qualities of heroism, bravery, and ferocity that are coded as masculine - and it is these qualities that the suffragettes take on for their agenda.

Looking back at the image of the Scottish suffragettes with their tartan sashes (fig. 1), it is now apparent that this act alludes to the Highland soldier's military uniforms. Many of the suffragettes also wear the distinctive Glengarry hats, bonnets which were part of the regimental military uniform, with their sashes deliberately wide

and worn high on the shoulder. The similarity of the women's costume to the military uniforms reveals the suffragettes' deliberate evocation of the textile's symbolism. Contrariwise, Victoria's lithograph portrait (fig. 2) shows her tartan sash worn low to accentuate her delicate shoulders, enhancing her femininity. It can there be understood that the suffragettes are evoking the qualities that are ascribed to the Highland soldier, with their of tartan in a military fashion to emphasize their ferocity, fearlessness, and loyalty to their cause. This is in keeping with Butler's theory of gender as performance, as here the suffragettes are performing a highly militaristic form of masculinity. British Suffragette Christabel Pankhurst called the campaign a 'war' to gain suffrage, for like its campaigns in southern England, the Scottish battle, too was characterized by increasing acts of militancy and violence.³⁹ This constant and repetitive evocation of war and military imagery simultaneously masculinized and strengthened the cause and actions of the suffragettes, because, at this time in history, a more masculine model would have garnered more respect, a fact of which the suffragettes seemed to have been totally aware. The suffragettes, like the Highland soldiers whose spirits they are referencing, saw themselves as fighting a battle, and their uniforms indicate their preparedness and capability to fight. It is unusual though, that the suffragettes would have adopted the tartan considering its strong connection to the highly patriarchal clan system.⁴⁰ The Highland clan families each had their own individual tartan sett, and a large variety of family tartans are on display in the photo of the suffragettes parade. It is interesting that the suffragettes would choose use tartan in their campaign, considering its origins and continued connection to the patriarchal clan system. But it seems that the suffragettes saw great use in appropriating the military signifiers of tartan, regardless of any other association with the family clans.

The event on September 18th, 1908 that the tartan-bearing suffragettes were celebrating was the release of Mary Phillips, a Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) suffragette, and supported the organization's militancy from Holloway Prison.⁴¹ Phillips can already be understood as a kind of soldier, and was later painted as one following her incarceration. She was the longest serving suffragette, with her sentence for a demonstration in the House of Commons having been extended to almost five months in prison.⁴² Upon her release, the WSPU organized "a fine Scottish welcome" for her that included a parade of tartan and bagpipes.⁴³ During the procession, the suffragettes even sang the rousingly patriotic 'Scots wha hae' (Scots, Who Have) for

Phillips, which carries with it heavy military connotations. Written by Robert Burns as a battle cry uttered by Robert the Bruce to his troops, the poem exclaims “By oppression’s woes and pains!/By your sons in servile chains!”⁴⁴ This use of poetic language in connection to the suffragette’s work is a compelling evocation of the type of injustice these women were fighting against. Their singing of ‘Scots wha hae’ puts the suffragettes’ fight at the same level with other great male battles in Scottish history.

Through the suffragettes adorning military signifiers, and their singing of a battle song, the suffragettes repeatedly invoke and take on a military male persona. In this instance, the women are using tartan as part of an appropriation of a certain type of ferocious masculinity, and militant male gender signifiers, an act which supports Butler’s emphasis on the performativity of gender. Their use of tartan in these instances as a symbol of rebellion and insurrection is a return to its eighteenth century Jacobite use. The portrait of the suffragettes wearing their sashes has much in common with Ramsay’s portrait of Flora MacDonald: here are women at different times in history that are using tartan in a politically explosive manner. Like the English government following the Rebellion of 1745, the suffragettes recognized the possibility of tartan to inspire revolution and uprising. Murray Pittock argues that tartan can be understood to “embody alternative traditions to those of the dominant hegemony.”⁴⁵ This is ultimately the attitude the suffragettes take in their use of tartan; that is, to challenge the dominant conceptions of women and their abilities. This defiance through the use of the male military persona, a deliberately subversive act, further complicates the relationship between tartan and gender.

TARTAN AS CROSS-DRESSING

The tartan and Highland dress have a complex relationship with masculinity, which necessitates an exploration of the kilt as a symbol of masculinity. As McNeil explains, while the kilt was strongly associated with Scottish maleness, especially in the context of the Highland soldier’s virility, it was viewed as ‘oppositional dress’ for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.⁴⁶ This is largely due to the fact that kilts were a kind of skirt, and many outsiders could not reconcile the mix of gender indicators.⁴⁷ This type of ‘male petticoat’ horrified the English, who saw it as proof of the Highlander’s savagery, and used it to justify its ban in 1745 as part of the Act of Proscription.⁴⁸

McNeil further explains that the kilt became a point of fascination as it reveals what should have been concealed - the male body - and even hinted at a possibility of seeing the male genitalia.⁴⁹ This possibility of exposure subsequently became a source of comedy, which sought to emasculate the wearers of the kilt, the Scots, who would normally represent a virial and primal masculinity. Faiers argues that the repetitive comedy surrounding the kilt is a result of the "perceived threat to dominant sexual hierarchy" that it embodies for the non-kilt wearer.⁵⁰ According to the 'natural order of things,' men should not wear skirts, especially short ones. This action confuses the gender codes within fashion, and therefore, must be mocked when not used to promote a certain type of masculinity. Thus, prior to its use by the suffragettes, the kilt had already endowed tartan with the ability to trouble gender binaries. In this context, the kilt, and by extension tartan, can be understood as a type of cross-dressing, in that the wearers simultaneously adorn a female-coded garment which uphold the masculine characteristics of the Highlander costume and persona. If the kilt and the tartan are the costume that endow its wearer with a specific type of masculinity, then this very construction of Highland dress reveals the artificiality of gendered signifiers. The gendered Highland costume can therefore be understood as part of a larger repetition of gender norms, one that is constructed and performative.

This understanding of the kilt and tartan as a mode of cross-dressing, especially in the context of the suffragettes' project, relates strongly to Judith Butler of gender performativity, wherein she argues that femininity and masculinity are constructed through the repetition of norms and behaviors.⁵¹ It is a performance of totally artificial and socially fabricated gender signifiers, which creates both a 'right' and 'wrong' way of performing gender.⁵² The suffragettes' successful appropriation of a militaristic masculinity thus illustrates the constructiveness of these performed traits. Writing on the Women's Rights Movement, Queen Victoria condemned the women for "[unsexing] themselves by claiming equality with men" which she argues would result in their becoming horribly ugly creatures.⁵³ Here Queen Victoria distinguishes between a right and wrong femininity. The suffragette's inability both to perform a femininity based in submission and passivity, and their defiance of the gender norms and expectations of the Victorian era, results in their social condemnation. Because the Scottish suffragettes are able to perform a certain type of masculinity so effectively,

they expose the inherent artificiality of these signifiers. Butler uses drag to expose the “artificial nature of our gender identity,” an act which further illustrates the performativity of gender, as it subversively repeats the gender signifiers of the opposite gender, thereby questioning their naturalness and stability.⁵⁴ It is possible to consider the kilt as a kind of cross-dressing, as it did work against conceptions of male dress of the eighteenth and nineteenth (and even twentieth) centuries; however, it was not a deliberate challenge to gender norms. Thus, this consideration of the kilt as drag is somewhat unsatisfying.

A further exploration of the subversive use of the kilt and tartan as drag is possible through the analysis of an image of two young women wearing kilts on the day of the suffragette parade in 1908 (fig. 3). These two unidentified suffragettes both wear tartan skirts with large sporrans hanging from their waists, military style jackets, feathered Glengarry caps, and plaid sashes on their shoulders. It is possible the two women are sisters, though they each wear two different tartan setts, and thus any clan or family identification become difficult to detect. Their costume is not simply an evocation of military signifiers, but a complete adoption of a masculine persona through dress. As Butler notes, in the performance of these male characteristics by women, this action exposes the constructed artificiality of the male Scot as mighty and strong. Especially in the context of the spectacle of the parade, with the other suffragettes already appropriating certain masculine signifiers, this act of cross-dressing registers as an extremely subversive act. The spectator realizes the attributed artificiality surrounding the attribution of courage and heroism exclusively to men since these women are able to successfully perform this kind of masculinity in their fight for suffrage. This is not just any kind of masculinity the women are able to perform, but that of the Highland soldier, whose very essence emanates strength and power. As women intent on challenging the limitations placed upon females, this performance works towards their goal by subverting and undermining popular conceptions of femininity. Theoretically, there is no longer a right/wrong performance of maleness or femaleness, because there no longer exists a binary within which to consider the Scottish tartan. The suffragette’s demand for power in the political sphere becomes manifest in the powerful act of gender subversion. Interestingly, Hanoverian propaganda against the Jacobites during the eighteenth century spread rumors of cross-dressing women that was meant to indicate the Scots’ ‘unnaturalness.’⁵⁵ Thus, the

kilted ladies inherit a legacy of Scottish cross-dressing, and use it extremely effectively to make a political statement furthering their cause. I would argue that it is the use of tartan in this specific instance that truly frees it of its long association with exclusively masculine characteristics. The use of a fabric which already troubled the gender binary by subversive women to further reveal the artificiality of the gendered traits effectively liberated tartan from the confines of the gender binary.

CONCLUSION

The use of the tartan in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century was an inherently gendered act. The evocation of tartan before and after the Jacobite Rebellion highlights the textile's perceived threat to the dominant power; a threat, however, which at the time did not extend to women. During the Victorian era, a romanticized vision of Scotland aided in strengthening the association of tartan with a specific type of primal masculinity that emphasized strength and loyalty. Queen Victoria's own use of tartan emphasized her own femininity, especially in the domestic interior of the home, and functioned to support a highly gendered view of the cloth. It was only with the suffragette's appropriation of the tartan that a more complex vision of gendered tartan emerges. Through their evocation of the Highland soldier, the suffragettes' use of tartan becomes a way to challenge the dominant institutions that limited women's power, as it was the kilted suffragettes that truly dissolved a binary understanding of gender in relationship to tartan that liberated the textile. As a cloth of rebellion and subversion on the bodies of the kilted ladies, tartan becomes an extremely powerful and effective way of understanding the performativity and artificiality of gender.

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(Figure 1): Artist Unknown, Suffragettes welcoming Mary Phillips on her release from Holloway Prison, September 18th, 1908, Photograph on paper.



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(Figure 2): Artist Unknown, Queen Victoria, c. 1858-75, Lithograph with pencil, 47.2 cm x 33.8 cm.



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(Figure 3): Artist Unknown, Suffragettes in Highland dress, September 18th, 1908, Photograph on paper.

NOTES

¹ Thorburn, W. A. "Military Origins of Scottish National Dress." In *Costume*, (1976), 10:1, 34.

² Cheape, Hugh. "Gheibhte," in *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd. 2010), 28.

³ Coltman, Viccy. "Party-Coloured Plaid? Portraits of Eighteenth-Century Scots in Tartan." In *Textile History*, (November 2010), 41:2, 183.

⁴ *Ibid*, 183.

⁵ Coltman, *Party-Coloured Plaid*, 183 and Clyde, Robert. *From Rebel to Hero: the image of the Highlander, 1745-1830*. (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995.), 112.

⁶ Coltman, *Party-Coloured Plaid*, 184.

⁷ *Ibid*, 190.

⁸ Faiers, Jonathan. *Tartan*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008.), 87.

⁹ Nicholson, Robin. "From Ramsay's Flora MacDonald to Raeburn's MacNab: the Use of Tartan as a Symbol of Identity." In *Textile History*, (November 2005) 36:2, 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 149.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 149.

¹² Clyde, *From Rebel to Hero*, 125.

¹³ *Ibid*, 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 128.

¹⁵ Royle, Trevor. "From David Stewart to Andy Stewart: the Invention and Re-Invention of the Scottish Soldier." In *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth*, ed. Ian Brown, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2010.), 60.

¹⁶ McNeil, Kenneth. "Scotland, Britain, empire: writing the Highlands, 1760-1860." (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2007.), 83 and 85.

¹⁷ Martin, Maureen M. *The Mighty Scot: Nation, Gender, and the Nineteenth-Century Mystique of Scottish Masculinity*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.), 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 32 and Pringle, Trevor. Robert. "Prophet of the Highlands: Sir Edwin Landseer and the Scottish Highland Image." PhD. Diss., Loughborough University, 1988, 1.

¹⁹ Prince, Carla Jean. "Sir Walter Scott, Queen Victoria, the Railways, and Scottish Romanticism." Master's Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 2013 and McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 168.

²⁰ Martin, *The Mighty Scot*, 40.

²¹ Faiers, *Tartan*, 87.

²² McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 174.

²³ Faiers, *Tartan*, 187 and 202.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 200 and 182.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 182.

²⁶ Faiers, *Tartan*, 41.

²⁷ Clark, Robert. *Balmoral, Queen Victoria's highland home*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981.), 56.

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- ²⁸ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 166.
- ²⁹ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 166 and Prince, *Scottish Romanticism*, 51.
- ³⁰ White, Emma. "Starved by Society: An Examination of Judith Butler's Gender Performance and Society's Slender Ideal." In *Feminist Theology*, (2015) 23:3, 317.
- ³¹ Martin, *The Mighty Scot*, 130.
- ³² Faiers, *Tartan*, 88.
- ³³ Martin, *The Mighty Scot*, 131.
- ³⁴ Clyde, *From Rebel to Hero*, 112.
- ³⁵ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 121-122.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 118.
- ³⁷ Clyde, *From Rebel to Hero*, 117.
- ³⁸ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 118 and Dziennik, Matthew P. "Whig Tartan: Material Culture and its Use in the Scottish Highlands." In *Past & Present*, (November 2012), 217:1, 121.
- ³⁹ Leneman, Leah. *A Guid Cause: the woman's suffrage movement in Scotland*. (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1995.), 2. Ibid, and 13.
- ⁴⁰ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 4 and 92.
- ⁴¹ Leneman, Leah. "Phillips, Mary Elizabeth." In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (September 2006), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.1093/ref:odnb/63883>.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Low, Donald A. eds. *The Songs of Robert Burns*. (London: Routledge, 1993.), 635 and Pittock, Murray. *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in 18th Century Britain and Ireland*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.), 219.
- ⁴⁵ Brown, Ian, "Tartan, Tartanry and Hybridity," in *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.), 6.
- ⁴⁶ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 124.
- ⁴⁷ Clyde, *From Rebel to Hero*, 126.
- ⁴⁸ Faiers, *Tartan*, 134.
- ⁴⁹ McNeil, *Writing the Highlands*, 134.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 134.
- ⁵¹ White, *Gender Performance*, 317.
- ⁵² Ibid, 318.
- ⁵³ Lassiter, Pamela S. "Exploring Power and Gender-Role Expectations: A Historical Interpretive Analysis of Queen Victoria." PhD Diss., the College of Education Georgia State University, 2004, 32.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 319 and 320.
- ⁵⁵ Pittock, Murray. "Plaiding The Invention of Scotland," in *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.), 37.

“SECURE THE SHADOW E’RE THE SUBSTANCE FADE”: HOW POST-MORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY CAPTURES AND EVADES

Brenna Goodwin-McCabe

Photography has an elicit relationship with death. As authors like Audrey Linkman note, while detailing 19th century Britain, all photography is pursued with the intention of pausing life, or to “secure that shadow ere the substance fade.”¹ However, post-mortem photography declares this relationship by depicting idealized corpses. In constructing death, these memorizations capture souls before decomposition, and provide “a means of reclaiming the diseased...rehumanizing them and reasserting their individuality.”² Attempting to capture this substance or essence, post-mortem photographs were thus multifunctional and complex cultural rites which relied on viewers’ intentions. By consciously rendering and arranging (placing) these photos, and by indicating shadows or expression, these images were similarly contradictory, engaging with theorist Roland Barthes’ concepts of *punctum* and *studium*, which evaluate the emotional gage of an image. This paper will focus on two examples of Victorian imagery by examining their physical, metaphorical, and social roles: *Mother Holding Dead Child*³ from the early 1860’s, and an *Untitled* piece depicting a young reclining woman⁴. While these images are thematically similar, their different presentations of age and composition are noteworthy for the purposes of my research. Photographs such as these linger in contemporary culture, seeping into both artistic and historical genres. As such, post-mortem imagery sustains its influence while fluxing between these categories. Through its methodologies, intentions, and deathly manipulations, these images are thus both a micro and macro representation of artistic affluence and mortal ineptitude.

Before examining these images in depth, it is important to note the cultural background and methods of post-mortem photography. Historically, the genre started soon after “the invention of photography...[where they] were produced...[as] daguerreotypes and ambrotypes of the 1840’s, ‘50’s and ‘60’s [before eventually transitioning] to albumen prints...[in] the 1860’s until the 1890’s.”⁵ Likewise, as László Kürti notes⁶, the genre was not restricted to the Victorian era, as instances of portraiture engaging with deathly subject matter occur contemporarily. Additionally, this typography existed prior to the invention of photography, as post-mortem works interacted with a broader painterly tradition.⁷ As a more affordable form of representation, the camera simply extended the practice of post-mortem icons and the

audience's exposure to an "unflinching witness to death...[and] an apparently unimpeachable record."⁸ Consequently, as Helen Ennis discusses, because the Victorians "had to deal with high rates of mortality," the accessibility of the camera permitted photos to be "part of a complex set of rituals developed around death."⁹ Through conscious presentation, these images were "a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power,"¹⁰ as they outlined and adjusted the idea of death. In doing so, the camera was perceived as a method of challenging "the dominion of death until one has the illusion that death has been abolished."¹¹

Because these images were intended for private or familial consumption, "there is [often] little identification"¹² of the bodies rendered, as many were "concealed within the privacy of the family archive."¹³ Thereby, it is "difficult to estimate the extent of the practice,"¹⁴ and authenticate images. For example, figure 1 is a "carte-de-visite of the early 1860s by the photographer David Johnson of Corporation Street, Blackburn,"¹⁵ but this amount of identification is quite uncommon, as seen in *Untitled* figure 2. Similarly, as photography was a relatively new practice, and many had never had their photo taken, depicting a subject's personality was a crucial aspect of post-mortem works. To heighten their individuality, it was standard to depict a corpse as resting or reclining¹⁶ and to accentuate their features through specific lighting. Age was also a compositional factor, as "babies and children represented...the most numerous group"¹⁷, and photographs would highlight their development by including their entire body, contrasting adult imagery which focused on facial characteristics¹⁸. In both contexts, the relationship between death and sleep suggested a comfortable ambiguity, as images navigated "the Victorian idea of the 'sleeping beauty'"¹⁹ by using clamps and tactful positioning.

Incorporating this background, post-mortem photographs were constructed in and utilized by the household. As objects, the Victorians situated these portraits domestically, displaying them in mourning albums²⁰ or other visible locations in the home. This placement suggests that "the boundaries of familial, communal...sacred and secular"²¹ simultaneously existed in the household. Extending "the interval between death and burial," these photographs immortalized the time when the body remained in the home as was tended by relatives."²² Due to unhealthy overcrowding, the living were forced to cohabit with the deceased,²³ an action which was both a religious procedure and a practical method of stopping potent diseases. Consequently, photographers were required to incorporate this domestic environment, as most deaths occurred because of either an illness or an undiagnosed ailment. Because "contact with the physical remains...carried a potential risk of spreading infection," certain regions even introduced legislature which "specifically prevent[ed] corpses from being taken to the studio."²⁴ Therefore, until "the terminally

ill... [began to be] treated in hospitals rather than at home,"²⁵ most images were taken within the subject's household.

Illustrating the "dead within the circle of living,"²⁶ post-mortem works functioned as both the verification and denial of death. For example, *Mother Holding Dead Child* contrasts the typical post-mortem composition by containing a moment of grief, as the Mother's presence forces audiences to acknowledge death's social and familial consequences. Archetypally, "family members were...excluded from the photograph,"²⁷ with figure 2 depicting the standardized singular body. Containing a relaxed subject, this image indicates that grief occurs outside of the frame, thus contrasting the visualized sorrow of *Mother Holding Dead Child*. Conversely, both images involve a compositional domesticity, with the chair in figure 1 and the mother in figure 2 illustrating a fixation with the home as a site of "uneasiness...[and] death."²⁸ Therefore, by displaying dead relatives through domesticity, these images suggest that the home is a binary space, one which comforts the bereaved while also providing "unquestionable proof that someone has died."²⁹ This explains why early post-mortem photos were known as Remembrance Cards³⁰ as they reminded the possessor of the individual while also identifying them as deceased³¹. This function is immediately problematic as context is not written but cited through memory. For instance, figure 1 does not label its subjects, just the studio and estimated year. In doing so, the image rejects immediate identification for familial outsiders. However, as these photographs also functioned as remembrance tokens for those who knew the subject, the genre likewise requires audience participation in order to retain identity. Therefore, while *Mother Holding Dead Child* was intended to provide "visible evidence that the child had been brought into the world,"³² and "to give substance and reality to a life,"³³ its identity has both an evidentiary and contextual requirement.

Embodying contradiction, post-mortem images were similarly a form of social documentation, as photographs had "to retain the dead, to immortalize them," yet simultaneously had "to deny death and recapture"³⁴ the individual. Explained by professor of contemporary literature Roger Luckhurst, "trauma theory at one demands representation and insists on the erasure of that ghastly presumption,"³⁵ meaning that every post-mortem photo has a dual purpose. As an example, the baby in figure 1 does not immediately appear dead. Covered slightly, the mother's gaze is what suggests grief and death. Similarly, in figure 2, the woman appears to have fallen asleep, yet her rigid positioning and dark clothing suggests a deathly presence. In each instance, spatial distance and cloth are used to flux interpretation, with figure 2 inviting viewership through the subject's closed eyes and reclined posture. Because of this placement, the photographs are close enough to show the features of the dead, but also remove the subject from the audience's realm. Therefore, the bodies in these

photos are contradictory, as they illustrate “death as a final moment,” or evidence that a person has died, while also depicting them “still among the living,”³⁶ through their idealized representation.

Navigating this duality, post-mortem photographs used expression to capture a person’s shadow. Often paired with the term substance, which means soul, a shadow represents the metaphorical body. When advertising photography, the terms formed a relationship, such as the slogan “secure the shadow ‘ere the substance fade.”³⁷ In this rhetorical phrase, the shadow is what the camera captures, and the substance is its implication. Because of this association, many “believed that taking a photograph of the dead...was securing the shadow”³⁸ and thus retained a person’s soul. This implies that “the photographic cadaver becomes a substitute for the real corpse”³⁹ as it never departs or decomposes. In this manner, the subject’s metaphorical body or shadow transcends death, with the photograph creating an idealized twin which could reject disintegration. Because photography was marketed as a medium of immortality, post-mortem artists had “to start work as soon possible...when the facial muscles were still relaxed,”⁴⁰ and expression could be enhanced. In this context, expression was crucial as it “was the mechanism through which the intangible qualities of mind and soul were made visible.”⁴¹ To give viewers a “taste for someone,”⁴² post-mortem photos attempted to capture expression, or shadow, and thus elicit the substance, or soul.

In entrapping this substance, these images were what American writer Susan Sontag described as a “defense against anxiety.”⁴³ To reanimate the expressive body, props and clothing were used to create a sense of movement. In figure 1, the woman clasps what appears to be either a book or handkerchief, both of which are objects associated with feminized activity. Likewise, the folds in her dress serve as the “sinuous curves... [which introduce] movement into pictures where movement had ceased.”⁴⁴ Therefore, each wrinkle in the fabric installs a vibrancy to the photograph, while the flower on her belt suggests that her photographic body will never wilt, unlike her corpse. This sense of curvature is also found in figure 2, as a comparison between life and death. The dead baby is surrounded by wrinkled fabric, as though he is still shifting within it. Conversely, the mother’s smooth shoulders suggest a stillness which contrasts the suggested motion of the baby, whose creases now appear manufactured. In both images, the photographer has toyed with light and dark. In doing so, the young woman in figure 2 is illuminated in chiaroscuro, making her face appear more drastic and highlighted. Likewise, this method is also used in figure 1, as the baby’s light clothing is made brighter by the mother’s dark mourning outfit. In this instance, the baby’s body and mother’s face are amplified by the image’s darker tones, such as the mother’s dark halo or bonnet. Additionally, the baby’s hand gesture maintains a significant

implication. Still grasping, the hand mimics movement to “play down the fact of death.”⁴⁵ This grasp is also found in other infant images, as well as slightly open mouths that suggest light breathing. By depicting bodies like this, death is not confrontational, but contemplative.

Involving this visual substance, expression was also a religious necessity. For example, faces had to depict the “smile of death... [as it] was regarded as proof that ‘the soul had sighted the glory of heaven’,”⁴⁶ and post-mortem works had to indicate where the soul had gone. In a biblical sense, this manufactured peace comforted relatives, informing them that their loved ones were in a better place. Because “sudden death...allowed no time for spiritual reckoning,” this peace negated the belief that if “a person had not prepared...eternal damnation would...result.”⁴⁷ Fixating on this notion, the mother in figure 1 emphasizes expression by appearing to hold “her child slightly away from her, as if in offering to the camera and the viewer...in an attempt to capture the detail of her baby's face.”⁴⁸ To a similar extent, some Victorians believed that since photography absorbed shadow, it could capture “the retinas of a corpse [which] fix[ed] the last image seen...like a photograph,”⁴⁹ implying that post-mortem images contain an additional photo within the eye. Because the eyes were culturally noteworthy, and gazes were transcriptions of death, both figures 1 and 2 ensure that the eyes of their dead are closed, maintaining ambiguity alongside the concepts of a “smile of death”⁵⁰ and “sleeping beauty”⁵¹.

In the process of photographing a body, the concepts presented by French poet Charles Baudelaire similarly interact with post-mortem functionality. As previously mentioned, these images have an evidentiary role, proving that a person existed and that they died. Historically, these photographs are snapshots into a different culture, providing context and visual information, aspects which reflect Baudelaire’s definitions. Distinguishing photography from art, Baudelaire argues that photograph is a “servant to the sciences and arts,”⁵² acting as a tool rather than an independent work. Implementing this distinction, these photographic cadavers are measurable and have an academic purpose, making any artistic connotation incidental. However, while this factual method is one interpretation of deathly photography, Baudelaire neglects the complexity of post-mortem imagery; namely, its power over memory, legacy, and the viewer. Therefore, although they do “rescue from oblivion”⁵³, their social role and context are more expansive than Baudelaire suggests.

Following this discussion on expression and physicality, post-mortem's functionality also problematizes conceptual classification. Although arguments such as Baudelaire's are noteworthy, as he implies that post-mortem "rescue[s] from oblivion those tumbling ruins...which demand a place in the archives of our memory,"⁵⁴ theories promoted by Roland Barthes also function in post-mortem imagery. As Luckhurst notes, since the publication of Barthes' text *Camera Lucida*, "the photograph has become intrinsically linked with the deathly,"⁵⁵ as his legacy overwhelms photographic scholarship. Presenting a concept previously alluded to, Barthes' theory implies that photographs do "not capture life, but instead build a monument to an anticipated...death."⁵⁶ Containing this anticipation, photos "are visual triggers evoking emotional responses in the viewers."⁵⁷ For example, *Mother Holding Dead Child* incites this reaction through her "direct gaze...[one which is] unusual in commercial portrait photography."⁵⁸ Conversely, the *Untitled* image creates this sense through invisible bereavement, jolting the viewer through what is implied and imagined.

Further examining Barthes' concepts, his text *Camera Lucida* describes the "rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead,"⁵⁹ or the substance. Presenting *punctum* and *studium* as methods of encountering a photograph, Barthes' implications are problematized by the photographic body. Rather than merely anticipating death, post-mortem images varnish death, depicting a form which challenges the distinction between *punctum* and *studium*. Barthes defines *punctum* as "that accident which pricks me,"⁶⁰ or the aspect of an image that captures a viewer's attention. Likewise, *studium* refers to the cultural or academic participation⁶¹ of a photo - aspects that are interesting, but do not entrap consciousness. Applying these approaches, post-mortem photos transit between *studium* and *punctum*. Initially, the piece exhibits *studium*, as its context creates historical evidence,⁶² and passes as "incontrovertible proof,"⁶³ that something existed, while also "actively promot[ing] nostalgia."⁶⁴ However, when a viewer recognizes "the subject as dead and not sleeping,"⁶⁵ the photo's association with mortality and grief creates *punctum*. Therefore, *punctum* is caused by examining a *studium* image. After realizing an image's deathly containment, and experiencing *punctum*, the viewer similarly reverts back to *studium*, engaging with its historical and artistic merits. Creating this cycle, Barthes' terms become transitory, indicating that the substance, or the soul in post-mortem images, changes depending on its viewership and approach.

Evolving this debate on photographic cadavers, Susan Sontag's concepts further complicate the theoretical role of post-mortem, as the genre embodies a form

of violence as bodies are reanimated without the subject's consent. As mannequins, vacant of agency and objection, corpses are injected with specific and one-sided narratives. Fabricating an approachable version of the subject, these photos represent an extreme version of Sontag's philosophies. To idealize a subject, a photographer would position a body for longevity, based on both aesthetic discretion, such as concealing scars or injuries, and on practicality, what was feasible with the corpse. As with figure 2, the subject's constructed and standardized form reveals basic facts: she was young, middle or upper class, and possibly enjoyed reading. Besides this, there is no personal context. Thereby, in "deciding how a picture *should* look, photographers are...imposing standards on their subjects,"⁶⁶ as post-mortem typology blocks true individualism. In this regard, "just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder,"⁶⁷ as each subject is trimmed and erased by the frame, photographer, and patron. Likewise, because of this memorialization, the photographer and audience impose narratives onto the dead in a way that "violates them."⁶⁸ In this context, meaning is dependent on the viewer, their subjective context, and what they require from the image. Even if the image elicits memory and religious comfort, the subject's body is reconstructed, and its life or legacy is comfortably altered. Therefore, because "the circulation of images of dead bodies has remained a consistently politicised matter,"⁶⁹ intention blurs the definition and implication of substance in post-mortem photography.

Ultimately, post-mortem photographs have remained a complex and emotional genre. While it is "a medium which...gave...security"⁷⁰ to the bereaved, it also illustrates "the vanity ever trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it."⁷¹ In doing so, the contemporary gaze defines it as "something that cannot be silenced, that...demands the name of the person,"⁷² as its unusual subjects extend beyond the frame, thus negotiating mortality and morality. Therefore, while "time eventually positions most photographs...at the level of art,"⁷³ this contemporary viewership transforms post-mortem images from private to public, a move which suggests that "there is nothing new about the desire to depict the...dead."⁷⁴ In this manner, both *Mother holding dead child* and *Untitled* challenge substance through physicality, expressions of the soul, and by transitioning between *punctum* and *studium*. As this is dependent on the viewer's context and opinion, only a shadow can be captured by photography. Because of this, the idea of an ethereal, social, or historical substance, those which the post-mortem genre propagated, can never truly be secured by post-mortem photography.

LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 1. David Johnson, *Mother holding dead child*, Blackburn, early 1860's, carte-de-visite. (Linkman 319)



Figure 2. Untitled Victorian Photograph of a dead woman in a chair. (via <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/photos/post-mortem-photographs-20496377/image-20496642>)

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² Helen Ennis, "Death and Digital Photography" in *Cultural Studies Review* (2011), 138.

³ *Mother holding dead child*, Figure 1, Linkman 319

⁴ *Untitled*, Figure 2, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/photos/post-mortem-photographs-20496377/image-20496642>

⁵ Ennis, "Death and Digital Photography", 128.

⁶ László Kürti, "For the Last Time: The Hiltman-Kinsey Post-Mortem Photographs, 1918-1920" in *Visual Studies* (2012), 92.

⁷ Kay and Richardson Bryne, "Ethereal Presences in Holography and Photograph" in *SPIE* (2007), 310.

⁸ Kevin Foster, "Deploying the Dead: Combat Photography, Dead and the Second World War in the USA and the Soviet Union" in *War, Literature, and the Arts* (2014), 1.

⁹ Ennis, "Death and Digital Photography", 130.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador, 1973), 8.

¹¹ Aries in Roger Luckhurst, "Why have the Dead Come Back?: The Instance of Photography" in *New Formations* (2017), 104.

¹² Ennis, "Death and Digital Photography", 129.

¹³ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 311.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁸ Ennis, "Death and Digital", 130.

¹⁹ Byrne, "Ethereal Presences", 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kürti, "For the Last Time", 92.

²² Linkman, "Taken from Life", 337.

²³ Kürti, "For the Last Time", 92.

²⁴ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 316.

²⁵ Ennis, "Death and Digital", 133.

²⁶ Kürti, "For the Last", 92.

²⁷ Ennis, "Death and Digital", 130.

²⁸ Kürti, "For the Last", 92.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³² Linkman, "Taken from Life", 343.

³³ *Ibid.*, 343-344.

³⁴ Byrne, "Ethereal Presences", 2.

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- ³⁵ Roger Luckhurst, "Why Have the Dead Come Back?" in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* (2017), 106.
- ³⁶ Kürti, "For the Last", 101.
- ³⁷ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 312.
- ³⁸ Byrne, "Ethereal Presences", 2.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁴⁰ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 317.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 322.
- ⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1980), 26.
- ⁴³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.
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- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ⁴⁸ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 318.
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- ⁵⁰ Ennis, "Death and Digital", 131.
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- ⁵² Charles Baudelaire, "On Photography: From the Salon of 1859."
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
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- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
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- ⁵⁸ Linkman, "Taken from Life", 318.
- ⁵⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.
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- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.
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- ⁶⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁶⁹ Luckhurst, "Why Have the Dead", 102.
- ⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" in *The Literarische Welt* (1931), 18.
- ⁷¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 82.
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- ⁷³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 21.
- ⁷⁴ Ennis, "Death and Digital", 128.

RE-BRANDING AND HYBRIDIZATION: NEW APPROACHES TO 'DRAG' IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERAL QUEER "AFFIRMATION"

Maxim Greer

An MC stands on a stage with a microphone, preparing the audience to welcome "Drag queen extraordinaire, Victoria Sin".¹ The drag queen walks out on stage, greeted by applause, dressed in a shimmering, glamorous blue sequin gown, with dramatic makeup. They leer at the audience. As elevator jazz plays, Victoria Sin places a packaged loaf of bread on a table. She grabs a cutting board and knife and slowly proceeds to butter the bread, presenting it to the audience. Their body language and facial expression each convey the banality of the task being performed and express the performers own ambivalence to the overall performance. While wearing glamorous clothing and make-up, aligned with trends in drag makeup artistry, Victoria Sin diverts from the conventional drag queen in their tactics as a performer whose very identity is itself a critique and a challenge to the medium. They identify as non-binary, meaning they do not ascribe to the gender binary as male or female.² They also identify an affinity with femme lesbian identity. Historically, drag queens are predominantly male-identified or trans women. When a cis-gendered woman performs in drag as a woman, she is often called a bio-queen.³ Sin complicates labels and categories in a medium which already toys with and mocks the labels of broader society. Furthermore, they challenge homonormativity and misogyny within drag and the queer community at large.⁴ In the short film Define Gender: Victoria Sin, the performer sits in a darkened room, painting their drag face, narrating that for femmes "the labour of femininity isn't only in the performance, it's perseverance in the face of our inscribed and ascribed precarity". Sin's artistic practice aims to "interrupt normative processes of desire, identification, and objectification" using drag "as a practice of purposeful embodiment questioning the reification and ascription of ideal images within technologies of representation and systems of looking".

Judith Butler famously wrote in the 1990 book Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity that drag presents the potential to interrogate identity categories including gender as social constructs, and expose gender as based upon a performance of traits and surface boundaries. Victoria Sin not only works within this framework, but rather uses their art to problematize how gender and queerness

(along with other categories such as class and race) are represented within drag itself.⁵ This paper observes this rise of new and updated forms of drag performance, namely transgressive and subversive drag terrorists such as Christeene Vale, as well as the new critical, and self-reflexive drag espoused by Victoria Sin. Both artists are—in a sense—responding to a major paradigm shift within drag and broader queer representation, largely due to the mass-popularity of the reality television program RuPaul’s Drag Race, amidst an era in which queer assimilation into a capitalist and neoliberal schema has intensified. What these two artists perform is a hybridization of drag styles as a response to intensive branding and the industrial complex of RuPaul. This hybridization, which itself delves into a masked-branding of its own, disrupts the reification at play in mainstream drag by re-inserting the body; in particular, the dispossessed queer bodies of color and those that do not fall into the binary system imposed by capitalist gender representation. The self-reflexivity and self-critique in these artists approaches to drag requires a re-assessment of the dialectic brought forth in 1997 by prominent queers of color and cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz’s research explored the opposition between mass-cultural icon and drag star RuPaul Charles and the “drag-terrorism” of Vaginal Crème. While Muñoz famously labelled RuPaul’s drag as “sanitized” and “corporate,” Vaginal Creme worked to challenge heteronormativity and white supremacy, specifically aiming itself against the capitalist mimetic representation of gender as exemplified by RuPaul.⁶

In the latter half of the twentieth century, drag has held a historical position within the aesthetics and politics assigned, and often embraced, by large swaths of queer populations.⁷ Art historian and cultural theorist Douglas Crimp’s definition of “queer,” as the rejection of the capitalist heteronormative assimilation of queer (lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual) subjects, hangs heavy over this paradigm.⁸ RuPaul’s Drag Race, the increasingly omnipresent source for the growing dissemination of contemporary drag practices, models itself as a pastiche of the classic drag pageant. Contestants compete each season to be crowned “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” Regardless of victory, many contestants are thrust into a niche-level celebrity status maintained through extensive touring, sale of merchandize, and social media marketing.⁹ Moreover, RuPaul and the show itself stress the cultivation of a viable “brand” for successful drag performers on and off the show.¹⁰ This context functions as an example of the subsumption of queer modes of artistic and political expression into a capitalist framework. can be drawn between the contemporary practices of drag with broader issues of gender commodity production, neoliberalism, and the problem of representation and identity in queer discourses.

In order to conceptualize drag amongst a backdrop of issues in queer theory—namely the paradox of representational politics of affirmation and Marxist social theories—a careful analysis of opposing forms of drag performance styles and an exploration of aesthetic trends is required.

RuPaul's career in the culture industry, as an icon in the fashion and cosmetic world for more than three decades and as a television personality, presents several opportunities for an assessment of the figure's drag style and feminine representation.¹¹ Queer and feminist theorists have explored how drag can potentially function as a means of dismantling gender binaries to reveal gender as a social construct and artificial performance.¹² Indeed, RuPaul is famous for stating "we're all born naked, and the rest is drag."¹³ Thus, drag as a medium can often be positioned as subversive and transgressive.¹⁴ On the other hand, some see RuPaul's female presentation as mimesis, a mirror act composed of stereotyped feminine signifiers that trends dangerously toward gender essentialism.¹⁵ As a counterpoint to RuPaul, Muñoz offers an analysis of "terrorist drag," as displayed by performance artist and drag queen Vaginal Davis.¹⁶ Muñoz characterized Davis's performance approaches to drag as an interrogation of pervasive masculinity and white supremacy in the social realm of America.¹⁷ Further, with Davis' performances navigating numerous conflicting identities in her art and in her performances, Muñoz qualifies it within an intersectional framework.¹⁸ In the two decades to pass since Muñoz's article on Davis, all of the varied theoretical approaches to drag are still applicable. However, in response to the mass popularity of RuPaul's television program and growing acceptance of LGBT peoples in liberal pluralist democracies,¹⁹ the gulf between Davis and RuPaul's style of drag must be revisited and expanded into Marxist theories of the commodity and reification. Through this, readings of RuPaul's critical approach to drag will be undermined. Its subversive power is deemed woefully inadequate when its mimesis of capitalist constructions of femininity and the relationship to the realm of production in a full-blown neoliberal economy, are examined.²⁰ On the other hand, Vaginal Davis's terrorization of normative identity only becomes all the more relevant and nuanced, and closer to a definitive manifestation of Crimp's ideal of what queerness "is."

Almost every episode of RuPaul's Drag Race unfolds in accordance to a strict formula. RuPaul introduces the challenge to contestants in the "workroom." The challenge is usually a form of dance performance, an acting challenge in either a comedy or musical style, or a design and sewing challenge. At this point, RuPaul always engages the contestants as his male self, with all of the contestants also "out of drag." Scenes often cut between the different queens as they work away on the sewing machine or rehearse a performance. In preparation for the runway, the

contestants begin to get in drag, showing the varying stages of transformation as the queens become their feminine characters. This aspect of the program is perhaps the most unsettling to conservative discourses around gender, as the artificiality of both drag and femininity becomes exposed. The use of hip pads, rubber breastplates, extensive makeup, heavy contouring, wigs, acrylic nails, and lashes are indicative of the amount of illusionism at play in drag. Further, amidst their transformation, the queens experience a momentary state of gender non-fixity, one that is often embraced in queer discourses.²¹ The second half of the television show undoes any of the deconstructive elements as it moves into pageantry and the spectacle of reality television. A mix of RuPaul's song Covergirl plays as the camera cuts to different shots of stage lights, revealing a garishly colourful set with a runway and judging panel. RuPaul, now in drag, stands at the end of the runway and walks forward to greet the judges and introduce the challenge and runway theme. Crucially, RuPaul is never filmed getting ready. The transformation from male to female is concealed and is made to seem instantaneous due to editing. Contestants then walk the runway to be judged in the challenge, and the bottom performers "lip sync for their lives" to a famous pop song, with the loser being asked to "sashay away." Now in its ninth season, the show's winners reflect a balance of queens whose style is glamour, and those who work more in camp and comedy.²² Regardless, the show is frequently critical of contestants who are not able to present the glamorous form of drag, and all of the more transgressive winners have conformed in order to be named victor.²³ At times, the program presents a more shocking drag style similar to that of drag queen Divine, the star of queer cult-director John Waters' early films. While such an offshoot style may be a featured theme in a challenge, the show's demand for performers to adapt, presenting women as filthy and drag as unsanitary, is merely a temporary feature before being quickly disavowed in the following week's episode. The program and RuPaul's gender illusionism combine to uphold normative ideologies around gender identity, in which true femininity is one of glamour, beauty, and based upon superficial identity markers such as clothing, makeup, and long hair.

RuPaul's approach to drag and the ideals upheld by the show represent an instance when the queer artistic medium can, according to Judith Butler, be unable to achieve subversion.²⁴ In the 1993 book Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex," Butler devotes a chapter to a review of Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary Paris is Burning.²⁵ The seminal film depicts the queer, black, trans, and Latino ballroom drag culture of New York City. Indeed, many aspects of RuPaul's TV program—from the pageantry, to "reading" challenges and terms like "shade"—were lifted directly from the ballroom culture depicted in Livingston's film. Butler's analysis provided a measured assessment of the film and ballroom drag, critiquing feminists

who misread drag as mere misogyny while at the same time arguing that drag as gender imitation is often ambivalent and not automatically subversive.²⁶ Furthermore, Butler holds that drag can often be paradoxical in that it has the dual ability for “denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms.”²⁷ Thus, with Butler in mind, RuPaul’s miraculous transformation between strictly gendered male and female categories is a clear example of gender performance that strengthens rather than dismantles binaric norms of gender and sexuality. RuPaul’s oeuvre functions as an appropriation of approximated identities and subjectivities. Of particular importance is Butler’s dismissal of critiques of drag as misogynistic, which reflects the limits of certain analyses of gender in feminist discourses. Certainly, *Drag Race* toes the line in this respect, but ultimately focusing on minor issues of sexism in the program is unproductive and represents a fundamental problem in the politics of representation and gender in some feminist discourses and media studies.²⁸ The feminine product that RuPaul presents, and which the show certifies, need not be the focus of examination for a potentially negative depiction of feminine stereotype. Rather, attention should be drawn to the forces of gendered commodity production that lingers behind the sequins, wigs, and painted eyebrows.

The rise of RuPaul as a cultural icon came about as North American economic policies fully embraced the policies of neoliberalism and globalization with the 1991 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), marking the point at which these forces accelerated.²⁹ In Canada, the cosmetics company MAC developed a marketing strategy that would transform its brand from a niche makeup artistry label into an international behemoth producer of cosmetic commodity items.³⁰ The success of the company is often attributed to the VIVA GLAM AIDS fund, which marked one of the first corporate engagements with queer politics issues and drag performance.³¹ In 1994, one year after the major market success of RuPaul’s song *Supermodel (You Better Work)*, MAC hired the drag performer as the first spokesperson for their new lipstick line. This brought commercial awareness to AIDS, with all proceeds going to charities focused on treatment and research for the disease that had devastated gay communities over the last decade.³² In the article “An Advertising World Gone Completely Haywire: MAC VIVA GLAM,” Andrea Benoit noted how the media campaign cultivated a “maverick” reputation for MAC in its partnership with a drag queen associated with the “subversive” club kids’ scene of the late 1980s, fostering an image of being “hip” and socially responsible. The most well-known artefact from this collaboration is RuPaul’s iconic *I Am The MAC Girl* advertisement, which sees the performer dressed in a blonde wig, in red latex and matching thigh high boots—the bold red colour signifying the lipstick line of the campaign.³³ Repeated in a series of three poses, the different Ru’s possess a serial

quality, denoting the industrial process behind the production of advertisements and commodity products. The ad bears a similarity to the work of Pop artist Andy Warhol and his silkscreen prints of celebrity icons such as Marilyn Monroe.³⁴ MAC used the art of a queer subculture and the spectral impact of a health crisis to purchase cultural capital and further their commercial interests. Indeed, this 1990s commercial condition symbolized how queer identity and politics came to be “normatively constrained” through the forces of neoliberal privatization.³⁵ Radical queer groups such as ACT UP, which sought attention for the AIDS crisis in the early years of the epidemic, saw itself excluded from later cultural dialogues due to their rejection of a logic of visibility that is based around “capital-intensive” interests;³⁶ the logic of visibility being one which sacrificed elements of the queer movement that were deemed overly radical and threatened the status quo of heteronormativity. Queer advocacy shifted to private campaigns of “representation” that de-sexualized and sanitized queerness, and were largely funded through the proliferation of charities in response to the growth of the neoliberal state.³⁷ RuPaul’s safe depiction of femininity and queerness rendered the performer into a palatable product for commodity marketing, mirroring the subsumption of queer politics into a commercial framework.

Art historian Jaleh Mansoor identified the ACT UP movement as one of the last instances in which a campaign for “visibility” and “representation” achieved an emancipatory victory of sorts.³⁸ In the piece “Representation,” Mansoor describes the contours of the problem of political representation in capitalist societies, concluding that capitalism became unable to accommodate the surplus populations of global underclasses.³⁹ The transfer of a queer political movement into a capitalist campaign of constructed social awareness, as well as the exclusion of groups such as ACT UP from further discourses, demonstrates Mansoor’s assertion as to the futility of these practices. Moreover, the problem of representation must be examined in accordance with Marxist theories of reification. Mansoor turns to Georg Lukács’ 1923 book History and Class Consciousness, summarizing that capitalism developed to the point at which a rift between object and process occurs. The result of this rift is the “disarticulation of fragment and whole,” yielding Lukács’ process of “reification.”⁴⁰ Lukács observes the way in which capitalism turns objects into commodities as the process through which their fetishistic illusionism “envelopes all phenomena,” enabling the concealment of relationships of humans with one another.⁴¹ Further, these relationships are always obscured and “bound to things and appear as things.” Thus, in regards to the performed feminine product walking the runway of RuPaul’s reality television program, or his I Am The MAC Girl serialization, the relationship to the sphere of production is masked through a futile representation of an inadequate queering of gender identification. Mansoor notes that when considering

representation amidst the process of reification, capitalist “visibility” becomes obscured and representation is often rendered as an abstraction.⁴² The female RuPaul that sells the VIVA Glam lipstick is an abstraction in which the consumer falsely identifies with a regime of constructed emancipation that is detached from any servable act of solidarity with queer subjectivity, and from the human labour expended in its industrial production.

RuPaul’s drag displaces and inverts any subversive qualities in mainstream drag practices, especially when considering its industrial underpinnings. Indeed, there is very little that is truly performed by this instantiation of drag. As Muñoz points out, it is merely a kind of static, glamorous mimetic illusionism.⁴³ In opposition to the mimesis, Muñoz offers the drag of Vaginal Davis, whose work spans several artistic mediums—from drag performance to the production of punk zines.⁴⁴ Davis’ name is lifted from black feminist and intellectual Angela Davis, as a salute to the era of black militancy and aspects of the Black Panther movement.⁴⁵ In *Expose Angela*, a zine cover, Vaginal Davis’ punk aesthetic may resemble the strategies of Weimar republic DADA movement and their experiments with collage and photomontage. Davis is seemingly working in the tradition of the Avant Garde artists such as Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann, who used print media photographs and texts to reconfigure meanings and subvert the rationale of emerging capitalism and fascism in post-World War I Europe.⁴⁶ Davis has very crudely taped a cut-out photograph of herself, attaching it to the face of a white model—a parody of fashion and gossip magazines. The text is confrontational; three headlines address the necessity of revolution, the prison labour system and rape as a structural tool in the oppression of women. Unlike the commercial campaigns starring RuPaul that mask commercial interests with constructed rebelliousness, Davis’ direct approach is a critique of illusionism in the realms of cultural production, the media, and advertisement. Davis’ work reveals rather than conceals the violence and exploitation that lingers behind capitalist discourses.

Vaginal Davis’ drag was most effective at dismantling the reification and stratification of identity in her performance art approaches to drag, with Muñoz remarking that Vaginal Davis marks a new “terrorist drag” style.⁴⁷ Firstly, Davis’ drag is a rejection of the glamorous style espoused by RuPaul, demonstrating a more nuanced approach to drag that to Muñoz, “challenges the universalizing rhetoric of femininity.”⁴⁸ The author identifies the two predominant categories in drag performance: glamour and its contrasting clown style, identifiable in its over the top and humorous approach to performance.⁴⁹ Muñoz classifies Davis within the contours of clown drag, but aims to illustrate how the artist nuances and transgresses the category in their social

critiques.⁵⁰ Muñoz's analysis of Davis is contingent on the theory of disidentification. Disidentification represents a "third way" in identity discourses, wherein a normative conception of identity can be readily absorbed into the dominant ideology, with counteridentification often managing to reinstate the discourse it opposes.⁵¹ Disidentification functions as a resistance of "the interpolating call of ideology that fixes a subject within state power apparatuses."⁵² Davis, who is queer, black, and Latino, navigates within a variety of subjectivities. She uses disidentification to create her artistic persona, identifying with aspects of black militancy in Angela Davis, while simultaneously disavowing homophobic and anti-feminist aspects.⁵³ Davis's drag performances also function along this approach in her use of "whiteface" to portray racist white colonial militiamen, even re-enacting the perverse violence of homophobic murderer Jeffrey Dahmer.⁵⁴ In the context of Davis' drag style, the theory of disidentification is drawn from a fusion of black feminist theories of intersectionality and Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's notion of bloc formation.⁵⁵ Intersectionality underlines how a subject often interacts with more than one identity, while bloc formation marks a Marxist approach that continues to center class relations, but which stresses the incorporation of other social formations into analysis.⁵⁶ Therefore, the potential to dismantle systems of representation and point to the reification that separates the particular from the whole, is a definitive characteristic of Vaginal Davis' drag.

In light of the now mass-success of RuPaul's Drag Race, the queer subtext—in terms of a turn to assimilation and neoliberalism that Muñoz wrote about in 1997 in "The White To Be Angry"—has only intensified. As such, the dialectic has shifted and drag terrorism has a broader aim and audience. Seemingly carrying the legacy of drag terrorism forward are figures like Christeene Vale, an American musician and performance artist. Swirling electronic beats accompany a hip-hop style verse in the opening shots of their music video for their song Big Shot.⁵⁷ Vale sits in bed, dressed in a pink nightgown with a matching headband, adorning the performer's long brown hair. The walls are painted with the same colors, the bed and shelves holding various symbols of a stereotyped female? gendering of childhood – including stuffed bunny rabbits, hearts, and unicorns. Two middle-aged men dressed in matching preppy outfits hover into the room, smiling in unison at the girl on the bed—at which the video's tone shifts from one of mocking to something more sinister. The three engage in a number of looks which are layered with perverse sexual innuendo before the men coerce the girl to sit in front of the mirror, passing her a vanity box, and have her apply lipstick.

A quick analysis of the video would clearly highlight the underlying theme of pedophilia and female infantilization. The two men, intended to be perceived as a couple, could represent the new, powerful male same-sex couple. In that sense, their treatment of the young girl—forcing her to be sexualized—represents the tendency in gay male discourses for misogyny and to celebrate female objectification.⁵⁸ Thus, the video functions as a queer critique of homonormativity which cultural figures such as Larry Kramer and Andrew Sullivan cultivated in the mid 1990s following the waning of queer activism after ACT UP.⁵⁹ Homonormativity stresses a conservative ideology that seeks to position the struggle for gay rights as being tied to privacy, transferring capital and political means mostly toward the legalization of marriage and the end of the ban of American homosexuals from serving in the military, disavowing the rebellious aspects of gender expression and queer sexuality.⁶⁰ Indeed, a closer look at the artistic practice and formal strategies undertaken by the artist, as well as the queer contemporary context in which it was produced, reveal Vale's work as a nuanced assault on the representation of queerness, femininity, and sexuality in an era dominated by the marketing of a sanitized, easily assimilated queer. A close-up shot of Christeene's face shows skin that is reddish, denoting decay and disease. Instead of highlighting her better features and covering up blemishes with makeup, Christeene uses makeup to look unhealthy, unsanitary, and unsafe. She is the antithesis to the beautiful, flawless drag queens that will be churned out of the latest cycle of RuPaul's Drag Race. While certainly not a drag queen by conventional standards, Christeene, who identifies as genderqueer, states that she uses the strategies of drag terrorism.⁶¹ By observing how Christeene uses her altered identity, from the smeared makeup and minimal attempt at female illusionism, one can easily see how she follows in the vein of other prominent drag terrorists such as Vaginal Davis.

Troubling this reading of Christeene's drag practice are the issues of branding and hybridization within drag in light of the omnipresence of RuPaul's Drag Race. In many ways, Christeene's drag terrorism has become a brand in itself, defanging its critical prowess. Christeene's persona as a rapper and the use of popular media imagery represent the assimilation of the violent interrogation of identity that Vaginal Davis provided, into a more commercial practice. Furthermore, the use of makeup to depict disease and violence underlines an exploitative use of cosmetics and aesthetics. While the disavowed queer body is simulated in the video, it ultimately becomes a kind of object, contributing to another reification. Filth is rendered into a glamorous spectacle, neutering its ability to challenge or shock. As such, while certainly critically informed, this new commercial approach to drag terrorism

contradicts its aims, and ultimately delivers an example of disidentification that is incomplete.

Victoria Sin's drag practice shares the same hybridity as Vale's; however, theirs is a more academic and inevitably more critically nuanced approach to drag. Sin returns the queer body into drag representation without a commercial oeuvre that consequently muddles its interpolation of the reification of gender and commodity production. The artist employs strategies of feminist performance art with her live performance of the banal, durational tasks of spreading butter on bread, resembling the seminal video-art piece by Martha Rosler in the 1975 work *The Semiotics of The Kitchen*. Rosler's dull, detached presentation of various domestic kitchen objects becomes increasingly violent, associating various kitchen utensils with a more sinister subtext. Moreover, Sin also employs the critical theories of Judith Butler in their work.⁶² Coming of age well beyond the turn to third wave feminism and the proliferation on intersectional academic work, Sin has the luxury of knowledge and access to media that drag performers in the 1990s did not. As such, their academic approach to drag forms a new kind of hybridity, sitting somewhere at the intersection between academics such as Munoz and Davis, and glamour drag performers.

The drag embodiment of Sin is one that disguises itself as a glamour icon. With flowing white-blond hair, makeup that resembles the face of queer legend and classical Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich, Sin embodies glamour to critique reification of gender and subvert identity in the manor of Munoz's disidentification theory. In the short documentary *Define Gender: Victoria Sin*, the performer walks on stage to shining stage lights with a swirling classical Hollywood score. The sound of their stilettos is powerful, carefully thudding as the performer walks around the stage without speaking or lip-syncing to a song, as a drag queen would traditionally do. Remarking on the size of their wig, "the bigger the hair, the larger the space I occupy. It was always my space. But now you are aware," Victoria Sin makes aware the point of their drag: to demand space within queer performance practices for femmes, for trans artists and for people of color—each an identity their work suspends simultaneously. Indeed, in many embodiments there is a level of gender transgression in the drag queen product they project. In fact, while they depict elements of the glamour queen typically seen in media representations including *RuPaul's Drag Race*, they also insert reference to queer femme identity with their tattoos and exposed armpit hair. This re-associates the body in the abject sight of hair on the femme body, dismantling systems of representation that seek to sanitize and restrict the queer body.

Re-activating drag into a queerer aesthetic has the effect of re-uniting body with image, and by extension object with process. Victoria Sin's purposeful suspension of the two, image and body, dismantles reification and the associated alienation occurring within capitalist systems of representation. Their work succeeds in subverting the branding and cosmetic oeuvre of contemporary drag by disrupting the normalizing logic of mainstream drag and queer politics of representation. What occurs is a new approach to drag that renders drag terrorism either inadequate or into a new hybrid that sees the medium, known for its brash, abrasive and violent connotations, into a more quiet, subdued, graceful performance that even in silence provides the critical re-queering required and demanded of drag in light of the new paradigm. In a new, precarious era of mass-cultural popularity, Victoria Sin asks the important questions of femininity, identity, and queerness that drag often asked historically, but which is needed now, again, more than ever.

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NOTES

- ¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_Trd6Vs4SA. Artist performing at Duckie, pulled from their channel on YouTube. The name of the performance is unknown.
- ² <http://shadesofnoir.org.uk/an-interview-with-victoria-sin/>. Interview with artist detailing their femme identity and the oppression of queers who are not cis-gendered gay-males within the drag and queer community.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Sin, Victoria. "You're Giving Me Boy, It's not feminine enough". Autolalia. 12.05.15. Article by Sin, critiquing the censorship of non-normative gender embodiment on RuPaul's Drag Race.
- ⁵ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. 1990. Print. New York: Routledge. Pp 204.
- ⁶ Muñoz, José Esteban. 1997. 'the white to be angry': Vaginal davis's terrorist drag. *Social Text* 52-53 : pg 87
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- ¹³ Benoit, Andrea. "An advertising world gone completely haywire".
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. 1997. 'the white to be angry': Vaginal davis's terrorist drag. *Social Text* 52-53 : pg 92.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 86.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 87.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 100.
- ¹⁹ Floyd, Kevin, and Project Muse. 2009. *The reification of desire: Toward a queer marxism*. New ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Pg 200.
- ²⁰ One aim of this project is an attempt to bring analysis of queer theory and feminism to an attempt at totality, joining analysis of both base and superstructure. This is certainly

observable as a subtext in the thesis and general approach in the paper, problematizing how a queer striving for autonomy in the realm of media and discourse is implicated in issues of production, with an attempt to expose the relationship between the two structures. However, as Mike Wayne remarks in Marxism and Media Studies, base and superstructure has come into question and labelled as “vulgar” and inadequate. Wayne himself attempts to reconfigure the base and superstructure model, quoting Frederic Jameson’s call to “Always historicize!”. In light of the lack of coherence on these issues, I have not directly named base and superstructure in my attendance to the relationships between the two through my discussion of reification and other labour concerns in neoliberal policies.

²¹ Muñoz, José Esteban. 1997. 'the white to be angry': Vaginal davis's terrorist drag. *Social Text* 52-53 : pg 87.

²²Ibid, 86. Muñoz builds his analysis of underground forms of drag through the ranking of drag queens along a spectrum between “glamour” such as that of RuPaul and “clown” such as Verla Jean Marman. Muñoz lifts this distinction from the book Drag Queens of New York by Julian Fleishcer.

²³ Collins, Cory G. 2017. Drag race to the bottom?: Updated notes on the aesthetic and political economy of RuPaul's drag race. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4 (1): 128-34. Pg 129-130.

²⁴ Butler, Judith, and Taylor & Francis. 2011;1993;2014;. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY;: Routledge. Pg 85.

²⁵ Ibid, 86.

²⁶ Ibid, 85-87.

²⁷ Ibid, 85.

²⁸ Power, Nina. 2009. *One-dimensional woman*. Winchester, UK. Nina Power’s book largely criticizes contemporary feminism’s failure to address the role the capitalism plays in a number of the major debates in feminism such as the place of Muslim women within the movement, prostitution, and pornography. Without a more Marxist approach, these debates are simply unproductive and delve into trappings of a less informed identity politics.

²⁹ González Rodríguez, Sergio. 2012. *The femicide machine*. Los Angeles, Calif: Semiotext(e). Pg 9.

³⁰ Benoit, Andrea. 2014. *An advertising world gone completely haywire": MAC VIVA GLAM*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 534

³⁵ Floyd, Kevin. *The reification of desire: Toward a queer marxism*. 200.

³⁶ Ibid, 199.

³⁷ Ibid, 200.

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- ³⁸ Jaleh Mansoor. "Representation" from *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-capitalist Struggle*. Fritsch, Kelly, Clare O'Connor, and A. K. Thompson. 2016. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed April 5, 2017).
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Lukács, Georg. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. London: Merlin Press. Pg 14.
- ⁴² Jaleh Mansoor. "Representation".
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 82.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 83.
- ⁴⁶ Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History*. 14th edition. (Wadsworth Centage learning, Boston, 2013) 856.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 92-93.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 86.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 83.
- ⁵² Ibid, 84.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 90-01. Dahmer was a serial killer and sex offender whose victims were young, homosexual African American men. Largely committed in the 1980s, the killings were noted for Dahmer's gruesome and perverse tactics, which include cannibalism.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, 87.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJNDWvLmxbk>. Christeene. Big Shot. 2016. Music Video.
- ⁵⁸ <http://shadesofnoir.org.uk/an-interview-with-victoria-sin/>. Interview with artist detailing their femme identity and the oppression of queers who are not cis-gendered gay-males within the drag and queer community.
- ⁵⁹ Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 200.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Aaron Scott , Interview with TBA's Gender Terrorist Christeene, *Portland Monthly*. 9/7/2012. Web Article. URL: <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/articles/2012/9/7/interview-with-tbas-gender-terrorist-christeene-september-2012>
- ⁶² Sin, *You're Giving Me Boy*.

THE OFFENDER BEHIND THE LENS: ENDURING ETHICAL LEGACY OF LAWRENCE BEITLER'S LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHY

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America, at present, is beginning to look and behave more like a parody of itself every day. One of the main reminders of American values used to be perceived is a gauge of social attitudes. Social attitudes are often the slowest and most difficult projections of those mindsets to change. One of the most glaring and persistent examples is racism -- such prejudice is itself the result of psychosocial conditioning that is exercised across multiple spheres: social structures, economic implications, legal frameworks - and even in those last bastions of intimacy and safety, education system and the family unit. During the Jim Crow era of the American South, racism represented a particularly insidious exercise of state sanctioned prejudice codified by laws surrounding housing, employment, and the suppression of voting rights. Worse, however, was the acceptability of murdering African Americans, often without any basis or legal accountability. African Americans during this period were excluded from legal protection, social support systems, and societal recognition of their rights. One such instance is captured on film in the 1930 photograph entitled *Lynching*, by Lawrence Beitler. The photograph has persisted in the American cultural lexicon because of the despicable context of the image: two men who did not deserve to have their lives taken, especially in such a barbaric way, robbed of dignity even in death. Even more astonishing is that the same trend is seen today in America, primarily through the shooting of unarmed African American men by police officers and the mass incarceration and capital punishment sentencing of African American men. Yet images as such must be scrutinized beyond their intended meaning, especially through a lens of modernity. Looking back, it becomes painfully evident that images like these do not simply shed light on a societal ill, but contribute to its normalization, over time inoculating the masses against the outrage that the image is meant to evoke. This is conveyed through the medium in which the photos were distributed, such as postcards and other

memorabilia, the publicity in which men like Beitler received for taking these photos, and the marketing of the photos through music and other mass media.

The photograph depicts the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, two African American men from Marion, Indiana, who were accused of robbery, rape, and murder. They were not given due process by any means of formal trial by peers or even formal legal processing, and so their innocence or guilt will most likely never be proven. Given the sociopolitical climate of the time and era, however, the viewer can assume that they were probably innocent, which is what makes the lynching that much more difficult to understand. Lynching is the hanging of a man/woman by his/her neck with rope from a tree or other structure until dead. It normally is accompanied by some form of grotesque celebration, like dragging the body or leaving it for public display. It became a very popular way to “deal with” African Americans during this particular period of American history. The photograph is iconically tragic because it depicts an event that was published in major outlets as a normalized phenomenon. It inspired the famous song, *Strange Fruit*, by Abel Meeropol in 1937, which was later turned into a timeless protest ballad by the famed African American singer Billie Holiday but stands also as a crowning achievement in the measures of photographic accountability. Even roughly a century after the photograph was taken, one question remains: how did society allow for this moment not only to occur, but also become so celebrated by those who were willing to be photographed conducting this heinous action of prejudice and outright murder? It is clear that even the most brilliant photographs, the ones that linger in the public imagination long after their having been taken, do more than just capture a moment in time; they capture, archive, and lay bare some of the most harmful societal beliefs, stripping away the shock value which incites change.

Within the photograph itself, the dead bodies of Shipp and Smith are quite visible with the nooses around their necks, suspending them from a tall tree. The young African American have blood on their faces and clothing, which is ripped and revealing their bare chests and torsos to the crowd. The corpses are the focus of the photograph but are not centered; instead, they share the frame with an entirely white crowd looking on with little fear, sadness, or shame in their eyes. One

could even argue hints of smugness on the visible parts of the onlookers. The majority of the all-white crowd appear nicely dressed and even at total ease with the scenery, which they obviously regard as “so ordinary, even banal’ few could have imagined the place in history they earned that night by posing for Lawrence Beitler’s camera.” One man points up to the body on the right, almost as if drawing attention to what they had just accomplished. Particularly memorable is the young man towards the lower left corner, wearing a thin tie and smiling, as he appears to be holding hands with an attractive woman who is standing next to another. While the image is a bit less clear at this angle, the next woman appears to be holding food in her hands and eating from it.

Such a detail is arguably more arresting than the man smiling. While racism could prompt individuals to experience a wide variety of reactions to the suffering of the group on the receiving end of the prejudice, the depiction of the woman being able to casually eat next to the scene of a murder provides a strong commentary on how utterly indifferent white people could prove to be towards African-Americans. Reviewing the photograph, one can only wonder how humanity experienced such psychic indifference as to document the murder as though it were a celebratory occasion. Given that lynching during this period was a common occurrence and had been for centuries, this image serves as a reminder of how such occurrences became increasingly normalized based off of human behavior and reactions; Beitler’s photograph is not the only one of its kind, but rather is one of a career-long series. By judging this image critically, and contextualizing it within the entirety of Beitler’s oeuvre, it seems that his images do little to startle and instead tend to create an aura of complacency. Of course, a counterargument might be that this same impact is not received in today’s environment and that people are not inoculated by extreme versions of violence such as lynchings. However, a strong case can be made to suggest that people are still just as desensitized to this extreme form of violence today as they were in the past. Video games and other mass-media have drawn on this basic premise of a lynching and made it commonplace. Moreover, the mass distribution of Beitler’s photo has made it commonplace and, in the act of mass distribution, some of the edge has been taken off of it. Lauren Walker writes, concerning the photos of lynchings “The photos scared me, but on the rare occasion they reappeared in school lessons, my

predominantly White classmates usually said 'ewww,' or laughed. The photos that served as warnings for Black children were used as mementos and retrograde shareable content among White people. Black people were and still can be regarded as things to be taken apart and passed down." In this manner, the impact of the photo has been muted, over time, and in some cases the violence has been reinvented in modern forms of entertainment.

The problem with Beitler's photo of the lynching is that, depending on one's perspective, one might expect a rational person to be horrified by the crowd's nonchalant demeanor. However, this kind of thinking only applies to those who empathize with the plight of African Americans. For others, this tone of (inappropriate) calmness will reassert their beliefs. Today it is easy to make this judgement, but when considering the state of America at the time this picture was taken and disseminated through a lens of historicism, when many Americans were not interested or actively pursuing social justice, the picture undoubtedly supported the unhelpful and archaic style of thinking held by most white Americans. Considering this history is essential to understanding the image.

To begin with, 1930 was an incredibly momentous year in American history. Just one year after the start of the Great Depression, it was marked by increasing white-driven hostilities towards African Americans who were struggling for survival in the Jim Crow era in the Southern United States, who were seen as threatening to what little livelihood was to be had by white men. Julius E. Thompson observes that the rapidly declining economic era provided the thinly veiled excuse that poor whites needed to perpetuate the reign of terror against the vulnerable population of African-Americans, who, because of their skin color and the historical perpetuation of discrimination and marginalization against them in a society that did not legally protect their rights either. Thompson essentially argues that while lynching rates had fallen in the years leading up to the Great Depression, they were resuscitated by economic competition between white and African-American populations. This is made exceedingly clear when Thompson claims that "lynching became briefly more common and more brutal." The increasing frequency and brutality of lynchings was specific to Mississippi, but the results were observed in states across the southern United States of America.

This sociopolitical backdrop of angry whites and vulnerable people of color sets the stage for not only how Shipp and Smith were lynched, but the justification to have the event documented by photographer Lawrence Beitler in the first place. Given that lynching during this period became more common, the public's acceptance of this photograph illustrates that this picture serves as a reminder of how such occurrences became increasingly normalized as society became desensitized to them. After all, Beitler's photograph is not the only one of its kind. Other similar photos were taken and were widely shared. Returning to the unresolved question offered earlier in this paper regarding what role the photographers play in normalizing this phenomenon of violence, sources that opted to publish the photographs such as local newspapers took a tone that "justice had been done, if perhaps precipitously, by the town's upstanding citizens." "Upstanding citizens" here is a cultural signifier meant to euphemistically describe those willing, eager even, to lynch the men for the sake of flawed, biased justice rather than giving them the chance to escape or be acquitted in court. Beitler's own beliefs with regards to 'racial purity' (the belief that races should remain separate and not inter-breed, or the belief that one race is purer than another, and thus superior) are never explored in any scholarly biographical accounts of him. However, it is known that after capturing the famous image, he allegedly stayed up for 110 days straight printing as many images as he could (a hyperbolic exaggeration which highlights Beitler's own disgust with the content of the images and their cultural significance). In a later interview with his daughter, Beitler was remembered as stating "I didn't even want to do it...but taking pictures was my business." Most of the pictured Beitler printed were in postcard format, which he then sold for fifty cents each as a sort of grotesque souvenir of lynchings in the Southern United States. The selling and advertising of this image, however, demonstrates a coldness on Beitler's part. It could be argued that he was not, after all, taking these pictures purely for charity or for the public good and that he had every right to sell them, but this is still a major facet of the problem of normalizing these kinds of image, this kind of racial hierarchy, and this senseless violence.

The short answer is that the role the photographers played in the lynching scene was a rather large one. Mark Reinhart argues that one school of thought in

the decades since lynching was a common occurrence, is that photographers were arguably complicit in the violence they documented from behind the lens. Particularly, in the mid-twentieth century, individual photographers were generally sympathetic to the racist views of white supremacists, evident in their ability to document lynchings in the first place. It is worth noting, for example, that the angle of the photograph with relation to the height of the tree means that Beitler most certainly would have had to use a tripod to capture it. Even as the citizens appear unashamed—a subject to be addressed later—the preparedness of the photograph’s setup suggests Beitler had some prior knowledge of the lynching that would take place. If Beitler knew that the lynching was going to occur beforehand, and was sympathetic to the lynch mob himself, that essentially means that the cruelty of the crowd extends beyond the camera lens, that the picture, and not the lynching itself, is a result of this kind of racial violence. It is both the premeditated documentation of an unspeakable act of violence as well as the confession of a violent but ultimately personal act: Beitler’s own complicity in the lynching. And while it would be easy to claim that Beitler had no prior knowledge of the event, he is clearly on congenial terms with the white crowd, as they are interactive with the camera and fine with the idea of this picture being taken by this particular photographer. Mark Reinhardt and Henrik Gustafsson characterize photographers of lynchings as “part of the script,” arguing that they “were, as a rule, taken by those actively joined the mob or by professionals known to be sympathetic to its aims.” Therefore, this allegiance granted them the proximity allowed them to be close enough to document the violence in the first place. Photographs like the image captured by Beitler were common throughout the 20th century, which suggests that these photographs serve as not merely a documentation of racial violence, but praise of it. One of the most haunting photographic relics of the time are postcards which explicitly depict lynchings. These postcards bore grisly images not unlike Beitler’s captured image of Shipp and Smith, which document lynching victims in the moments immediately following their deaths. Most of the postcards involve macabre images of whites, clearly celebrating the death of the young men in the background. The sheer volume of lynching photographs suggests two things: first, that lynching was an acceptable enough social activity to provide an ample supply for a high demand; and second,

that such photographs “served to normalize and make socially acceptable—even aesthetically acceptable—the utter brutality of a lynching.”

In her exhaustive study regarding the process of documenting lynching in film, Amy Louise Wood suggests that the most horrific dimension of lynching lies within the desire on the part of white supremacists to so significantly and thoroughly harm their African-American victims. They are so motivated “to obliterate his human and masculine identity, to make him into the “black beast” that their racial and sexual ideology purported him to be.” The photographer reinforces this narrative of white supremacy, because in capturing the African-American in their reduced, mutilated state, the representation of the deceased is as something less than human. Dehumanizing African-Americans was a key method of obtaining power through such hate crimes. The method of dehumanization is also one that “justifie[s] and incite[s] the violence” inherent in lynchings. Wood also suggests that the frequent exhibition of such images similarly guaranteed that lynching was not only “visually remembered and repeatedly witnessed,” but also that it remained “perpetually alive or in force.” This framework clearly establishes a foundation for the photographer’s responsibility in documenting the lynching photographs. In Wood’s thorough study of the subject, she found that lynching photographs typically fall into one of three categories: “they feature isolated framings of the hanging body or bodies, a group of satisfied white men surrounding the dead, or a larger crowd of white spectators viewed from a distance.” Two of the three categories focus on a clear trend of demonstrating “a sense of purpose and racial solidarity. . .while leaving the dead men isolated and degraded, stripped of dignity”. The stripping did not end with the murder of the men, however; Wood’s research shows that the psychic angle of continuing to devalue the men postmortem was a deliberate and appealing element of documenting their dead forms on film. The continued promotion of the images also helped justify the cause of white supremacy, which in turn, caused more harm and injury to communities of African-Americans, portraying them as savages.

Some of the “savage” imagery is strangely present with Beitley’s work. Numerous authors have pointed out that a white sheet has been wrapped around the body of Smith. Not only does the sheet replace the pants that were likely

ripped from his body, the sheet resembles a loincloth. In more modern interpretations, the draping of the loincloth is interpreted as a Christ-like image, but at the time of the lynching, it most likely served as a confirmation of the “wild man” narrative, as loincloths were considered to be “primitive” clothing options. Dovetailing on the work of Reinhardt and Wood, Ellen Armour’s findings reveal that the photographer bears responsibility for the photograph’s intentions and impacts. Reinhardt counters that the pictures were “sexualized fury.” Sexuality often played a large part in the poor treatment, stereotyping, and lynching of young African American men. As slaves, they were often seen as “black bucks,” meant to please the white mistresses or, conversely, capable of rape. This same narrative continued well into the early 20th century, with African American men being associated with insatiable sexual appetites and sexual crimes. The “sexualized fury” could be interpreted as a kind of retribution: a blow against black masculinity because of closely-held white inferiority, jealousy, or contempt based off of these untrue stereotypes.

Attempting to discern the ultimate responsibility for the person behind the camera is not a new area of study specific to photography. Susan Sontag grappled with these questions in her groundbreaking work, *On Photography*, initially published in 1977. Sontag argued that “there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera”—a way of asserting how photography cannot only reveal, but even revel in the violence perpetrated against vulnerable people. Sarah Parsons interprets that the motivation behind Sontag’s work was largely to warn the public about the power and possibility of photography to “anesthetize its viewers.” The anesthetization of the viewer is exactly what allowed lynching photographs to exist, circulate, and accumulate profit as novelty items. In Sontag’s assessment, the emotional reactions one experiences upon viewing photographs can reveal a good deal about the assessment and judgment values a viewer ultimately makes. However, much of those ideas are driven by narrative. With respect to the historical issues of lynching, the narrative that drove many of those photographs was one of white supremacy and white racial superiority to the suffering of African-American communities. Such messages were unquestionably reinforced by the economic disparity, as numerous studies of history find that no one population suffered during the Great Depression as significantly as African-Americans. Reinhardt

argues that lynching photography “enacted humiliation and degradation; the circulation of the pictures extended it.” The motivation to terrorize African-Americans; the need to humiliate and dominate them, could only come about through the determined evaluation that the men were less than human.

To conclude, it is clear that the right photograph can exercise a profound influence upon human society. Seeing is often equated to believing, and anyone who has been moved emotionally by a movie or other visual medium can readily understand that there is an unspoken power in art. Beitler’s photograph, *Lynching*, for instance, did not simply document a bloodthirsty mob in the aftermath of several brutal murders. On the contrary, it provided a telling and concise encapsulation of the racial divide present in 1930s United States, which caused a racial divide so great that many whites were eager to brag about taking part in such horrific displays of prejudice. The Civil Rights movement, which fully took form in the 1950s, was an arduous struggle, and photographs such as Beitler’s *Lynching* basically forced the privileged (and mostly white) portion of society to confront the fact that the Civil War and ensuing Reconstruction period had not solved the country’s racial problems. Even now, photographs such as the infamous image from August 2016 depicting a bloodied Syrian child sitting in a hospital chair works against humanity’s impulse to sweep the effects of unpleasant conflicts under the rug. In the end, the fact that images can move us from deep-seated apathy and ignorance is a potent testament to photography’s profound effect on the human psyche. This impact must be recognized today because it has modern-day ramifications. Specifically, lynching has taken on modern-forms and is readily seen today in America. For instance, there is a high number of shootings of unarmed African American men by police officers and African American men are at an increased risk of receiving capital punishment. The lessons of the past have to be applied to the present and future, and it is incredibly dangerous when cultures become desensitized to such horrific images and happenings.

FIGURES



Beitler, Lawrence, *Lynching, 1930, America's Black Holocaust Museum*. Accessed April 1, 2018.

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