

## INTRODUCTION

### HAVING IT ALL: *TRANSVESTIA*'S GENDER COMMUNITY

It was good to have known Sheldon. His life reached far beyond the circle of his loved ones to touch others like me. Though he lived out his life in the body of a man there was also the spirit of a gentle kindly woman living there in the home on the hill—and this is the person I really knew.

On February 9, 1971, Sheldon, a successful businessman and engineer, died of a sudden heart attack at the age of thirty-nine. In a number of respects, Sheldon's life embodied the American Dream. He was a happily married husband and a devoted father to a son and daughter. He and his family lived in a nice house on a beautiful hilltop in northern Idaho. And as a civic leader, Sheldon was admired and respected by other citizens in his town.

Sheldon's passing came as a devastating shock to his family and community. His death also deeply touched a unique underground society of friends that stretched across the United States. A few of Sheldon's friends from this underground community wrote poignant tributes, like the one in the above epigraph, in honor of his memory. These tributes were published in *Transvestia*, a bi-monthly magazine that Sheldon subscribed to [See Appendix A]. Many readers of this magazine recognized Sheldon as a 'first.' Ten years earlier, he had appeared on its cover in the guise of a woman named Annette. His feminine appearance was not a joke or a Halloween costume. *Transvestia* catered to male-to-female crossdressers, or transvestites, to use the label common at the time.

“Annette ” was Sheldon’s alter ego—his feminine persona—and *Transvestia*’s very first ‘cover girl.’

*Transvestia* was first published in 1960 by Virginia Prince, a white, heterosexual, male-to-female crossdresser from Los Angeles. With this magazine, Prince sought to educate, entertain, and instruct heterosexually-oriented crossdressers like Sheldon. *Transvestia* went from twenty-five initial subscribers to several hundred around the United States over the twenty years of Prince’s editorship. While Prince contributed regular columns to the magazine, readers submitted most of the content of each issue, including their life histories, fictional stories, letters to the editor, and self-photographs. In 1962, Prince formed a national membership organization for transvestites called Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE), which Sheldon also joined. It lasted for almost fifteen years before merging with another crossdressing club to form Tri-Sigma, a group that later became Tri-Ess, which still exists today as the largest membership organization for crossdressers in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Marilyn and Maureen were also crossdressers, *Transvestia* subscribers, and members of the same national “sorority” as Sheldon. In their tributes to their dear friend Sheldon / Annette, they each recalled a flattering comment made by one of Sheldon’s business associates who was unaware of his feminine persona and his association with this underground network of crossdressers. To this associate, Sheldon was the quintessential “All American Boy.” Marilyn and Maureen agreed with this assessment, but they not

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<sup>1</sup> Born in 1912, Prince’s birth name was Arnold Lowman. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Prince first adopted “Muriel” and later “Virginia Prince” as a pseudonymous feminine name. When delivering public lectures and co-authoring articles, Prince sometimes went by “Virginia Bruce.” She chose the name “Charles Prince” as a pseudonymous masculine name. Prince was a chemist and part owner of a pharmaceutical plant. For a personal account of Prince’s life, see “The Life and Times of Virginia,” *Transvestia* #100 (1979).

only admired the man, they also remembered Sheldon as the beautiful and gracious Annette—the “fairest of them all”—their own “Miss America.” The gendered dichotomies featured in their tributes are striking. Marilyn described Sheldon the man as “hard working, skilled, strong, [and] highly regarded in a line of work which was ‘strictly masculine’; [he was] a wonderful husband; a fine father.” With these remarks, Marilyn portrayed Sheldon as the prototypical middle-class breadwinner. “But, transformed into Annette, she was feminine perfection: lovely, graceful, soft spoken, [and] delightful in every way. Never one to swish, to exaggerate or to otherwise artificially draw attention to herself, all eyes nonetheless followed her every step because she carried herself gracefully and because she was strikingly beautiful.” Sheldon / Annette’s other friend, Maureen, concurred and added:

...her life was the best balance between the two roles of man and woman. As a man he lived with confidence, moving in a masculine world with enthusiasm and satisfaction.... As a woman, Annette was quiet and charming.... Everything about her was correct for a woman her age and lifestyle. No pretense, nothing artificial that had to be labored over. She was at ease as a woman, a warm and friendly person, free of the tendency to overdo the feminine aspects that characterize some.... I could detect no difference in the family attitude as he moved from one role to the other. Self restraint and consideration marked the activities of Annette so that her fun and satisfaction were not bought at the expense of family happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Amazingly, what Maureen said of Sheldon’s family life was true. Sheldon did not hide “Annette” from his wife or his two children. In fact, his crossdressing was known and accepted by many members of his community.

Virginia Prince also wrote fondly of Sheldon / Annette. Prince marveled at Annette’s growth, service, and transformation over the ten years she had known ‘her.’ Prince had

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes from “Annette—The Fairest of Them All” by Marilyn and “My Friend Annette” by Maureen in *Transvestia* #68 (1971). Maureen put Sheldon’s age at thirty-five but this is wrong. A death record I found listed his date of birth in the year 1931.

helped Annette and hundreds of other male-to-female crossdressers who read her magazine and joined the membership organization to develop a sense of self-awareness. Prince wanted to socialize individual ‘deviance,’ in short, to place transvestism within a group context, domesticate it, and normalize it by promoting the radical idea that transvestites were not immoral, sexual deviants but rather normal, respectable citizens with only a harmless gender variation. By creating a semi-public space for its expression, Prince transformed crossdressing from a private, secretive and sometimes shameful practice into a social phenomenon for her readers.

The specific goals of *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon, in these regards, were to foster self-acceptance on the part of subscribers and members, to help crossdressers cultivate a respectable and aesthetically pleasing feminine persona, to instill within them a desire to help other crossdressers develop their feminine gender personalities, and to promote a socially affirming script to counter public discourses that configured transvestism as a configuration of sin, sickness, and criminality. Annette had followed the script perfectly, having moved from a closeted, fetishistic transvestite who had a particular fixation for women’s shoes to a person who had learned to accept his feminine personality, to dress tastefully and behave respectably, and to responsibly integrate his crossdressing practices into his regular, masculine life with little or no harm to his family or his status as good husband and strong father. Adhering to certain prescriptive advice within the grand script, Annette had also worked hard to find acceptance from others within his family and community. Furthermore, he had been a dedicated member of Phi Pi Epsilon, having hosted yearly retreats for fellow crossdressers at his home in Idaho.

Although distance separated Annette (Idaho), Marilyn (Washington), Maureen (Colorado), and Virginia Prince (California), they forged “brotherly” and “sisterly” bonds through their subscription to *Transvestia* and their membership in the transvestite sorority. They, along with several hundreds of other crossdressers, risked ruining their often privileged lives and destroying their reputations in order to build and belong to a world where male-bodied individuals who had a certain “feeling” for femininity could find acceptance and comradeship and experience a sense of normalcy.

There were probably numerous (sub)cultures of transvestism in postwar America. This project is narrowly concerned with the forms of social identity constructed by the hundreds of crossdressers who read *Transvestia* and officially joined Phi Pi Epsilon, as well as those who affiliated with the organizational network in less formal ways. I refer to this social formation and cultural imaginary as “*Transvestia*’s gender community.” It comprised several hundred mostly white, heterosexual-oriented, middle to professional class, periodic male-to-female transvestites. A large subset of this group, perhaps half, also possessed a sense of crossgender identification. A few within this subset, including Prince, changed their social gender permanently and lived full-time as women. Some of these folks would later identify as transsexual and obtain sex reassignment surgery.

How did this underground society emerge? How did it develop from a readership to a membership organization? What were the risks and benefits of membership? Why did Annette, Marilyn, Maureen, and others who joined its ranks invest in rigid notions of gender, cultivate distinct feminine personas, and live out dichotomized gender roles as “All-American men” and as Miss Americas? How do the answers to these questions enrich our understanding of postwar gender and sexuality in the United States? These are

some of the important questions I tackle in this attempt to document and historicize the development, evolution, culture, thought, identity-work, and social practices of *Transvestia*'s gender community. I seek to broaden our understanding of male-bodied gender diversity by exploring how, from the declining Cold War culture of the early 1960s to the sexual experimentation of the 1970s, one faction of "gender outlaws" rode the wave of postwar social and cultural changes, constructed crossgender identities, and formed group consciousness through an underground print culture and social world of their own making.<sup>3</sup>

These crossdressers assembled first in a storytelling, textual space and later in organized social groups. As the transformation of Annette and hundreds of other crossdressers demonstrate, transvestite identity and the practice of crossdressing from the 1960s onward changed through the circulation and consumption of identity stories and photographs and within the context of community formation. I argue that transvestism came to mean something quite different for many of *Transvestia*'s subscribers and Phi Pi Epsilon's members than it had before the advent of these cultural and social mediums. As the succeeding chapters demonstrate, crossdressing within this gender community became an activity around which a person constructed a significant part of his or her identity. Under conditions of developing solidarity, consciousness, and social organizing in the 1960s and 1970s, what had previously been a secret and private *practice* came to be conceptualized as a social *identity*.

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term, "male-bodied gender diversity," from Susan Stryker's pioneering scholarship. See her impressive edited volume *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006). The term, "gender outlaws," comes from Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

This dissertation, then, historicizes the making of an important “trans” identity. The crossdressers who read and contributed to the magazine and joined Phi Pi Epsilon were actually part of a broader social formation of gender and sexual minorities that included transsexuals, drag queens, street queens, she-males, effeminate gays, butch lesbians, and clothing fetishists. All of these diverse groups crossdressed to varying extents and were ‘guilty’ of gender transgression, that is to say, of displaying non-normative variations of the sex/gender relationship. Yet all were lumped together in the public’s mind under the broad category of sexual deviancy. In the decades after WWII, these groups, along with gays and lesbians, sorted themselves out from the fray of gender and sexual variance. They did so within a social context of mutual aversion to one another and a cultural context of public fear of deviation from conventional gender roles and the social norm of reproductive, marital heterosexuality.

It should go without saying that the practice of crossdressing and crossgender phenomena have existed for centuries and have had different meanings and stylistic variations across time and from culture to culture. Even in the 1950s and early 1960s, a variety of styles and practices relating to gender and sexuality characterized the category of transvestism in the United States. My archival research has uncovered one such variation. Or rather, it has uncovered a cohort of gender variant individuals who, with varying levels of success, tried to instill uniformity among diverse gendered practices, forms of expression, and modes of identity. The mostly white, heterosexually-oriented, and middle to professional class men who read *Transvestia* and joined Phi Pi Epsilon developed and consolidated distinct styles, aesthetics, forms of self-expression, and modes of gender identity and gendered personhood. Most of these individuals

crossdressed periodically and completely in women's clothing in order, they claimed, to relax and to express the feminine side of their personalities. With some exceptions, they tended to crossdress in conservative fashions. They would not dare don flashy or over-the-top clothing and heavy make-up like that worn by most drag queens and female impersonators. *Transvestia*'s crossdressers usually avoided these forms of overly sexualized gender presentation and considered their clothing styles to be tasteful and respectable—the kind of attire and accouterments worn by genuine “ladies.” Of those who enjoyed dressing completely, and most did, a sizeable number also imitated the behaviors, looks, and mannerisms that signified white, middle-class femininity in their time. Emulation also often involved speaking in softer, feminine-like voices, which rounded out the overall image of femininity they were trying to capture. It seems that most crossdressers in *Transvestia*'s gender community ‘dressed’ secretly in their homes and in motel rooms; however, a large minority also regularly went out on public excursions crossdressed and visited gay bars and female impersonator shows. A majority was married and had children. Of those married, a surprising number were “out” to their wives and sometimes even to their kids.

Most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers considered the practice of crossdressing a fun, exciting, and relaxing hobby. Yet Cold War ideology compelled them to rationalize and dignify it. Prince, columnists, and many letter and life history writers elaborated a philosophy called “dual personality expression.” Adherents of dual personality expression contended that every human being has both masculine and feminine traits, attributes, and capacities. Therefore, a man who dressed in women's clothes, acted feminine, and emulated the social role of a lady was merely expressing qualities that had



been arbitrarily assigned to the feminine gender role. Dual personality was heavily promoted in *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon as a mode of gender identification and a form of self-expression. Many adherents of the dual personality philosophy genuinely believed that they could create a legitimate, three dimensional embodiment of the feminine—that is to say, a feminine persona or personality with hobbies, interests, and personality quirks distinct from those belonging to their “masculine selves.” They usually referred to this feminine persona as the “girl-within.” For example, Annette was Sheldon’s feminine persona, his girl-within.

*Transvestia*’s crossdressers idealized and emulated certain classed and racialized models of femininity, such as the suburban housewife, the girl-next-door, the well-bred lady, the club woman, and the pin-up bombshell. In cultivating a feminine persona in the mold of these now iconic figures, they strived for authenticity. Perfecting these looks constituted an important goal, especially for those who ventured out in public ‘dressed.’ As is evident in the dozens of identity narratives published in *Transvestia*, the concept of “gender” held by many within this community carried both constructionist and essentialist elements. While their practices suggest that they viewed gender as a process of becoming and conceptualized it as fluid, that is to say, as a thing one does as opposed to a thing one is, many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers retained an essentialist notion of “femininity” as flowing from an original source: female-bodied individuals, the “GGs” [genetic girls] they sought to emulate. Even as they reinforced the gender dichotomies of their culture by cultivating a second, distinct feminine persona out of the cultural and

social accoutrements that signified “woman,” they mostly viewed the linkage between (social and psychological) gender and bodily sex as arbitrary.<sup>4</sup>

Still, this transvestite subculture challenged, both in theory and in practice, society’s biological essentialisms, which aligned sex, gender, and sexuality. The subjective identifications of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers enabled them to question the deeply ingrained presumption that gender is an epiphenomenon of biological sex. That is to say, many of them held to task the dominant logic that femininity naturally and mechanically springs forth from a female-sexed body. At the same time, however, they retained certain notions and understandings that I would call *social* essentialisms. For example, *Transvestia*’s crossdressers certainly did not think that attributes such as grace, beauty, and daintiness were *inherently* feminine qualities. Nevertheless, they did view them as *essentially* belonging to the female social world. And they wanted the right, in spite of their male-bodiedness and the cultural imperatives they faced to be and act masculine, to

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler popularized within queer and literary studies the idea of gender as a stylized performance. See, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). For those who wish not to plow through this foundational yet dense text, see an abbreviated and more assessable version of her ideas in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside / Out* (New York: Routledge, 1991). In this essay, Butler’s notion of gender as “a kind of imitation for which there is no original” is germane to my analysis of this transvestite subculture and their performances of femininity. Extending Esther Newton’s insights into drag, Butler argues, “Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group, i.e. an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’ and ‘feminine’ belongs to ‘female.’ There is no ‘proper’ gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property” (21). Butler goes on to observe that “Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (21). With this analysis, Butler denaturalizes normative heterosexuality and heterosexual genders, thereby exposing their constructedness: “...in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (21). It follows then that “If heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself, an imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original, then the imitative parody of ‘heterosexuality’—when and where it exists in gay cultures—is always and only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original” (22). A Butlerian perspective on gender exonerates, so to speak, the enactments of femininity that other scholars have criticized transvestites (and drag queens) as misappropriating. As the reader will discover later on in chapter three, I strike a balance. While I recognize all genders as performances, I point out transvestites’ complicity with male power, even as they transgressed gender roles and norms.

trespass into this “foreign” world and enjoy the pleasures of femininity that their culture forbade them to express as men. Paradoxically, many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers used the strict, repressive gendered social and cultural dichotomies they encountered in everyday life to their advantage. They reasoned that the only way they could express feminine attributes without suffering a good deal of cognitive dissonance and public sanction was to dress in women’s clothing—to look and act the part that called for these qualities and traits to be expressed. This logic would begin to dissipate as the decade transpired. As a result, many altered their rationales to accommodate the changing times.

It is important to emphasize that *Transvestia*’s gender community was a product of Cold War culture as well as an alternative to it. Scholarly literature and popular memory have painted an image of the Cold War era as rigidly conformist with one prevailing standard of masculinity. More recent scholarship, however, has complicated this portrait of postwar manhood and masculinity, contending that gender was never as uniform as commonly mythologized. Rather, the postwar era saw a variability and proliferation of masculinities and femininities. *Transvestia*’s gender community represented one small but significant variation of the sex/gender relationship in postwar America.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The argument regarding the existence of diverse masculinities in the postwar era has been made by Bill Ogersby, *Playboys of Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure Style in Modern America* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001) and James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the Fifties* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005). For other works in the field of masculinity studies, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995); Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); K.A. Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis of American Masculinity, 1949—1960,” *Journal of American History* 87 (September 2000); Robert Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York: NYU Press, 1993). For reviews of the literature on masculinity and men’s movements, see Bruce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies,” *American Quarterly* 52 (June 2000); Toby Ditz, “The New Men’s History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Remedies from Early American Gender History,” *Gender and History* 16:1 (April 2004), 1—35;

Yet even while serving as evidence of the existence of an alternative model to normative notions of masculinity, *Transvestia*'s community also confirms that the postwar culture's models of gender, while not ubiquitous or always followed, exercised tremendous power. The Cold War fear of sexual deviancy or better, the fear of becoming stigmatized as sexually deviant, greatly structured this community's ideology, style, aesthetics, and practices. To normalize the practice of periodic crossdressing and to remove the stigma of deviant gender and transgressive sexuality commonly associated with transvestism, *Transvestia*'s crossdressers obscured the erotic components of crossdressing. Instead, they emphasized the aesthetic functions of transvestism and purported that the style of crossdressing they uniquely practiced outwardly reflected interior, virtuous, feminine qualities. They contended that the expression of such 'feminine' qualities as grace, beauty, and gentleness safely distinguished them from gender-variant types that they considered disreputable—the *true* sexual deviants, such as transvestite fetishists, drag queens, and street queens.

### Historiographical Context

In the pages of *Transvestia* and in the almost two dozen FPE "sororities" that formed across the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of crossdressers constructed and fought over their own identities, wrestled with gender norms and postwar domestic problems, and profoundly engaged questions of gender, embodiment, desire, and identity. In this social formation brought about by reading *Transvestia* and socializing in Phi Pi

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Kenneth Clatterbaugh, "Review Essay: Literature of the U.S. Men's Movements," *Signs* 25:3 (Spring 2000), 883—894 and James Gilbert, chapter 2, "Crisis and the History of Masculinity," *Men in the Middle* (2005).

Epsilon, transvestites experienced a shared culture. They began to develop a sense of what transvestism could mean socially and communicatively beyond their private fantasies and secret practices. Searching for meaning in their desires, they took self and group photographs and wrote their life histories for others to see and read in *Transvestia*. They also gathered in homes and motels to socialize as members of their national sorority. In the process, many of them came to see themselves not as isolated members of a deviant category but as an empowered community; they became the authors of their own stories rather than the subjects of regulatory medical and stigmatizing cultural discourses. The sort of agency, resistance, and identity and community formation I describe has been examined by numerous scholars of the GLBTQ experience. My dissertation is situated within this trajectory of scholarly works, especially scholarship on gender and sexuality that make visible sexual and gendered lives and experiences that have been “hidden from history.”<sup>6</sup>

While a fairly large body of historical scholarship about postwar gay and lesbian social identity formation and collective activism has been produced in the last thirty years, historians have not had that much to say about the concomitant emergence in the United States of “trans” identities and communities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. One

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<sup>6</sup> This expression alludes to Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, & George Chauncey’s landmark edited volume *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1990). For several other examples, see: Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998); Annick Prieur, *Mema’s House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998); Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Avalon, 2006); and Brett Beemyn, ed., *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

notable exception is Joanne Meyerowitz, who in 2002 published a path breaking historical account of the socio-medico construction of transsexuality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States. Using medial literature, court cases, correspondence among medical and mental health professionals, and mainstream and tabloid newspapers, she focuses a good deal of attention on the perspective of doctors and the popular press, that is to say, the medical and media construction of transsexuality. Yet Meyerowitz astutely counters this top-down narrative with an analysis of transsexual agency and identity construction from the ground level, particularly the identity-work and public life of male-to-female transsexual and media sensation Christine Jorgensen.

In broad strokes, Meyerowitz paints a portrait of the “taxonomic revolution” that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among doctors, journalists, and ‘transgendered’ persons as each group delineated and differentiated types of gender and sexual variance. My dissertation is similarly concerned with the modern formation of “trans” identities that emerged from the confluence of sexological nomenclature, media stories, and agent negotiation. My work differs first and foremost by its primary subject of investigation: transvestites instead of transsexuals. And the focus is on agent negotiation and resistance on the ground level. Therefore, I take a closer, more detailed look at one group or alliance of ‘gender deviants’ that struggled for social legibility within a broader climate of taxonomic production and contestation<sup>7</sup>

Meyerowitz’s book was a product of growing academic interest in transgender phenomena that took place alongside the emergence of a transgender political and social identity movement in the 1990s. Susan Stryker, a pioneer in the field of transgender

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<sup>7</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

studies, observes that the term “transgender” took on its current meaning in 1992 as a result of its appearance in Leslie Feinberg’s influential pamphlet, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement whose Time Has Come.” According to Stryker, “transgender” came to be viewed as “a ‘pangender’ umbrella term for an imagined community encompassing transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys and anybody else willing to be interpolated by the term, who felt compelled to answer the call to mobilization.” Stryker provides the following definition of the field she helped establish:

Transgender studies...is the academic field that claims as its purview transsexuality and cross-dressing, some aspects of intersexuality and homosexuality, cross-cultural and historical investigations of human gender diversity, myriad specific subcultural expressions of ‘gender atypicality,’ theories of sexed embodiment and subjective gender identity development, law and public policy related to the regulation of gender expression, and many other similar issues.... Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly my project falls within this rubric, but I would emphasize that I am also bringing a historical framework to bear on the “trans” folk who crossdressed, read, wrote, and socialized within *Transvestia*’s gender community. The inclusion of transvestites in transgender studies and transgender history, and more broadly the history of gender and sexuality, is crucial because of their role in shaping this history and the questions and issues they raise in their lives in their writings about gender, transgender, sexuality, embodiment, and desire.

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds. *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 3-4.

Before the entrance of “transgender” in academic and common parlance, some scholars had actually written about transgendered populations, networks, and individuals yet were unaware of it. Like many health professionals, journalists, and lay persons, scholars conceptualized gender variance as a symptom, condition, sign, and visual marker of homosexuality. Therefore, individuals and groups that are often considered today as transgender were represented as “gay” twenty years ago. Deciding which historical agents count as gender variant or transgender and which ones as possessing a non-normative sexuality can be tricky. For example, is Esther Newton’s classic *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America* an ethnographic account of a homosexual population or of a transgender population? Although originally billed as one of the first book length scholarly monographs of a gay subculture, it could certainly be re-classified today as ethnography of a transgendered population. Likewise, might we now consider the crossdressing fairies that George Chauncey writes about in *Gay New York* as falling within the umbrella of transgender? These questions, of course, are merely observations of how concepts change and new categories revise or subsume older ones and are not an attack on scholars who researched and wrote before the transgender movement emerged full force and before transgender studies came out of the shadows of queer theory and gay and lesbian studies. To be sure, gender variance and sexual variance (i.e. same sex object choice) have intertwined histories, as they were conflated in the past and remain so today, at least in some contexts. Meyerowitz argues that the discourse on transsexuality that proliferated in the postwar era compelled professionals in science, medicine, journalism, and law, as well as gender variant individuals, to make analytical distinctions among the categories of sex, sexuality, and gender. The transvestite agents in my



dissertation tried to untangle sex, sexuality, and gender and did so alongside other individuals and groups from their era who also marked finer distinctions.

The formation of ‘trans’ identities was a complex and collaborative process involving men of science who often invented the labels and public categories, members of the media who wrote about gender transgression, and gender variant individuals who negotiated these medical and cultural discourses and also created their own unique lexicon. ‘*As a man I exist; as a woman—I live*’ highlights the one part of this dynamic process that has received the least amount of scholarly attention: the existence of a counter-discourse generated by a particular subcultural community of transvestites—i.e. *Transvestia*’s gender community—that illustrates the ways they constructed and negotiated crossgender identities and formed group consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

In this study, I examine the social practices and modes of identity developed by both periodic crossdressers and transvestites who possessed crossgender identifications, as they both inhabited the social formation that emerged alongside *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon. Without a doubt, a handful of other gender variant individuals who practiced crossdressing affiliated in various degrees with *Transvestia*’s social world, and where appropriate I note their participation, as well as discuss the role of exclusionary ‘other’ that was often foisted upon them. However, this history does not focus on individuals who crossdressed for entertainment purposes, such as drag queens or professional female impersonators. And although the erotic informed the crossdressing practices of *Transvestia*’s readers and writers, I do not focus on those who crossdressed *primarily* for

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<sup>9</sup> Again, for a fascinating history of how transsexuals sorted themselves out from the mix of gender and sexual variance, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), especially chapter five. Meyerowitz offers a few paragraphs on Virginia Prince, see pages 91 and 181—182.

sexual gratification—the fetishistic transvestites—who typically utilized only a few articles or a single article of clothing. By extension, individuals whose S&M practices involved crossdressing are not featured in my history.

Lastly, transsexuals are not ostensibly represented in this study. I say ostensibly because ‘transsexuality’ is everywhere in *Transvestia* as a category against which the “true transvestites” defined themselves. Besides the symbolic presence of transsexuality within the thematic scope of the magazine, many self-identified transsexuals read the magazine and joined the organization. Some subscribers and members may actually have been transsexual but lacked the knowledge or finances to pursue sex reassignment surgery. After all, before this kind of surgery became more available in the United States during the mid to latter 1960s, there was a good deal of fluidity and movement among gender-variant individuals between the categories of transvestism and transsexuality. Many individuals with a strong sense of crossgender identification used crossdressing networks as sort of a training ground en route to transsexual self-awareness. Making these distinctions necessitates a brief discussion of terminology.

### Terminologies and Medical and Cultural Discourses

It is necessary to review briefly the emergence of transvestism as an independent medical and social category, distinct from homosexuality and transsexuality. Although European and American doctors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries described cases of crossdressing, they subsumed the behavior under the broad category of “sexual inversion” and associated the practice of crossdressing closely with homosexuality. German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld challenged this framing. In 1910, he coined the

term “transvestism” to identify a special category of men and women who desire to dress in clothes that are seen socially as belonging to the other gender but who are otherwise heterosexual.<sup>10</sup> In this new category, Hirschfeld also included individuals who identified as the gender ‘opposite’ their biological sex—those who we would today call “transsexuals.” Transvestism and transsexuality would not become clinically differentiated until a few decades later. According to Joanne Meyerowitz, the category “transsexualism” entered medical parlance in the United States in the early 1950s due to the work and published studies of psychiatrist David Cauldwell and endocrinologist Harry Benjamin. Although there may be some overlap, doctors would come to differentiate transsexuals from transvestites by the former’s intense desire to alter their physical sex through hormone treatments and sex-reassignment surgery. Transsexuals experience their gender identity and anatomical sex as incongruous, often expressing a belief of having been born in the wrong body. Consequently, many transsexuals view surgery as correcting “nature’s mistake.”<sup>11</sup>

Most of the American public learned about what would later be termed transsexuality when George “Christine” Jorgensen, a male-to-female transsexual, made national headlines in December of 1952 for having a series of operations in Denmark to change George into Christine. Jorgensen’s return to the United States in February of 1953 caused

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<sup>10</sup> For a historical analysis of Hirschfeld’s treatment and (mis)interpretation of his gender variant respondents, see Darryl B. Hill, “Sexuality and Gender in Hirschfeld’s *Die Transvestiten*: A Case of the ‘Elusive Evidence of the Ordinary.’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 2005. Around the same time, British sexologist Havelock Ellis coined the term “Eonism” to reference heterosexual crossdressers. The term never caught on in medical parlance; however, some transvestites, having read Ellis, referenced the term in their letters and life histories in *Transvestia* and in correspondence I have seen in the archive.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in a letter to her parents in June of 1952, Christine Jorgensen wrote: “Nature made the mistake which I have had corrected and now I am your daughter.” Quoted in Meyerowitz (2002), 61. Granted, some self-identified transvestites held the same beliefs, as I will illustrate in chapter two.

a media frenzy. This media exposure and a series of subsequent high profile sex changes undergone by other transsexuals introduced the American public to the idea of transsexuality and compelled doctors, journalists, and “trans” folk to define and differentiate among sex, gender, and sexuality and to make further distinctions among gender-variant populations and phenomena.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1960s, sex-reassignment surgery was beginning to become more available in the United States, although it was expensive and required approval from a doctor or mental health professional. Also, standards of diagnosis, treatment, and care were beginning to become professionalized, usually according to a model promoted by Harry Benjamin. Whether a gender-variant individual in the 1950s and 1960s identified as transvestite or transsexual often depended on his or her knowledge of the surgical technology and access to a network of professional “gate-keepers.” Still, labels are not easily assigned to many of the historical actors in this dissertation. For instance, a person with a strong sense of crossgender identification might identify as transsexual yet never have the actual surgery, and some self-identified transvestites desired surgery but either could not afford it or decided that it was not a valid option or was even rejected by doctors. To make classification more complicated, some crossdressers experimented with hormones in order to develop breasts and to enhance feminine characteristics. Thus, the terms invented

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<sup>12</sup> For a history of how the discourse on transsexuality shaped medical, legal, and social conceptualizations of sex and by extension, gender and sexuality, in the twentieth century, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed* (2002). Meyerowitz goes into greater detail about the mid-twentieth century emergence of the transsexual category; the cultural impact of the Jorgensen case; and the relationship between the formation of transsexual identity and consumption of popular news and magazine stories on sex change and gender transgression. More information on Jorgensen can be found in her autobiography, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967) and in David Harley Serlin, “Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet.” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995). Richard Docter has a biography of Jorgensen coming out in the near future.

to denote types of gender variance were historically bound, contextually shifting, and conceptually slippery.

In this study, I describe how members of this stigmatized medical category of transvestism constructed a social identity and formed group consciousness through an underground print culture and social network of their own making. Chapters one through five direct attention away from the medical and mass media's construction of gender deviancy and thus away from the perspectives of doctors, sexologists, and other scientific experts, as well as the mainstream press. The crossdressers who serve as my historical actors were by no means ignorant of the medical and popular culture discourses concerning transvestism. Many had read the scientific literature on the subject and most had consumed the sensationalized stories of sex change and public gender transgression generated by the popular press. Some transvestites, including Prince, made scrapbooks containing newspaper and magazine clippings they collected of crossdressing related themes and topics. Crossdressers, then, negotiated an identity in relation to clinical and mass media generated representations.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the print culture that this cohort of transvestites created served as a public forum where they debated the merits of sexological, psychological, medical, and popular knowledge about transvestism. The cultural imaginary that formed around *Transvestia* presents an especially compelling case study concerning how a medically

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<sup>13</sup> In future research and work, I will historicize the construction of transvestite and other gender variant identities from "above." My concern in this dissertation is identity-work on the "ground." For histories of medical and clinical constructions of non-normative sexual and gender identities, see the work of Jennifer Terry *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) and Vern Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

stigmatized group of individuals negotiate dominant discourses that mold their identities. Certainly, doctors and journalists did not “create” transvestites. Doctors only invented the labels, and their and journalists’ knowledge of crossdressing and crossgender phenomena was based on their observations of urban subcultures, readings of police reports and journalistic investigations, and their interviews with individuals who sought medical help for a perceived deviation. Transvestites, then, negotiated the social, cultural, and medical discourses that produced the category of transvestism. At the same time, they helped shape the public category.<sup>14</sup>

For most Americans in the postwar era, especially those who had consumed the national headlines about Christine Jorgensen, the practice of crossdressing made sense within the context of a male who had undergone a sex change operation. And for the most part, the general public could grasp the idea of female impersonation as a form of

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<sup>14</sup> As will be discussed later, Prince played a significant role in shaping the clinical definition of transvestism when she ignited the club movement in the 1960s. Studies could then be conducted on the club population as opposed to patient populations. This shift produced definitional and diagnostic changes. Most studies on transvestism have come from psychologists and psychiatrists. For those who are interested in this perspective, see Richard F. Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Towards a Theory of Gender Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988); Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestism: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*; translated by Michael Lombardi-Nash (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991); Harry Brierly, “The Heterosexual Transvestite: A Gender Anomaly,” *The Bulletin of the British Psychological Society* 27, no. 95 (1974) and *Transvestism: A Handbook with Case Studies, for Psychologists, Psychiatrists and Counsellors* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979); Neil Buhrich and Neil McConaghy, “The Clinical Syndromes of Femmiphilic Transvestism,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 6 (1977): 397—412, “The Discrete Syndromes of Transvestism and Transsexualism,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 6 (1977): 483—95, and “Three Clinically Discrete Categories of Fetishistic Transvestism,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 8 (1979): 151—157; A.J. Taylor and D.G. McLachlan, “MMPI Profiles of Six Transvestites,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 19 (1963); Neil Buhrich and Trina Beaumont, “Comparison of Transvestism in Australia and America,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 10 (1981): 269—79; Ray Blanchard, I.G. Racansky, and Betty W. Steiner, “Phallometric Detection of Fetishistic Arousal in Heterosexual Male Cross-Dressers,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 22 (November 1986): 452—62; James Beatrice, “A Psychological Comparison of Heterosexuals, Transvestites, Preoperative Transsexuals and Postoperative Transsexuals,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 173 (1985): 358—65; Vern L. Bullough, Bonnie Bullough, and Richard Smith, “A Comparative Study of Male Transvestites, Male to Female Transsexuals and Male Homosexuals,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 19 (August 1983): 238—57 and “Masculinity and Femininity in Transvestite, Transsexual and Gay Males,” *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 7 (1985): 317—32.

commercialized stage entertainment.<sup>15</sup> What the public could not fathom, however, was why a presumably ‘normal,’ heterosexual male would want to dress in women’s clothes on a periodic or permanent basis. The heterosexual, periodic or full-time crossdresser did not appear as a legible social type on the mainstream public radar in the 1950s and early 1960s. For most Americans, the term “transvestite” designated the gay street fairies (depicted in the popular print and news media) that were arrested for masquerading in public or rounded up after policemen raided a gay bar. Transsexuals also grabbed most of the news and tabloid headlines in the 1950s and 1960s. Very often, the popular press mislabeled them transvestites. In fact, as late as 1974, one transvestite complained that “the occasional sex gender disorientation information given out by the news and medical media tends to conflate transvestism and transsexualism. This has an unsettling effect on many of us and especially on our wives and the very process of our finding self acceptance and maturity, as a TV is often misinterpreted as inexorably moving toward transsexualism.”<sup>16</sup> When the first issue of *Transvestia* was published in 1960, most professionals and gender-variant individuals could differentiate among stage impersonators, transsexuals, transvestites, and street fairies, but the general public could not and even cannot now. In all, this dissertation historicizes an important, controversial, and overlooked segment of the “transgender” population—a non-patient population of crossdressers who fought for a socially distinct public identity through a relentless politics of respectability.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, female impersonation shows were popular during World War II. For a comprehensive study on the representation of crossdressing in popular culture, from a cultural studies approach, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Crossdressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Maureen from Colorado, letters section, *Transvestia* #83 (1974).

## Caveats

I want to offer a several caveats before describing the methods and sources used for this dissertation. In this historical study, I do not attempt to explain what *causes* transvestism, whether the causes stem from biological, psychological, or childhood social conditioning. However, I am interested in bringing to historians' attention the particular styles, identifications, and modes of expression that this underground society of "gentlemen deviants" developed during this historical period of time, from 1960 to roughly 1980. I define *Transvestia's* gender community as the group of people who subscribed to the magazine and/or affiliated with Phi Pi Epsilon in the 1960s and 1970s. Obviously, there were varying levels and degrees of participation among these crossdressers. Problematic questions abound: Were those who borrowed *Transvestia* occasionally from a friend to read or those who browsed it only in bookstores members of the community? Were those who only occasionally attended FPE meetings members? What was the geography of this community and its boundaries? Was it completely underground? What were its public aspects? The boundaries and geographies are difficult to draw, and I do not pretend otherwise. But for the sake of clarity, I have established parameters around this community, however porous and permeable my lines are. Another challenge has been defining this particular social formation of crossdressers. Is it best characterized as a community, a subculture, a readership, a textual assemblage, a social network, an underground society, or a cultural and social imaginary? The reader will notice that I employ all these terms at various points in this dissertation, as they each, in some way, capture an essence of what it entailed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The term "gentlemen deviants" comes from Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall, 1963).



Yet another challenge has been discerning what was at the core of this community's culture, consciousness, and identity: Crossgender identification? Gender play? Mimicry? Narcissism? Eroticism? Certainly, a little of all of these elements informed *Transvestia's* gender community. What to do with the sexual and fetishistic aspects of transvestism? In my reading of the larger historical, social, and cultural meanings of this group's culture of crossdressing, I have tried not to obscure the role that eroticism figured into their crossdressing practices. I do not want simply to erase these associations, as Prince and her followers were prone to do. Nor do I want to characterize the erotic charge that so many of them derived from crossdressing as their *raison d'être*, as doctors and psychiatrists have been prone to do. As I will discuss in later chapters, eroticism manifested itself in varying ways within this subculture and carried different meanings, depending on the individual. The general tendency among *Transvestia's* crossdressers in the early 1960s was to de-sexualize transvestism. The historical source material from this early period seldom mentions erotic rewards; however, as the sexual revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s transpired, the cultural productions of *Transvestia's* gender community feature more frequent and candid discussions of sex, sexuality, and even fetishism.

The title of my dissertation, '*As a man I exist; as a woman, I live,*' captures the duality that also lies at the core of *Transvestia's* gender community—a much stated desire to live the best of both gendered worlds but also a strong feeling that life as a woman far surpasses the mundane existence of life as a man. But *Transvestia's* crossdressers could never just unselfconsciously live their lives as women and lavish in the erotic charge and feelings of self-actualization that crossdressing engendered. In response to Cold War

gender strictures, they developed an elaborate philosophy to justify, dignify, and rationalize their (cross)gendered identities and practices. Indeed, *Transvestia*'s gender community offers a complex and bewitching configuration of the old and new. Certainly, the magazine and club were products of Cold War culture. At the same time, though, the magazine provided a forum and the organization a space for the creation of alternative models of gender expression and for the working out of gender identities based on freedom, consumption, self-expression, fun, playfulness, frivolity and other qualities that stood in direct contrast to the qualities (e.g. self-restraint) associated with "Traditional Masculinity." Therefore, *Transvestia*'s crossdressers can be added to the list of lifestyle groups in the 1960s and 1970s that challenged postwar gender roles and norms.

However, to take at face value the notion that these transvestites crossdressed solely to escape dominant, repressive, and stifling models and ideologies of Cold War masculinity is to ignore the fact that many of them were just being true to themselves. My journey with this project started very much as seeing *Transvestia*'s crossdressers as "symbols" and agents of transgression and rebellion. As I became more knowledgeable of the field of transgender studies, I have tried to let go of these overdetermined interpretive moves and allow these folks to be who they were in everyday life. As Susan Stryker remarks:

Transgender people who problematize the assumed correlation of a particular biological sex with a particular social gender are often considered to make false representations of an underlying material truth, through the willful distortion of surface appearance. Their gender presentation is seen as a lie rather than as an expression of a deep, essential truth.... At stake in these critical engagements is the self-understanding of many transgender people, who consider their sense of gendered self not to be subject to their instrumental will, not divestible, not a form of play. Rather, they see their gendered sense of self as ontologically inescapable and inalienable—and to suggest otherwise to them is to risk a profound misrecognition of their personhood, of their specific mode of being.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 9—10.

Stryker's last point also relates to my final caveat. In *Transvestia* magazine, in the organizational literature, and in social gatherings, this network of crossdressers referred to themselves and addressed one another as women, using feminine pseudonyms and pronouns. Although I respect this social practice and understand the context for why they were doing it, I use feminine pronouns only for those historical actors, including Prince, who lived or would eventually decide to live 'full-time'—privately and socially—as women. I also use feminine pronouns for self-identified male-to-female transsexuals. The vast majority of *Transvestia*'s readership and FPE's membership comprised periodic crossdressers. I call these folks by their feminine pseudonyms but use masculine pronouns when referring to them otherwise.

I realize that my decision to use masculine pronouns for periodic crossdressers slights those crossdressers who possessed a strong sense of crossgender identification, even if they only found occasion to express their sense of gendered personhood by crossdressing periodically. I also recognize that my decision, regardless of the extent in which crossdressers felt "transgendered," reinscribes the binary gender system's claims to essential truth by suggesting that only female-bodied individuals can rightfully claim "she-ness." My intent is not to reject gender variant male-bodied individuals' claims to "she-ness" but merely to seek a compromise with many scholars who are sure to frown upon this group's 'misappropriations' of womanhood and also to avoid linguistic awkwardness. And yes, this awkwardness does attest to our culture's absolute historical investment in maintaining gender polarity.

## Methods and Sources

‘*As a man I exist; as a woman I live*’ is a project in historical excavation and utilizes the methods of social and cultural history, with some attention paid to issues of textuality and to various theoretical insights drawn from the field of gender studies. At this stage of the project, I primarily seek to address historians of gender and sexuality, although scholars in transgender studies, masculinity studies, women’s studies, and gender studies, or any academic interested in matters of identity formation and social organizing among stigmatized populations may find something of value within these pages. In the chapters that follow this introduction, I describe the identity-work, lived experiences, social practices, and organizing efforts of this subcultural community of crossdressers—*Transvestia*’s gender community, which has no substantial scholarly history.

This is a history of *Transvestia*’s gender community from the bottom-up, that is to say, from the perspective of its participants, using evidence I have found in *Transvestia*’s letters, histories, photographs, and opinion and advice columns. I have also utilized the surviving organizational records and literature of Phi Pi Epsilon. Finally, I have interviewed four living participants, including Virginia Prince. What can be learned from these crossdressers’ negotiations of gender and sexual norms in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of significant social change? How do the stories we tell of sexuality and gender in postwar America enriched when transvestites are placed at the center of investigation? Depending on the context, *Transvestia*’s crossdressers occupied both privileged and marginal subject positions, and they embraced both male and female subjectivities within the same body. As respectable and conventionally masculine men and as socially suspect transvestites engaging in non-normative gender behavior, perhaps no other group

navigated the contours of gender and sexuality in postwar America as carefully, skillfully, and precariously as *Transvestia*'s crossdressers. Certainly they warrant a social and cultural history of their own.

To answer the above questions, I have read the underground print culture produced by *Transvestia*'s gender community. This project was literally born in the archives. In the fall of 2001, I came across *Transvestia* magazine in a collection of transgender materials recently acquired by Special Collections at the University of Michigan. My primary sources include all 100 issues of *Transvestia* that Prince edited between 1960 and 1980. I read every column that Prince wrote, every letter to the editor, every life history, all the columns written by fashion/gossip columnist Susanna Valenti, and other miscellaneous articles that I judged to be pertinent to this study. *Transvestia*, alone, amounted to around 5000 pages of reading. I also read other "trans" magazines from the era to get a sense of how *Transvestia* differed. These magazines included all eight issues of *Turnabout* (1963—1967), a handful of *Female Mimics* (1965—1979), and several issues of *Drag* (1971—1980), as well as, fetish-oriented magazines such as *Bizarre* and *Exotique*. Another collection of sources included the organizational literature and national newsletter of Phi Pi Epsilon.

In addition to Special Collections at the University of Michigan, I conducted extensive archival research in the Kinsey Institute of Indiana University and Special Collections at Cal State University at Northridge where the Virginia Prince Collection is housed. Although I did not visit the ONE Institute in Los Angeles, I had archival materials photocopied and sent to me by staff members. Throughout this dissertation, I provide more detailed information regarding archival sources when warranted in the footnotes.

One collection of sources, though, requires a brief discussion now, as it represents the evidential backbone of this historical study.

### *Transvestia's* Life Histories and Letters to the Editor

From 1960 to the middle of 1979, Prince published in *Transvestia* some 120 life histories and around 300 letters to the editor from readers of the magazine. In this respect, she created a significant forum for the collective construction of self-knowledge and understanding about transvestism. The identity and life narratives featured in *Transvestia's* histories and letters typically focused on the writer's crossdressing history, his patterns and practices, and his subjective sense of gender identity and embodiment. With only a few exceptions, these histories and letters chronicled the experiences of a narrow range of 'men': white, heterosexual, and middle to professional class crossdressers, usually between the ages of thirty and sixty. A postwar obsession with consensus, conformity, and normative gender and sexuality fueled their narratives. Composed and published throughout the 1960s and 1970s, each narrative represented a profound engagement with the gender roles and sexual norms that structured most American lives in the postwar decades.

The letters that readers wrote to Prince ranged from short notes of thanks and praise to long letters recounting their histories and experiences with crossdressing. Curiously, most of the longer letters that recounted history and described personal experiences appeared in issues from 1960 to 1968. After 1968, the majority of the letters represented short "fan" letters that reacted to Prince's public relations efforts, including her television appearances and three book publications: *The Transvestite and His Wife* (1967), *How to*

*Be a Woman Though Male* (1971), and *Understanding Cross Dressing* (1975). Most writers of these fan letters described how one of Prince's books or media appearances helped bring them and / or their wives to a deeper understanding and level of acceptance. I speculate that there are three reasons explaining the preponderance of fan letters and paucity of "history" letters after 1968. First, the always business-savvy Prince probably intentionally published an abundance of fan letters to serve as laudatory advertisements for her books. Second, a few letter writers in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s conveyed a reluctance to tell their crossdressing histories because they felt that they were repeating patterns and stock experiences others had already written about in previously published letters. Third, the novelty of having a print medium in which a reader could share his secretive, guilt-ridden history with crossdressing may have worn off in a culture that, by 1968, and in many parts of the country, was becoming increasingly sexualized, culturally permissive, and more tolerant of non-conformity. Nonetheless, the letters I analyze in this dissertation were the descriptive and introspective accounts. Therefore, the evidence in this study in respect to the letters is disproportionately weighted toward the 1960s. The life histories, though, are drawn more evenly across the two decades.

My reconstruction of transvestites' lived experiences is a poor substitute for actually reading all the fascinating histories and letters in their entirety. To give the reader a less mediated view of how *Transvestia*'s crossdressers wrote and to convey the perspectives, concepts, language, and texture of *Transvestia*'s community and culture, I extract many and sometimes extended quotations from their narratives. I think this move is justified given that the experiences of stigmatized individuals are often filtered through outside discourses, even well-meaning academic scholarship. For example, mental health

professionals, sexologists, and doctors have built careers from explaining the causes of transvestism and theorizing treatments and cures. As transgender historian and theorist Susan Stryker observes of the situation before the emergence of a viable transgender movement in the 1990s that gave voice to those who joined its ranks, “Previously, people who occupied transgender positions were compelled to be referents in the language games of other senders and addressees—they were the object of medical knowledge delivered to the asylum keeper, the subject of police reports presented to the judge; they were the dirty little outcasts of feminist and gay liberation discourses whose speakers clamored for the affections of the liberal state....Only rarely did we speak to others on our own behalf.”<sup>19</sup> As a historian I am interpreting *Transvestia*’s gender community from a particular historiographical frame, one that may distort the gendered subjectivity and embodied experiences of those I write about. The danger of ‘erasure’ is one of the reasons why it is important to allow the writers of these narratives to ‘speak’ as much as is possible. Also, a thorough and ‘bottom-up’ academic history of this transvestite community has not been written until now.

As Stryker further notes about the ubiquity and power of medical and cultural discourses to define individuals who occupied transgender positions, “This is not to suggest that transgender people did not carry on lively exchanges among themselves; indeed, there is a vast body of transgender community-based critical and cultural work that is scarcely visible to the broader society.”<sup>20</sup> I had the great fortune and honor of stumbling upon a portion of this cultural work six years ago in a vast collection of transgender-related materials that Atlanta-based transgender activist Dallas Denny

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<sup>19</sup> Stryker, “De-subjugated Knowledges,” 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



bequeathed to the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection. My project, therefore, seeks to rectify the state of near invisibility in the public and historical record of these past "lively exchanges" carried out by an important segment of the transgender population. Given their marginality in historical discourse, it is only fair that their voices are clearly heard in this pioneering attempt to document their most common experiences and to capture the complexity of their identities. I hope that in reading the excerpts from their narratives that the reader will hear what I hear. Undoubtedly, the reader will discover cadences I failed to notice.

As an edited text, *Transvestia* should be read through the lens of editorial theory for its material conditions of production and bibliographic codes. As one noted literary critic writes, "Various readers and audiences are hidden in our texts, and the traces of their multiple presences are scripted at the most material levels." Capturing the interaction between authorial intentions and nonauthorial conditions, though, will require more research on how the magazine was produced, disseminated, and consumed. It would also require a greater level of detail with seemingly mundane matters such as physical form, printing technologies, visual layout, pricing, advertising, and distribution venues. Certainly these features and characteristics would not be difficult to list, describe, and enumerate. Yet merely describing the material conditions of production is not enough to capture the complexity of a text's coding networks. I would need to show how these material factors within *Transvestia*'s "editorial horizon" interacted with and shaped linguistic codes to produce the text's meaning. There are too many unknowns at this point for me to adequately accomplish the work of editorial theory. Nevertheless, while the conditions of production and consumption are elusive in regards to the life histories

and letters, I try to provide as much historical and personal context as I can and think is necessary for the reader to understand each example.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, as a magazine that published autobiographical narratives and as a discursive site for the *narrative* construction of crossgender identities, *Transvestia* should be read through the lens of autobiography studies. As scholars of autobiography have noted, the self cannot exist without narrative. Their studies on life writing have produced brilliant insights regarding the narrative construction of personal identities and experiences. Unquestionably, the evidence I use to describe transvestites' lived experiences and identity formation comes from their own personal, autobiographical accounts. These historical actors, then, are "storied selves," or "narrative selves." In this dissertation, they exist at the level of representation—textual and photographic representations carrying a specific agenda to normalize and depathologize transvestism through a politics of respectability. More oral and archival research is needed and will be conducted in the future to round out these persons. Therefore, it should go without saying that these life histories and letters published in *Transvestia* cannot offer an unmediated reflection of raw experience. As autobiographical texts that were produced in the 1960s and 1970s but relate experiences as far aback as the 1920s and 1930s, these narratives were shaped by the writer's flawed memory of events. Moreover, the experiences these writers recounted were filtered through the process of narration, which first begins with the act of reflecting on identity and experience before crafting thoughts in a coherent story that adheres to the conventions of an autobiographical narrative.

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion on editorial theory and "materialist hermeneutics" from one of the literary authorities on the subject, see Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). The quotes I use in this paragraph are from this work, page 10 and page 21.

Furthermore, these histories were shaped by each writer's historical moment and by factors unique to his or her individual circumstances and intentions. Was the process of writing a cathartic experience for writers? A form of disclosure or confessional? Perhaps even an erotic experience? Or maybe a combination of all these modes? Lastly, these letters and histories were written for a specific audience, namely the readership of *Transvestia* magazine. Writers may have been cautious about how they presented themselves to a magazine that catered to ideals of respectability and propriety. My sense, though, is that most of *Transvestia*'s writers threw caution to the wind, as the vast majority of the narratives display a frankness and honesty that is all the more remarkable given the social risks these writers faced if ever their 'strange' desires and unconventional practices became known to their families and to others in their cities, towns, and communities.<sup>22</sup>

I am committed to producing a deeply historicized and historically grounded project of identity formation. My perspective as a social historian who is interested in issues of textuality, mediation, performance, and cultural representation frames my interpretation of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers as both active agents who had the power and resources to shape and change their circumstances, conditions, and environment and as subjects enmeshed in discourse and representation. Consequently, I perform both cultural and factual readings of the source material. Factual, because in the absence of diaries, home

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<sup>22</sup> For scholarship on autobiography, life writing, and the postmodern and narrative self, see Linda Anderson, *Autobiography (The New Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985) and *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) and *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); James A. Holstein, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (The Guilford Press, 1997); and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

movies, and a large base of oral interviews, no better historical evidence beyond these mediated and agenda-filled life narratives is currently available to piece together the clandestine history of *Transvestia*'s gender community and, by extension—heterosexual transvestism—in the postwar United States. Therefore, I consciously extrapolate 'facts' and ethnographic information from these narratives to introduce the reader to a historically obscure subculture and to paint a composite portrait, however mediated and imperfect, of the social lives of heterosexual transvestites in postwar American society.

### Living Informants

Fortunately, in the past two years, I have located four living sources who participated in *Transvestia*'s gender community. My communication and conversations with Virginia Prince, Katherine Cummings, "Barbara," and "Carol" have greatly enriched this project and have added nuance to the historical narrative. I employ their stories and insights throughout this dissertation to enhance and qualify my interpretations. An important caveat is that their memories of the 1960s and 1970s are colored by events that have occurred since then, especially the social, cultural, and linguistic changes wrought by the transgender movement. Also, all of my informants felt good about their experiences in FPE and as subscribers to *Transvestia*. So a major concern is the lack of critical voices. This is a problem I should be able to rectify as I expand my interview pool in the near future. But for now I am pleased to introduce the four persons who have helped me see *Transvestia*'s gender community in a clearer light.

Katherine Cummings is 72 years of age, lives in Australia, works part-time as an academic librarian and as a staff person at the Gender Centre at the University of New

South Wales. She also edits the Gender Centre's transgender service magazine *Polare*. She and I have exchanged a voluminous correspondence over e-mail since the spring of 2006. It was through personal correspondence with a crossdresser in Texas that Cummings learned of *Transvestia* in 1960. In fact, the first issue she obtained, number five, was the one with Annette as the first cover girl. While going to school and working in Canada and the United States during different periods of time in the 1960s and 1970s, she participated in a Toronto-based network of crossdressers and was a member of the Lambda chapter of FPE in Seattle as well as the New Jersey chapter. Cummings had a more adventurous side to her crossdressing practices and usually found FPE gatherings boring. She told me that "I usually spent a dull evening doing jigsaw puzzles in company with a number of others who may well have been as bored as I." She laughingly recalls the tendency of members to 'circle up' in therapeutic "Why me?" sessions, which became quite tedious and redundant for her. Cummings has certainly contributed vivid detail and nuance to the archival sources and to the official script propagated by Virginia Prince. She told me that she had these buttons she wore to FPE meetings which read, "The only -ism for me is Narcissism"! and "I have a keen analytic brain and great legs" and another that said, simply, "Self-made woman." Cummings was one of perhaps dozens of periodic crossdressers who would eventually decide to undergo sex reassignment surgery. She had the surgery in 1989. In an essay entitled "The Life and Loves of an XY Woman," Cummings writes, "I emerged from the confining chrysalis of masculinity to be the female person I had always known myself to be, despite years of avoidance, denial and sublimation." Cummings chronicles her life experiences and transformation into a

woman in a fascinating 1992 memoir entitled *Katherine's Diary: The Story of a Transsexual*.<sup>23</sup>

It was Cummings who put me in touch with “Barbara” and who in the future should be able to connect me with a few other crossdressers from that era. Of my four contacts, “Barbara” is the only one who is “closeted” and wishes to remain unidentified for professional reasons. Barbara is happily married and rarely crossdresses anymore. In the 1960s, Barbara subscribed to *Transvestia* and contributed a fascinating life history that I quote from extensively throughout this dissertation. Barbara was also a casual member of one of the largest Midwest chapters of FPE. In December of 2006, Barbara provided very detailed and insightful responses to a list of questions I sent by e-mail.

“Carol” is 74 years old and lives in a retirement complex in St. Paul, Minnesota. Today, Carol identifies as a transgender woman, but back in the 1960s she identified as a transvestite, or TV, to use the popular lingo. She has been a life-long periodic crossdresser, and despite having a strong sense of crossgender identification, has never had reassignment surgery. Carol discovered *Transvestia* magazine in a bookstore in Minneapolis in the early 1960s. Later, she joined Phi Pi Epsilon and began making monthly trips from her home in Wisconsin to the capital city of Madison to socialize with another crossdresser named Fran. After attending a FPE meeting of the Chicago chapter, Carol and Fran co-founded the Theta chapter of FPE in 1963, which attracted members from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Indiana. Carol was active in the chapter for a couple of years before she married in 1966. Carol’s wife eventually became less supportive of her husband’s activities with the group. As a result, Carol gradually ended her association with FPE but continued to crossdress periodically. I have interviewed

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<sup>23</sup> Katherine Cummings, *Katherine's Diary: The Story of a Transsexual* (Melbourne: Mandarin, 1993).

Carol once by phone in November of 2006. I was put in contact with her by Michael Franklin, an American Studies graduate student at the University of Minnesota. Franklin and a colleague interviewed her extensively during the summer of 2005 and generously sent me copies of the interview tapes.

I am privileged to know and to have met Virginia Prince who is 94 years of age. She lives in an assisted living, retirement community in Claremont, California. After several phone conversations in 2005, I had the honor of meeting one of the pioneers of the transgender movement in October of 2006 at her home. Sadly, Prince's memory of events during the period of this study has diminished. Fortunately, she had been a prolific writer of her experiences and role with *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon. It is no surprise, then, that she has internalized stock narratives from her past writings. It was primarily these stories that I heard in my conversations with her when I prompted her to discuss an event or issue from the years prior to 1980. The result was that she seldom told me anything I did not already know from having read her opinion columns, travelogues, and autobiographical writings in *Transvestia*. It was a bit disconcerting for me once I figured out that I knew more about her past experiences than she did (at least the things that I felt were important to this dissertation). Nevertheless, Prince has been a joy to talk with on the phone and in person. There is much to admire about her. Although she understandably bemoans the lack of mobility and limited lifestyle that advanced age has caused, she has retained her thirst for learning and knowledge. For a while now, she has dabbled in astrophysics and leads a discussion group on matters of "being and consciousness" in her retirement village. Also, she apparently has not lost her trademark argumentativeness. On the phone and in person, she was very quick to challenge and

disagree with me on a number of issues and statements. Honestly, I can see why she rubbed some people the wrong way back during the heyday of her activism. However, her confrontational demeanor is balanced with a sharp wit and charming sense of humor. She can be hilariously self-deprecating, particularly with respect to her advanced age and fading memory. In response to me informing her that I am writing about her ideologies and stances and how they evolved over time, she quipped, “That’s good. When you finish, you can tell me what I thought.” Prince has a large bust-size and other feminine features along with a penis. She has willed her body to the UCLA medical school when she dies. Prince relishes the reaction that this incongruous image will likely illicit from the medical staff and students when they uncover her body. “Won’t they be surprised,” she barks!

#### Chapters, Structure, and Periodization

This study aims to write Virginia Prince and *Transvestia*’s gender community into the historical record. This dissertation provides snapshots of what I consider the most important and interesting aspects of the historical source material I have researched. When placed side by side, these snapshots show change over time, but the structure of this dissertation is not chronological. After all, the history of male-bodied gender diversity that I present takes places over a span of just two decades. Soon after this culture fully emerges in the early 1960s with the arrival of *Transvestia* and the founding of Phi Pi Epsilon, the ‘Cold War logics’ that fueled its emergence and shaped its members’ rationale were undermined by the “sexual revolutions” of the late 1960s and



1970s. The five chapters of this study reckon with the consequences and effects that these social and cultural transformations had on *Transvestia*'s gender community.

This dissertation is organized thematically, with each chapter focusing on a particular aspect of this unique postwar social formation. I describe the identity-work, social practices, domestic experiences, public excursions, and organizing efforts of a group of historical actors that I refer to as *Transvestia*'s crossdressers. In Chapter 1, I discuss the beginnings of *Transvestia*'s gender community. I argue that a unique subcultural formation of crossdressers—a textual community—was formed through a process of storytelling in *Transvestia*'s life histories and in many of its longer letters to the editor. The repetition of common themes and tropes in readers' identity narratives had a constitutive and generative effect. I highlight three themes whose repetition helped facilitate the development of a common script and cemented a particular social identity around the storytelling community.

Having described the making of *Transvestia*'s textual / gender community, I move in Chapter 2 to an examination of the identity-work and contestation that erupted within the pages of the magazine. If Chapter 1 analyzes the constructed 'whole,' then Chapter 2 deconstructs this seemingly cohesive social formation into its component and competing parts. I argue that *Transvestia*'s writers constructed crossgender identities through both internal and external exclusions and symbolic oppositions. I retrospectively recreate what I refer to as *Transvestia*'s "hierarchy of stigmatization." This taxonomic hierarchy that letter and history writers collectively constructed comprised identities and practices that were ranked and judged according to a specific class and racial based notion of respectability. Yet even a relentless politics of respectability could not exclude all

gender-variant voices. Therefore, I document several prevalent and marginal identifications and gendered embodiments represented on the magazine's "spectrum of gender variance."

I carry this analysis of the politics of respectability into Chapter Three's examination of the dress codes, behavioral guidelines, and rules of bodily comportment that constitute a regulatory discourse within the magazine. After all, transvestite identity is constructed around the act of dressing like a woman and behaving and feeling feminine. But exactly what kind of woman? In this chapter, I examine *Transvestia*'s fascinating visual archive of photographic presentations of self. The dozens of self-photographs that Prince published of readers serve as visual evidence of the raced and classed models of femininity they emulated and the idealizations of postwar domesticity they valorized and for some, fetishized. I have searched *Transvestia*'s photographic self-portraiture for the most prevalent renditions of femininity and found that the most popular models were the girl-next-door, the suburban housewife, the pin-up bombshell, the club woman, and the well-bred lady. What do these photographs of white, middle-class males who perform stereotypical, iconic, and idealized feminine styles and traits mean historically? I explain how they serve as visual evidence of the identity-work of those photographed and of their critical engagement with conventional gender norms, the women's movement, and women's changing roles.

In Chapter 4, I document the marital relations and domestic lives of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers and their wives. It is not just the case that wives' perspectives have to be filtered from the letters and histories written by their husbands. In fact, a few dozen wives wrote to the magazine, and Prince published their letters. While most wives were tolerant,

supportive, and even helpful, some interrogated their husbands' often unrealistic perceptions and fanciful constructions of femininity. I describe the contestation that erupted between wives and their transvestite husbands over domestic roles and marital norms. Some couples proudly viewed their marriages as affronts to the status quo, and others thought of their marriages as exemplary models of companionate marriage. Yet beneath the veneer of happiness and togetherness lay an unnerving anxiety regarding the gender non-conformity bred within their domestic fortresses.

In Chapter 5, I move out of the textual world that *Transvestia*'s crossdressers made to discuss how a large number of them organized for mutual support, sociality, and service in what was probably the first membership organization for gender-variant individuals in the United States—Phi Pi Epsilon. Histories of transgender social organizing, activism, and community-building have only recently, in the last fifteen years, been written by Vern Bullough, Joanne Meyerowitz, Susan Stryker and a few other historians of the GLBTQ experience. Using the evidence I have found in the surviving organizational records and literature of Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE), I contribute to this project in historical excavation. This chapter represents the first detailed account of the organizational culture, the social practices, and the historical evolution of FPE.<sup>24</sup>

Founded in 1962 by Virginia Prince to offer support and self-help to male-to-female crossdressers, FPE attracted hundreds of members and established twenty-five “sororities” in cities across the United States. In local chapter meetings, members of the

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<sup>24</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the husband wife team of Vern and Bonnie Bullough are the only *historians* to have written anything on Phi Pi Epsilon. It is a brief and breezy chapter entitled “The Emergence of Organized Transvestism and Its Implications” in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), chapter 12. My account of FPE is longer, more contextualized, and more detailed. Still, I am grateful for their work in helping me see one of the main implications of organized transvestism, which was the proliferation of voices from a non-patient population of transvestites into public and medical discourse.

club crossdressed freely, developed self-knowledge, and profoundly engaged gender norms and postwar domestic problems. Some chapters waged educational campaigns and created brochures and newsletters to counter stigmatizing public discourses that configured transvestism as a condition of sickness, criminality, and immorality. FPE lasted for fifteen years before merging with another crossdressing club to form Tri-Sigma, a group that later became Tri-Ess, which still exists today as the largest membership organization for crossdressers. In this final chapter, I situate FPE's organizing efforts within the context of the sixties' and seventies' culture of protest and social organizing, specifically the homophile and gay liberation movements, to which I draw parallels and note differences. Lastly, I argue for FPE's importance to the history of transgender activism. I gauge the role that FPE played in this movement during its nascent stages, long before "transgender" became the umbrella term for a host of gender minorities and the basis for a rights-based political identity. Therefore, I am drawing attention to an era when social identity was just beginning to be imagined and articulated by crossdressers and others who would fill and help shape the transgender category.

Like Sheldon / Annette, who at different periods of time lived the life of the All-American Boy and the life of Miss America, most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers desired the best of both masculine and feminine worlds. The following chapters look at how they found social meaning in their private desires; carved social lives out of secret fantasies; and nurtured and fulfilled both innocent and not so innocent dreams of having it all.

## CHAPTER ONE

### TELLING GENDER STORIES

For me, my story is just repetition of the majority of the others whose stories I have read in TVia [*Transvestia*]. I don't know how it happened but apparently I ran the normal course: the guilty secret behind locked doors, the frequent purges, the firm resolution and attempts to scale the insurmountable peak to prove to myself I was all man. Then—more buying, and back to it again. I was so alone and did not understand my compulsion.... I now know I must live with my sister as she is part of me.<sup>1</sup>

In his letter to the editor of *Transvestia* magazine, a transvestite named Inez identified the central dynamic that engendered a unique and vibrant social formation of crossdressers in the United States after 1960. Repetition of common themes and tropes in *Transvestia*'s letters and life histories was the constitutive force that brought into being a self-conscious minority—a transvestite gender “community.” The community that *Transvestia*'s readers and writers created was not based on a particular locale or on direct face-to-face contact in measurable time and space. This social formation is better described as a “textual community.” With few exceptions, *Transvestia*'s crossdressers first assembled in this textual space before ever meeting other transvestites or joining a social group. By writing letters and histories, transvestites integrated important aspects of their lives into meaningful identity narratives. Through this process, they began to develop a sense of what transvestism could mean socially and communicatively beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Inez to Prince, *Transvestia* #41 (October, 1966).

their own private fantasies and experiences. They, in turn, became the authors of their own stories rather than the subjects of regulatory medical and stigmatizing cultural discourses.<sup>1</sup>

The transvestites who read and wrote to *Transvestia* represented a group of several hundred geographically disconnected individuals who became ‘united’ through a shared cultural (print) medium. Before this underground print medium, few cultural resources in the United States existed for men who enjoyed crossdressing to learn about others with similar gender identities and crossdressing proclivities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, American newspapers and tabloids reported on individuals who were arrested for crossdressing and who were discovered after a long period of time passing as the gender other than the one ascribed to at birth. Beginning in the 1930s, the popular press began printing a flood of sensationalized stories of bodily sex change. These stories were usually accounts of experimental sex reassignment surgeries performed in Europe but also included dubious tales of mysterious, spontaneous, or unexplainable sexual metamorphosis. Many gender variant individuals, including crossdressers, found familiarity and connection in these stories. Many avidly read these accounts and collected news and magazine clippings of anything pertaining to crossdressing and gender transgression.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The inspiration for this chapter was drawn from Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. (New York: Routledge, 1995). Jeffrey Escoffier has written an essay about the power of print communication in forging a gay community. See, “Homosexuality and the Sociological Imagination: The 1950s and 1960s” in Martin Duberman, ed. *A Queer World*. (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 248—61.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of how those with a sense of crossgender identification found a sense of connection in popular cultural sources, see Joanne Meyerowitz. *How Sex Changed*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a more concise version of how gender-variant individuals negotiated identities through the popular press’s sensational accounts, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sex Change and the Popular Press:

Another source of information and connection included the medical and sexological literature on sexual deviancy. In their search for scientific explanations for what they perceived to be behavioral abnormalities, crossdressers encountered the writings of Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, David Cauldwell, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent researchers and ‘experts.’ Reading critically against the pathological framing of homosexuality, gender inversion, intersexuality, and transvestism, they sometimes found kinship with the ‘subjects’ featured in medical case histories. Beyond media stories and medical case histories of gender variance, unless a crossdresser corresponded with another transvestite through private letters or socialized in an urban crossdressing social circle, he had no real avenues for understanding and comparing his desires and experiences. Prince requested and published readers’ life histories precisely to foster self-understanding, self-acceptance, and connection. “I think the airing of case histories,” she wrote in the second issue of *Transvestia*, “would be of educational value to some TVs who have not been able to ‘find’ themselves and to adjust to their desires. Many TVs live such isolated lives that if they are not gifted with an ability to be introspective they are never able to gain enough understanding of their condition to be able to deal with it without profound guilty feelings which can be very destructive.”<sup>3</sup> The circulation and consumption of life histories greatly helped those crossdressers who were isolated experience as sense of connection with others like themselves.

To understand the historical, cultural, and social dynamics of this postwar community of crossdressers, I divide this chapter into four parts. In the first part I provide a brief

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Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930 – 1955,” *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1998, 4:159-87.

<sup>3</sup>*Transvestia* #2 (March 1960)

history of some of the historical and cultural precursors to *Transvestia*'s gender community. In the second part, I discuss the thinking of the magazine's founder and editor, Virginia Prince. Prince exercised tremendous authority in shaping the cultural politics of the magazine and the demographics of its readership. In Part Three, I analyze three thematic story clusters that *Transvestia*'s writers repeatedly wrote about in their letters and histories. The repetition of certain tropes in narratives describing the origins of a writer's transvestism, his early experiences with crossdressing, and the narrative deployment of white heterosexual manliness bolstered perceived commonalities among the magazine's readership. In Part Four of this chapter, I present evidence showing that *Transvestia*'s writers did, in fact, envision community in empowered articulations of solidarity and shared fate. In their narratives, these crossdressers carved out a respectable place within the postwar gender system for fellows like themselves to find acceptance. I also examine racial and class markers that formed in tandem with their construction of social identity, and I discuss some of the ways writers conceptualized their group identity in relation to mainstream society. Together, these four sections underscore the major role that storytelling in *Transvestia* played in forging *Transvestia*'s gender community. The arguments in each of these parts are based on the 130 life histories and over 300 letters that Virginia Prince published in *Transvestia* in ninety-nine issues that she edited from 1960 to mid-1979.

Before getting to the main themes featured in these narratives and before answering how they inspired and facilitated a sense of connection among a widespread readership, I want to review some of the underground social and cultural precursors to *Transvestia*'s gender community, followed by an examination of the stances and ideology of the



individual who, perhaps more than anyone else, helped usher in a new phase of “transgender” history and social organizing.

Part One: Dress Rehearsals: Correspondence Culture and the Making of Transvestite Social Networks, 1940 – 1960<sup>4</sup>

A history of transvestism in the United States, especially a history of this particular subcultural community, cannot be told without the inclusion of Prince and her work in helping create a unique identity category, a dominant script, and arguably, a new kind of gendered personhood. However, Prince was not the first transvestite to politicize the practice of crossdressing, to place it in a larger social narrative, or to imagine the wearers of the medical label as potentially constituting a community. The autobiographical writings and personal collections of Louise Lawrence [1913 – 1976], a white male-to-female transvestite from San Francisco, contain evidence that at least dozens of crossdressers corresponded with one another and exchanged hand-written fictional stories through the mail, made and collected scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, and gathered informally in small groups in the two decades prior to Prince’s *Transvestia* and national sorority emerging onto the scene.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This section will be expanded into a full chapter for my future book. Some of the history related in this section comes from Joanne Meyerowitz’s research. See, “Sex Research at the Borders of Gender: Transvestites, Transsexuals, and Alfred C. Kinsey.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. The John Hopkins University Press. 75:1 (Spring 2001).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to remind the reader that, as a project of historical excavation, this dissertation relies on evidence found in the archive to write a history of this subculture. The transgender collections housed in the Kinsey Institute, the Special Collections at Cal State Univ. at Northridge, and the Special Collections at the University of Michigan shape the historical narrative I tell and the focus I have placed on a handful of individuals, particularly Louise Lawrence, Edythe Ferguson, and Virginia Prince. This brief section on pre-*Transvestia* history has especially been constructed using sparse evidence found in these archives. There were probably other underground crossdressing networks in the postwar United States, many of which likely had no affiliation with *Transvestia*’s gender community. More archival research may uncover these communities and determine how they were structured differently along class, ethnic, and racial lines.

Lawrence, who began living full time as a woman in 1944 (without surgical alteration), corresponded and socialized with many transvestites, transsexuals, and other gender and sexual non-conformists around the United States and in England from the early 1940s to her death in 1976. She made use of the personal ads and correspondence columns of underground newspapers and magazines (e.g. *Justice Weekly*, *Bizarre*, and *Exotique*) and of correspondence mediums and contact services (e.g. *La Plume*, *Contact*, and *TransWorld*) that catered specifically to the tastes and fancies of erotic minorities and fetish enthusiasts. Lawrence had an intense fascination with bondage, female domination, and especially petticoat punishment. Petticoat punishment (also referred to as petticoat discipline) entailed forcing an ‘unwilling’ young man or boy to wear feminine garments as punishment for bad deeds. Lawrence became aware of this practice in the late 1930s through her discovery of some British fetish-oriented magazines of the early 1900’s, such as *London Life*, *Facts and Fancies*, and *Photo Bits*. These magazines often featured columns and letters detailing fantasy stories of domineering mistresses and nannies who humiliated and punished their male subjects through enforced feminization.<sup>6</sup>

Lawrence wrote her own fictional stories and exchanged them, along with letters of fantasy, with a number of like-minded individuals. The scenarios she and her correspondents created reflected the themes and narrative plots of transvestite fantasy literature, especially the petticoat punishment genre. The correspondence that she kept and donated to the Kinsey Institute illustrates a variety of erotic and gendered

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<sup>6</sup> Great sources for reading actual letters to the editor, articles, and stories about crossdressing and petticoat punishment that were sent to European ‘fetish’ magazines and newspapers are Peter Farrer’s edited volumes: *Men in Petticoats: A Selection of Letters from Victorian Newspapers* (Karn Publications Garston, 1997); *Borrowed Plumes: A Selection of Letters from Edwardian Newspapers*; and *Confidential Correspondence on Cross Dressing 1911-1915* (Hyperion Books, 1993); and *Cross Dressing Between the Wars: Selections from London Life 1923—1933*. (Karn Publications Garston, 2000).

subjectivities, desires, and practices that were later barred from the pages of *Transvestia* and the FPE sororities.<sup>7</sup>

Lawrence was also a pioneer “transgender” advocate and activist. She was probably the first transvestite in the United States to have an article published in a professional journal. In “Transvestism: an Empirical Study,” published in the May 1951 issue of *The International Journal of Sexology*, Lawrence, writing under the pseudonym “Janet Thompson,” described the complexity that comprised the transvestite category:

In the past ten years, I have personally known, corresponded with, or known of, over fifty transvestites. I have yet to find a common denominator other than the desire to wear the clothes of the opposite sex. In this the intensity of the desire varies tremendously. This common denominator may label an entire group ‘transvestites’ in the light of the broad definition; however, in this group, which includes the heterosexuals, there are definite fetishists, sadists, masochists, voyeurs, homosexuals, etc.

And immediately following, in a statement that shows that the term “transsexualism” had yet to enter common parlance, Lawrence included within the transvestite category “...the psychotic who, through wearing the clothing, comes to actually believe he is of the opposite sex or that he is ‘a female soul in a male body.’” Apparently, Lawrence had not yet learned about Hirschfeld’s term, “transsexual,” which had only just recently been introduced in American medical parlance by David Cauldwell and Harry Benjamin. Another noteworthy aspect of this article was that although Lawrence did not detail the erotic rewards associated with crossdressing, she did go farther than Prince would later go in *publically* acknowledging the role of eroticism in the crossdressing practices of heterosexual transvestites. “The greater portion of the transvestites I have known,”

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence donated her 1944 diary, autobiographical writings, newspaper clippings, and personal correspondence to the Kinsey Institute. Lawrence’s collection illuminates a broader culture of correspondence and the informal social networks created among transvestites in cities across the United States. I plan to write about this fascinating material in the future.

Lawrence contended, “are heterosexual with strong autoerotic tendencies.” Finally, in a move that probably reflected her desire to appease the journal’s professional audience, Lawrence used the language of “adjustment” and placed the burden of responsibility and change onto transvestites rather than unfair gender norms.

Lawrence’s accommodationism was largely tactical. She wanted to seize control of the story of transvestite identity, which, for her, entailed forming a strategic alliance with medical professionals in order to promote understanding of male-to-female crossdressing. Lawrence worked to educate doctors at the Langley Porter Institute in Berkeley and other medical and mental health experts in the United States about transvestism. In 1948, she met the eminent sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey, and introduced him and his associates to an underground network of crossdressers on the West Coast. Working as an informant, she solicited her contacts’ case histories, typed them, and sent them to Kinsey. She also set up interviews between Kinsey’s research team and the many transvestites she knew, encouraging her contacts to talk with Kinsey’s researchers. With an abiding faith in science and medical research, she believed that public tolerance would come only if professionals truly understood the desires and natures of transvestites. Although the insecurity she felt from not having an advanced degree caused her sometimes to bow to the expertise of Kinsey, Harry Benjamin, and other professionals, Lawrence should be remembered as one of the first transvestites to imagine transvestism as a social and ‘political’ category and one of the first to challenge medical authority over it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence’s 1944 diary is in box 1, folder 1 and her typewritten autobiography is in box 1, folder 2, both in the Louise Lawrence Collection. Lawrence’s personal and collected correspondence, including letters to and from Alfred Kinsey and Harry Benjamin, comprises folders 5 through 15 of box 1.

Through their personal correspondence with other crossdressers, transvestites not only exchanged fantasies but also offered support and advice. These exchanges happened on a private level. Edythe Ferguson, a crossdresser and lawyer from Long Beach, California, may have been the first transvestite in the United States to offer formal, printed instruction and advice to other crossdressers. In 1951, he placed an ad in the national show business publication, *The Billboard*, offering a personalized course by mail on the art of female impersonation. The ad promised that “Qualified students” would be “given individual attention,” with “the cost of the series approximating attendance at standard girls’ finishing schools teaching related subjects.” Ferguson called the 162 lectures he devised and sent through the mail the “Transmutation” series. In the advertisement, he described the program as “instruction in mimicry...and true feminine expression...and everything necessary and important for a fastidious, cultured and authentic feminine appearance, including encouragement of the psychological aspect and suggestions for acquiring the feminine ‘state of mind.’”<sup>9</sup> No evidence has been found to indicate how many people subscribed to Ferguson’s lecture series, and only a smattering of evidence suggests that it was received favorably. The lectures are significant primarily because they prove that at least by the early 1950s, one transvestite was imagining a collective identity, addressing a target subcultural audience, and beginning to codify the cultural signifiers and practices that would constitute a socially legible transvestite social identity, distinguishable from other gender-variant types.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Edythe Ferguson Collection, Kinsey Institute. The Ferguson Collection includes sample lists of available lectures, a representative collection of selected lectures, a few short essays penned by Ferguson, and a collection of correspondence (primarily letters addressed to Dr. Alfred Kinsey) authored between 1951 and 1956 by Ferguson.

<sup>10</sup> In a remembrance of the years before *Transvestia*, columnist Susanna Valenti recalled Ferguson’s instructional lecture series. Valenti did not indicate whether she had subscribed to it.

Both Lawrence and Ferguson corresponded with a few dozen other transvestites in California and in other states. Contacts led to more contacts and soon a web of social networks had been created. (In October of 1954, at the request of Dr. Kinsey, Lawrence composed a list of 152 known transvestites in the United States.) In the mid 1940s, Charles “Virginia” Prince, who was doing post-doctorate work in San Francisco, met Lawrence, who introduced [him] to other transvestites in San Francisco and provided him with contacts in his native home of Los Angeles. After visiting with a doctor who advised him to not be ashamed of his desire to crossdress, Prince began to participate in a network of crossdressers in the Los Angeles area.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Prince, along with several other crossdressers from the vicinity, including Edythe Ferguson, attended informal gatherings at the Long Beach home of a transvestite named Johnny “Joan” Thornton. It was at these meetings that the idea to create a newsletter began. In 1952, this small cohort, led by Thornton, published two mimeographed issues of *Transvestia: Journal of the American Society for Equality in Dress*. They mailed them to all the crossdressers they could identify in the United States and to sympathetic doctors and sexologists, including Alfred Kinsey. Unfortunately, after these initial two issues, the project ended due to high costs. Both newsletters featured a strategic alliance with medical authorities and a desire to differentiate transvestism from homosexuality—themes that would be repeated and sharpened eight years later in the magazine of the same name.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Johnny Thornton’s letters to Kinsey, including a prospectus for *Transvestia*, as well as, the two mimeographed issues from 1952, are in the Kinsey Institute. Future work will assess Thornton’s ideas and contributions.

## Part Two: Virginia Prince, a Transgender Pioneer

When Prince revived *Transvestia* in 1960 and founded Phi Pi Epsilon in 1962, she helped usher in a new phase of transgender history, cultural production, and social organizing. However, outside the transgender community, Virginia Prince is little known, and within the transgender community, she is a controversial figure because of her persistent stance on not admitting transsexuals and homosexuals into Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE), the membership organization she founded specifically for heterosexual crossdressers and their wives. As an underground publication, her magazine was not widely read. Moreover, her organization for transvestites barely put a dent in the public's attitude regarding heterosexual men who crossdressed. Yet, the ideas that Prince articulated to her readership and to the membership of FPE challenged popular and scientific assumptions about the meanings of sex and gender. Furthermore, her complex subjectivity and movement, in 1968, from periodic crossdressing to full-time living as a "male-woman" or "transgenderist," (a term she coined), complicated the notion that anatomy is destiny. As the editor of *Transvestia*, as a participant at numerous professional conferences, as a guest on dozens of local and regional radio and television talk shows, as a counselor to hundreds of crossdressers and other gender variant individuals, and as an author of three published books on crossdressing and co-author of several psychological studies on transvestism, Prince spent the better part of her life exploring the contours of normative and non-normative masculinities and femininities; shaping the category of transvestism; and planting seeds for a future rights-based transgender social movement to develop in the late 1980s and 1990s. I believe that Prince

deserves consideration as one of the most prolific and astute American theorists of gender in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

### Transvestia, “Virgin Views,” and the Homophobic Construction of Transvestism

In 1959, Prince established a publishing enterprise that she named “Chevalier Publications” after the 17<sup>th</sup> century French crossdresser, Chevalier d’Eon. She published *Transvestia* the following year in the format of a magazine. *Transvestia* was well put together and averaged about eighty pages per issue. It was sent through the mail only to subscribers for the first two years and then, in 1963, also began selling on some alternative newsstands and in adult bookstores in larger cities in the United States. It was published six times a year, every other month, although Prince did not always meet this schedule, usually due to her extensive travels and public relations tours.<sup>13</sup>

Prince served as editor until mid-1979, and the magazine lasted until 1986 under the editorship of Carol Beecroft. Prince designed *Transvestia* as a medium whereby readers

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Prince, *An Introduction to the Subject of Transvestism or Femiphilia* (Los Angeles: Chevalier Publications [undated, c. 1970]); Virginia Prince, *Sexual and Gender Identity: Transsexualism vs. Transvestism* (Los Angeles: Chevalier Publications, 1971); Virginia Prince and P.M. Bentler, “A Survey of 504 Cases of Transvestism,” *Psychological Reports* 31 (1972): 903—17; P.M. Bentler, Richard w. Sherman, and Charles Prince, “Personality Characteristics of Male Transvestites,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 26 (1970): 287—91. Scholarship on Prince is sparse. The first biography of Prince was written and self-published by psychologist Richard Docter, a personal friend of Prince. See, *From Man to Woman: The Transgender Journey of Virginia Prince* (Northridge, CA: Docter Press, 2004). Prince told Docter that *Transvestia*’s subscription list never surpassed 1000 subscribers (p. 83). Chapter eight of Docter’s biography provides a brief but useful history of the magazine. More biographical information on Prince can be found in Vern Bullough, *Before Stonewall: Activists for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Historical Context* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002) and *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), chapter 12. Sociologists Richard Ekins and David King have recently edited a special issue of the *International Journal of Transgenderism* that brings together five of Prince’s most significant writings. See, “Virginia Prince: Pioneer of Transgendering.” Volume 8, November 4, 2005. My work on Prince was already three years underway before Ekins and King’s edited publication.

<sup>13</sup> After 1966, Prince began traveling more and *Transvestia*’s publication schedule suffered. Readers criticized Prince for “falling into the habit of publishing whenever you feel like it” and “getting careless with publication dates,” both of which were “endangering your readership.”



would submit most of the content that comprised each issue. Readers contributed life histories, letters to the editor, fictional stories, opinion columns, poems, topical essays, cartoons, personal experience narratives, and self-photographs. These contributions provide the raw material for constructing a history of this unique social formation of crossdressers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to championing a forum where crossdressers could tell their stories, Prince utilized *Transvestia* as a regulatory tool for weeding out unsavory elements and as a mouthpiece for promoting a specific definition or narrative script of transvestism. After all, in the 1950s and 1960s, the category of transvestism included a variety of crossgender identifications and crossdressing practices. As early as 1957, in an article in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Prince defined a form of transvestism that she initially labeled “true transvestism.” In this seminal yet simplistic article, Prince differentiated among these three types of gender variant identities that shared the practice of crossdressing in common and that the mainstream public and some professionals conflated: homosexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites. Prince posited that each type’s differential development stems from each type’s childhood identification with a different aspect of womanhood.

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<sup>14</sup> Without a doubt, Prince greatly shaped the historical archive I have used to write this history. One measure of how much work she put into the magazine, Chevalier, and the sorority is indicated in a column entitled “Telling It Like It Is” in issue #55 (February 1969). “Everything else, opening and reading the mail; answering questions where necessary or giving counsel; reading and editing manuscripts; organizing the magazine, and getting it to and from the compositor first and the printer second; approving all FPE applications and the paper work that goes with it; filing all the records; making up deposits for the bank and taking them, paying all bills for printing etc. writing articles such as have appeared in the *Insider*, *Sexology* and elsewhere; interviewing new FPE candidates in this local area; meeting and talking with readers from out of state who are in L.A. and want to meet me; carrying on sometime quite lengthy long distance phone conversations with readers in other areas who have found the magazine and want to inquire further or to ask for advice etc., giving lectures, making radio and TV appearances together with the travel and all proceeding arrangements that go with it; conferring weekly with doctors at UCLA on the research we are doing there; writing when possible to doctors, columnists, publishers or anyone else who has said something about the field that is in error and needs straightening out; all these and others unmentioned are Chevalier matters that have to be and are done by me personally.”

Homosexuals identify with the “sexual woman;” transsexuals with the “psychological woman;” and transvestites with the “social woman.” Prince did not denigrate homosexuals and transsexuals but offered a de-eroticized description of “true” transvestites. “As a transvestite his desires are to dress like a woman, act like a woman, go about in public as a woman and be accepted by women as a woman.... Unlike the transsexual, the transvestite values his male organs, enjoys using them and does not desire them removed. He is under no illusions as to his actual masculinity. But nevertheless, there is an aspect of his psyche which is satisfied only by being permitted to present himself to himself, as well as to the world, as a woman.”<sup>15</sup>

After founding *Transvestia*, Prince further refined her viewpoints and the parameters of true transvestism in a regularly featured editorial column entitled “Virgin Views.” *Virgin* is short for Virginia, but her use of the term also connoted purity and innocence—the very qualities she was trying to associate with her de-sexualized version of transvestism. According to Prince, “true transvestites” were males who periodically and “symbolically” imitated the social and cultural role of women for the purposes of “peace, comfort, relaxation, and inner satisfaction.” In contrast to transsexuals, true transvestites did not believe themselves to have been born in the wrong body nor did they seek to alter their physical sex through reassignment surgery. Prince carefully noted that “It is not the sex we are imitating, it is the gender—the quality of expression, the kind of living, the kind of personality that we associate with a lady.” In her columns, she repeatedly claimed that gender is between the ears, not the legs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C.V. Prince, “Homosexuality, Transvestism, and Transsexualism: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiation” in *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. XI, No. 1, pages 80—85. January, 1957.

<sup>16</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #12 (December 1961).

One of the reasons Prince wholeheartedly embraced the language of gender in the 1950s and 1960s was that it allowed her to distinguish true transvestites from *sex deviates*, i.e., homosexuals. Her desire to distance transvestism from those groups the public deemed sexually deviant should be placed within the context of the social and cultural hysteria over homosexuality that erupted in the postwar era. During this period, the state, media, and medical establishment criminalized, demonized, and pathologized forms of sexual identity and gender expression that deviated from traditional gender roles and the social norm of marital, reproductive heterosexuality. Fearing guilt by association, Prince believed that the only way she could help win public tolerance for heterosexual transvestites was to rid transvestism of any popular and medical association it had with sexual deviancy.<sup>17</sup>

Prince's first "Virgin Views" column devoted entirely to the subject of homosexuality was in the December 1962 issue of *Transvestia*. She argued that whereas homosexuals could properly be labeled "sexual deviates," as they deviated from "the sexual norm" by choosing same-sex partners, heterosexual transvestites are better classified as "gender deviates." Prince maintained that true transvestites did not want "to copy a woman in bed but in social behavior, appearance, clothing, in short, [a woman's] gender, her

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<sup>17</sup> For histories of the hysteria over and regulation of sexual and gender non-conformity in the postwar era, see John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss, 226-40. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Estelle Freedman, "Uncontrolled Desires": The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920 – 1960," *Journal of American History* 74:1 (June 1987), pp. 83-106; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

femininity.” Even though she would never tire from drawing distinctions between transvestites and homosexuals, Prince recognized that both groups shared a common problem with social intolerance and understood that the social gains won by the larger and better organized homophile movement would only benefit her group. In this regard, she called for mutual respect and cooperation while still maintaining that separateness must also prevail in order to build a distinct group identity for heterosexual crossdressers.

My sense is that there was rampant homophobia within the readership and that Prince was quite progressive on the issue of homosexuality, especially given the historical context. “I am not a homosexual either in performance or desire,” she wrote, “but I have a number of very fine friends who are.... My point is let us judge the individual whom we meet and find to be a homosexual on the basis of his other human qualities, not on whether his sex orientation is the same as ours.”<sup>18</sup> Although this statement sounds soft by today’s standards, it was quite a liberal view in the early 1960s. Prince did, in fact, have a number of gay friends and acquaintances, including the homophile activists Harry Hay, Hal Cal, Phyllis Lyon, and Del Martin.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of what she thought of homosexuals as a group, Prince argued that true transvestites were not sexual deviants (despite the sexual rewards that often accompanied crossdressing); they were only afflicted with a harmless *gender* aberration. Still, this gender aberration made crossdressers sexually suspect in the eyes of a public who visibly recognized a “deviate” not by his sexual object

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<sup>18</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #18 (December 1962)

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Prince in February 2007

choice but by his gender presentation. To help change public perception, Prince believed that a new language was needed.<sup>20</sup>

### Inventing a New Lexicon

Prince's efforts to disassociate transvestism from forms of deviant sexuality, particularly homosexuality, included inventing new terms to describe heterosexual men who crossdress to emulate the social role of women. She understood the importance of language and its role in shaping reality and perception. Prince reminded her readers that "...words are also tools—the tools of thought. You fabricate your conceptions of yourself in terms of words." Therefore, she encouraged her readers to refrain from using such terms as "TV," "drag," "camp," "gay," and "Mary," as these were words that the public associated with homosexuality. In her editorial column, Prince identified a form of transvestism she termed "feminiphilia," which she defined as "a condition in which an anatomically and physiologically normal male who is heterosexually oriented feels driven to partake of all things feminine as an expression of his inner personality needs." Prince contended that every feminiphile (one who had the condition of feminiphilia) harbored a feminine personality needing and deserving outward expression. She also invented the term, "femmepersonation," to better capture what true transvestites do when they don the clothing of women and behave effeminately. Femmepersonators were not

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<sup>20</sup> George Chauncey discusses the societal shift in conceptualizing homosexuality from a factor of gender inversion to a matter of sexual object choice. See, introduction to *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

*impersonating*—a word with a prefix that denoted fraud and falsity. Rather, they were *personating*—giving life to the feminine side of their personalities.<sup>21</sup>

Prince encouraged the use of these new terms, including replacing “FP” for the popular abbreviation “TV,” because she wanted to separate the heterosexually oriented male who crossdressed for a hobby or for self-expression from those who crossdressed primarily for erotic stimulation (she included masochists, sadists, and clothing fetishists in this category) and commercial (e.g. street queen prostitutes) or entertainment purposes (e.g. drag queens and professional female impersonators). “To fight on our own terms, we must segregate ourselves in all possible ways from any other type of behavior. This is the only way we will ever achieve even a little dignity and respectability.”<sup>22</sup>

To help segregate heterosexual crossdressers “in all possible ways,” Prince also had fun with language. In a 1962 essay entitled “A Glossary of Femmeterms,” she encouraged her readers to use the prefix “femme” in front of words to create a unique lexicon, a “femmelanguage.” Some examples included “femmeparty,” “femmename,”

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<sup>21</sup> Prince coined the terms “feminiphilia” and “feminiphile” in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961). The spelling of these terms would change over the years to femmiphilia and femmiphile, sometimes capitalized, sometimes not. Prince coined the term “femmepersonator” in her essay “Targets, Titles, and Terminology” in #12 (December 1961). All these terms were abbreviated to FP, and Prince encouraged her readers to use FP instead of TV.

<sup>22</sup> *Transvestia* #12 (December 1961). Prince took credit for inventing the term “TV” and said that she has “an added right to pronounce a death sentence” (*Transvestia* #7). In the letters and histories that Prince published after 1961, few writers used this terminology, and even Prince was inconsistent. However, in 1970, Prince put an end to using “transvestite” and “TV” in her writings for good. She pleaded with her readership to do the same. In “Semantics—Identity or Confusion,” Prince explained why: “The reason for this decision is illustrated on the two pages following this article. [On these pages were news clippings of the variety of ways “TV” and “transvestite” were being used at that time to refer to homosexuals and drag queens.] It was bad enough when misguided and ignorant reporters used it in the press when referring to drag queens. But when the queens themselves appropriate it and use it in reference to themselves because they are, after all, crossdressers and because we have managed to give the word some respectability and dignity, then I for one have had it. I have spent 10 years trying to educate both my readers and the public to the fact that heterosexual crossdressers are a separate breed of cat. It is the only way to establish our identity, to gain a modicum of understanding and to escape the opprobrium (albeit unfairly) that society lavishes on the homosexual” *Transvestia* #62 (1970).

“femmeself,” “femmelife,” and “femmetalk.” This practice elicited ridicule from her critics and particularly a rival group of crossdressers on the East Coast, some of whom charged that it was silly and others who objected to the fact that these terms lampooned ‘real’ women and overemphasized femininity. These East Coast critics gravitated around a similar magazine called *Turnabout*. Edited in New York City by a crossdresser using the pseudonym Siobham Fredericks, *Turnabout* appeared in 1963 and lasted for seven issues before folding in 1966.<sup>23</sup> It was far more inclusive than *Transvestia* in regards to transsexual and fetishistic content and expression. The editor and columnists would sometimes attack and ridicule Prince, her ideas, and especially her invented lexicon. Prince countered these critiques by arguing that FPs sought only to *emulate* women and that an overemphasis on femininity fostered self-acceptance.<sup>24</sup>

### De-sexualizing Transvestism

With all the ink spilt delimiting the varieties of crossdressing practices and identifications and engaging in a relentless politics of respectability, Prince helped shape and refine the contours of a new “trans” social category, one that described men who identified as heterosexual and crossdressed periodically, usually in private with only an

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<sup>23</sup> According to Darrel Raynor in *A Year Among the Girls*, (a 1966 account that details his experiences in Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE) during 1963), *Turnabout* was started by a disaffected member of the FPE sorority just to get back at Prince. Prince did seem peeved at the new competition. In issue #21 of *Transvestia*, she wrote at length about the prospectus that the *Turnabout* editors sent out announcing the arrival of this new magazine. In her column, she reaffirmed the purposes and goals of her magazine, delimited the markers and boundaries of her notion of true transvestism, and somewhat bemoaned what appeared to her as an ensuing splintering of the fledgling transvestite movement she claimed to have started.

<sup>24</sup> In *Transvestia* #28 (August 1964), Prince defended the invented lexicon and her use of the term “sorority” with this response: “[Women] don’t have to learn to accept their femininity (though they may have to learn to accept their masculinity). Thus there is no sense in comparing this ‘femme’ business to the lives of women. In speaking of a ‘sorority’ or ‘femmedressing’ etc. we are creating an atmosphere or environment in which the acceptance of the feminine side of one’s self not only becomes desirable and possible but almost necessary since we are being reminded of it at every turn.”

occasional public excursion, and who practiced an aesthetic form of crossdressing rather than crossdressing **primarily** for sexual rewards. As will be discussed later, race (whiteness) and class infused the categories of “feminiphilia” and “femmepersonation.” By the second year of publication, Prince was consciously shaping every facet of the magazine in the direction of nurturing, training, and inspiring this particular breed of transvestite—the feminiphiles or the femmepersonators (FPs). Prince instructed her readers to get over the shame and guilt associated with crossdressing and to accept their burning desire to dress in women’s clothing. She claimed that “The desire to express some of those attitudes of feeling and behavior which are usually attributed to the opposite sex is really nothing to be ashamed of.” It is, in a sense, “as natural as to desire intercourse with the other sex as a means of blending with it and sharing some of what it represents.” As is evident with her intercourse analogy, Prince’s efforts to normalize heterosexual transvestism meant associating it with normative, phallogentric heterosexuality. By Prince’s logic, even if femmepersonation were a form of sexual deviancy, it would have to be classified as a heterosexual one, as an FP’s behavior only reflected his adoration for and love of women.<sup>25</sup>

In a culture disturbed by non-normative sexualities and genders, Prince was highly invested in de-eroticizing true transvestism and portraying it as a respectable practice and mode of being. As early as the fourth issue of July 1960, Prince devoted an entire column to answering the question of whether or not transvestism should be considered a sexual deviation. In this column, Prince elaborated a long and arduous rationalization to prove that true transvestites could not reasonably be labeled sexual deviates. By her logic, the

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<sup>25</sup> *Transvestia* #12 (December 1961)



sexual response resulting from crossdressing derived from an association that the crossdresser makes with something that belongs to the “female world.” Erection is “aided and abetted by the fact that the purely male part of the individual is in close psychological as well as physical contact with a portion of the female world which in itself tends to trigger the same reaction.” An erection, in other words, represented the natural outlet or channel for these pleasurable and satisfying experiences. Thus, when a transvestite emulates the social role of a woman and is temporarily relieved of the burdens of manhood, the satisfaction and pleasure are so great that they “trigger the deep satisfaction reaction,” i.e. an erection. Naturally, with the “sex reflex” aroused, he must masturbate to release the tension. Prince maintained that this form of sexual release was not the same as fetishism. “There is a big difference,” she argued, “between doing something for the purpose of arousing a sexual reaction that could not be roused without this aid [fetishism], and having the sexual reaction aroused as a result of doing something” [The bracketed term in this quotation is Prince’s]. This argument probably persuaded few of her readers, but it was certainly welcomed by those who also wanted desperately to obscure and deemphasize the role that eroticism played in their practices.

By promoting peace of mind and self-acceptance, Prince wanted to foster within her readership a sense of pride—“pride in the sense of being the opposite of shame.” “So having come to grips with it [transvestism] and [having] learned to accept ourselves, where do we go from here” she asked her readers. “It seems to me that we can go on to a sort of quite pride in ourselves, in our ability to express our femininity and our victory over our own guilt and fears.” Prince’s notion of “quiet pride”—the “inner peace that settles over one when he stops fighting, recognizes certain things as real and decides to

live with them”—may not have been the more robust sort of pride promoted several years later by advocates for black power and by gay liberationists, but it was a frame of mind that crossdressers could use to conquer their feelings of shame and guilt.<sup>26</sup>

### Dual Personality Expression and Gender Theory

In addition to helping a reader accept himself, develop a sense of pride, and realize that his “feelings for femininity” were not pathological or socially harmful, Prince offered advice concerning how to cultivate one’s feminine side. Prince’s advice revolved around her notion or philosophy of dual personality expression. This philosophy held that transvestites possessed both masculine and feminine “personalities.” The feminine personality—or what was commonly referred to as the “girl-within” and also as the “femme-self”—deserved outward expression just as much as the masculine personality. The metaphor of the “girl-within” represented the feminine persona that many adherents of dual personality believed was created as they practiced the art of crossdressing and the skill of behaving femininely and as they strived for an ever more perfected model of virtuous, non-sexualized femininity.

Prince further explained and defended the dual personality concept in a 1964 column in which she most likely answered *Turnabout* critics who ridiculed and questioned a notion of a transvestite man having a legitimate second feminine personality. Many skeptics purported that they did not “feel like” or think as two people. What exactly did it mean to have a dual personality? In this column, Prince defined “personality” as “how you show your self to the world and react to it physically, mentally, and emotionally.” A

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<sup>26</sup> Essays in which Prince most ardently expressed transvestite pride can be found in *Transvestia* #3 (May 1960) and in #20 (April 1963), which the above passage comes from.

personality, or self, she maintained, “is what you become known by.” Prince emphasized that the second personality does not form overnight. Rather, it develops over time just as one’s primary (masculine) personality does, through experiences, reactions, and social interactions. Therefore, acquisition of a “femme-self” depended on an individual’s social experiences and environmental circumstances as he moves along the stages from erotic compulsion to femmepersonation.

Prince acknowledged that many transvestites had few if any opportunities to develop a second personality, usually due to circumstances within their homes, such as non-accepting wives. “Others,” she contended, “who are fortunate in terms of domestic acceptance, opportunity, passable appearance, desire, etc. will, little by little, make an appearance in the outside world. There [they] will have experiences, learn to cope with them, to speak to others, to react to situations, to learn from each occasion, to give and to take. This is exactly the mechanism whereby everybody develops his or her #1 personality, and it works the same way for #2.” Prince maintained that the feminine personality that FPs develop through practice, social interaction, and experience enables them to express feminine emotions and traits that are incongruous if expressed as men in masculine attire. The expression of female gendered ideals such as daintiness, beauty, and passivity demanded a gender presentation in which those qualities socially, and, for some, naturally adhered.<sup>27</sup>

In the early 1960s, Prince could not imagine subverting the binary gender system with any program that hinted at androgynous living. As a philosophy for living and for self-expression, dual personality ultimately reinforced gendered dichotomies in culture and

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<sup>27</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964).

maximized gender differences between males and females. In a move that preserved gender polarities, Prince advised her readers to keep the masculine and feminine personalities that resided in the same male body separated. “Each self must give each his and her day.... Since you both have a RIGHT to exist...it is a matter only of each having use of the body and mind at the proper time but only one at a time.” Prince further counseled her readership:

...try to employ perspective in seeing FemmePersonation as an adjunct to your masculine personality, not a substitute for it. We were all born male, trained in masculinity, and have acquired most of our experience in that role. Thus we are expected by society and by our loved ones to function adequately in that role. *Transvestia* does not exist for the purpose of impairing or destroying the masculine but rather to allow those who are aware of their feminine side to extract the full benefits from it. We can experience some of the feminine side of life, express part of our personality that way, and be better persons and citizens for it IF we utilize and express our desires with WISDOM; in MODERATION; and apply PERSPECTIVE to keep the whole matter in balance and under control.<sup>28</sup>

For Prince, healthy and socially responsible expression of one’s girl-within meant exercising moderation in frequency of dressing, and it meant controlling and managing one’s erotic desires—guidelines and practices that reflected her white, middle-class upbringing and mindset.

One of Prince’s most impressive intellectual achievements was in cogently explaining the difference between sex and gender. Unlike many of her contemporaries who confused and conflated these terms, Prince did not conceptualize gender as an essential correlate of biological sex. She argued ad nauseam in her columns and public addresses that masculinity and femininity are social artifices and cultural constructs. “Within the limits of heredity all children are born with equal potentialities for the expression of most all human emotions, traits, and patterns. But in the process of growing up, boys and girls are

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<sup>28</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #3 (May 1960) and #16 (August 1962)

both taught to be masculine or feminine. These patterns are 90% learned according to the rules of the culture and are not biologically determined nor are they the same from one culture to another.” Prince made these remarks in 1964. At the end of the decade she contended that “Gender behavior is a highly sophisticated life style that is constructed ON sex but not BY sex.”<sup>29</sup>

As someone with first hand knowledge of male-bodied gender diversity, Prince viewed gender as malleable, and in one theoretically exciting moment, she formulated the notion that biological sex is not as natural as commonly believed:

When these sex aberrations [speaking of hermaphroditic abnormalities] are added to the fact that hormones may so affect the development of the child under certain circumstances that ‘he’ actually develops a feminine body (or the reverse), it is obvious that ‘male and female’ are becoming statistical terms only and not the fixed terms they were once thought to be. The law and legal profession will one day be faced with having to decide the sex of the person or at least the sex he wishes to present to society on the basis of the person’s own personal preference simply for lack of clear cut distinctions. When sex, and gender with it, can be influenced and determined by the interaction of anatomy, chromosomes, hormones and psychosocial forces of upbringing, all kinds of combinations are possible and the rules cannot be imposed just on the basis of what the majority are like. That will be the day, as the man said, for FPs.<sup>30</sup>

Prince drew from her readings in anthropology (particularly Margaret Mead) how various cultures throughout history had arbitrarily assigned roles and rules of expression to each gender category. She had also absorbed much of the psychological research on social conditioning theory and research on gender roles and gender identity in the 1950s and 1960s by pioneers such as John Money and Robert Stoller. These intellectual influences and her original thinking on these matters enabled Prince to historicize gender

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<sup>29</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964) and #60 (December 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).

dichotomies and to see masculinity and femininity as products of a specific time and place.

Ironically, it was the intransigence of gender in the pre-Cold War and postwar eras that informed Prince's rationale as to why she and other anatomical men crossdressed:

You and I have been brought up in a culture that has some pretty rigid ideas about what is masculine and what is feminine, so you have been made to conform to them pretty strictly.... As a result, even though you, as an adult man, come to realize intellectually that much of the rigid conformity forced upon you during childhood years was illogical, unreasonable, even destructive to part of your inner self, emotionally you are chained by it and you cannot alter your reactions to it WHILE IN THE MASCULINE ROLE AND ENVIRONMENT, without feeling silly, stupid and unmanly.... Abandoning that role for a time, however, you find little difficulty in letting out those emotions, traits and desires that you are unable to express in masculine attire no matter how much you'd like to, because the negative conditioning is too strong.... So when we wear feminine attire it is simply a way of putting ourselves in a position where the expression of tenderness, gentility, gracefulness, etc, is part of the expected behavior of that kind of person. These traits are appropriate to this particular façade.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear from her statements that Prince was not seeking to dismantle the binary gender system, even if she did conceptualize it as a "facade." The idea of cultivating distinct feminine and masculine personalities kept traditional gender polarities intact. In her statement above, transvestism was formulated as a temporary escape from the rigid codes of masculinity. While statistically abnormal, crossdressing alleviated the stress and anxiety induced by the social requirements imposed on men by a society determined to repress and eliminate male expressions of femininity.

This rationale for crossdressing, while somewhat tortured and devoid of any hint of the erotic rewards that many transvestites derived from the practice, made sense in the historical context of 1950s and early 1960's American society. Yet, the logic of dual personality expression would become harder to justify as the decade proceeded and the

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<sup>31</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964).

boundaries between traditionally masculine and feminine behaviors began to erode. By the latter half of the 1960s, men generally could more freely express their softer sides without fear of stigmatization. Observing the larger social and cultural trends, Prince adapted her philosophy to these wider transformations and began to allow for more flexibility in expression and acknowledge a range of behaviors and practices. Her encounters with new psychological research, with the women's movement, and her changing gender subjectivity pushed her to contend that one should embrace and express both masculine and feminine attributes in order to become a complete human being. In her columns, one can trace a gradual shift from advocating for separate and distinct dual personality expression in the early 1960s to encouraging an integration of masculinity and femininity around the mid-60s and afterward.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Prince began to assert that aesthetic crossdressing, as practiced by femmepersonators, made the practitioner a more complete person and a better human being. It was an elaborate rationalization for what many professional and lay outsiders considered an identity and practice based primarily on erotic rewards. To bolster her theories, Prince usually borrowed and applied insights from the social sciences. For example, in a column entitled "Psychiatry, Psychology, or Philosophy," she examined dual personality through Carl Jung's theory of animus and anima. Prince explained to her readers that Jung believed that every male has a feminine aspect to his psyche termed the "anima" and in every female a corresponding masculine aspect termed the "animus." Certainly, as the larger culture witnessed more breaches in the gender divide, Prince's rationale that men crossdress to get in touch with their feminine sides would become outmoded. She applied Jung's theory of animus and anima to the practice

of crossdressing to repair this historical rupture. “Regardless of the circumstances under which a male person learns about crossdressing,” she contended, “by the time he has progressed to the complete outfit and can see himself in the mirror as a woman he has begun to experience an integration of his Animus and Anima.” Prince’s promotion of the unification of animus and anima was a sharp departure from her many former admonitions to keep the masculine and feminine sides of one’s personality separate.<sup>32</sup>

In Prince’s later theorizations, the actual dressing in complete feminine attire and behaving appropriately became less of a priority than the basic recognition and acceptance of one’s anima. Unification of the masculine and feminine did not necessarily have to be manifested through crossdressing. Uniting the anima and animus could be accomplished in daily living. It was just that transvestites had found a unique way to unify these ideals. As is evident by the following passage, Prince had softened many of her former stances. Femmepersonation became less a hard discipline and more a therapeutic way of thinking:

There are, however, quite a number of us who have succeeded in recognizing our Anima sides, giving expression to ‘her’, originally through dressing, and subsequently simply through an integration of our inner selves in our daily lives. Dressing may still remain a very pleasant activity and a source of renewed emotional awareness and may continue with greater or lesser frequency all our lives. The important thing is not necessarily to conquer the dressing but to recognize what it is actually doing FOR us, and recognizing this, to actively attempt a greater degree of integration in our ordinary lives without any guilt feelings. I believe that this is the true goal and virtue of FemmePersonation.<sup>33</sup>

Armed with these theories that distinguished sex from gender and that encouraged the integration of masculinity and femininity, Prince boldly advocated public tolerance for

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<sup>32</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #27 (June 1964)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



her brand of transvestism. Although the term did not yet exist, Prince's analysis of gender foregrounded elements of social constructionism. As the 1960s gave way to the 70s, her non-essentialized understanding of gender enabled her to confront the binary gender order with theories that challenged its presumed social inevitability. In her columns and speeches, she gradually came to question many of the traditional roles and duties expected of (heterosexual and middle-class) men and women.<sup>34</sup> Prince's thinking and her lived experiences after the mid-1960s represented a significant reconfiguration of the postwar gender ideologies that structured the lives of many white, middle-class men and women into the 1970s and beyond.

One significant result of Prince's taxonomic efforts was the acceptance of her definition and parameters by many doctors within the mental health profession. According to Vern Bullough, a historian of science, sexuality, and gender, Prince's definition of transvestism became the one adopted by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association. Louise Lawrence had experienced limited success in the late 1940s and 1950s in bringing a non-patient population of crossdressers to the attention of doctors and researchers. With a popular underground magazine and a national membership organization, Prince extended Lawrence's networks and achieved greater results. In her own survey of 504 crossdressers, most of whom comprised her readership, sixty-six percent of respondents indicated that they had never seen a psychiatrist.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For example, she was able to imagine alternative marital arrangements in one column from the early 1970s. Influenced by the second wave of feminism, Prince envisioned a living arrangement where men were homemakers and women were breadwinners.

<sup>35</sup> Bullough (1993), 281. Bullough does not provide any hard evidence for this claim that Prince influenced the DSM change. However, he did personally know Prince and many of the prominent psychiatrists of the

On one level Prince's work broadened the parameters of research on transvestites to include non-patient populations, which certainly altered the image of transvestism. Yet on another level, Prince's ideology and push for respectability constricted the category, as she excluded homosexuals, fetishists, sadomasochists, and women from her definition. As Bullough explains, "Because the psychiatrists accepted Prince's definition of transvestism and incorporated it into the DSM-III-R, behavioral scientists...blindly followed the accepted definition by studying club members as if they were the universe of cross dressers. The cross sectional studies of transvestism all originated in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. The patterns of transvestite life we pictured were based on the official social and sexual scripts facilitated by the club movement."<sup>36</sup>

While Prince possessed editorial power to help advance her agenda and to proliferate a narrow identity script, she alone could not bring into being *Transvestia's* gender community. Community and social identity formation, as it was enacted through the production and consumption of stock narratives, was a nationwide project that hundreds of crossdressers participated in when they read the magazine and contributed letters, photographs, fictional stories, and histories.

Letters and histories came from almost every state in the United States. The West Coast, Mid-West, and Northeast regions had the most number of letters and histories and the South and the Mountain-West, the fewest. Letters and histories were written by adult men of all ages and social classes, but the greatest number seemed to come from middle-

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1970s, including Robert Stoller. Virginia Prince and P.M. Bentler, "A Survey of 504 Cases of Transvestism," *Psychological Reports* 31 (1972): 903—17.

<sup>36</sup> Bullough, (1993) 302. Bullough provides a useful table that summarizes and compares the findings of six studies on club populations of crossdressers in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

class and professional men between the ages of thirty and sixty. Except for one case, it is difficult to determine how many of the letters and histories came from non-white men, as no writer identified himself by race. It is reasonable to assume, though, that the racial make-up of the readership was overwhelmingly white. Of the hundreds of photos published of readers in the 1960s and 1970s, all were of white transvestites, except for three black crossdressers and one Asian transvestite. The Asian crossdresser was the cover girl on the December 1967 issue of *Transvestia*. In this same issue, he contributed the only life history that I know of from a non-white individual.<sup>37</sup>

As for sexual orientation, a handful of the writers explicitly identified as heterosexual, but most others offered implicit proof of their heterosexuality by describing their masculine achievements, by listing the sports they played, by telling about their military experiences, by disparaging homosexuals, and by emphasizing their love and sexual desire for women, including their wives. None of the writers identified as homosexual or bisexual. Only a few admitted to having had homosexual encounters, usually as a result of a period of confusion or experimentation.

Therefore, in addition to the practice of crossdressing, most of these men shared similar racial, class, and sexual backgrounds. Certainly, race, class, and sexuality helped forge the collective bond that united most of these men. Yet the mechanics of community-formation across time and geographical space entailed story creation and the

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<sup>37</sup>The first black TV (Diane from Pennsylvania) was pictured in #28 (August 1964); the second (Michelle) in #58 (August 1969). The third (Laura) was pictured in #69 (1971). Lili, “the Oriental bombshell,” had recently immigrated to New York from Shanghai. In his life narrative (he is twenty-seven years old), Lili described origins, early patterns, and practices that are strikingly similar to those of American transvestites. He befriended Susanna Valenti and socialized with her crowd at Valenti’s upstate resort and Manhattan apartment. Lili is pictured several times in *Casa Susanna*, a beautifully edited collection of photographs of Susanna and her coterie of TVs. The book’s editors, Robert Swope and Michel Hurst, found the photographs in a New York rummage sale several years before the book’s 2005 publication.

repetition of narrative themes and tropes. And it is to part three that we go to explore this dynamic.

### Part Three: Telling Stories

*Transvestia*'s gender community was carved out of a collective discussion of the shared activities, behaviors, experiences, and rites of passage central to heterosexual transvestism. The letters and histories endlessly elaborated on the same themes and topics: theorizing the causes of their condition; crossdressing for the first time; overcoming obstacles to free expression; dealing with guilt, fear, or loneliness; disclosing to or hiding from parents, wives, and children; venturing out in public; passing successfully as women without public detection; describing articles of clothing, wardrobes, and bodily measurements; and sharing fashion and make-up advice.

In this chapter, I will focus on three of these thematic story clusters: 1. origin stories and theories of causation 2. early crossdressing experiences and 3. 'doing' heterosexuality and performing masculinity. These themes will reveal more valuable information about the lived experiences, behaviors, and practices of transvestites—factual descriptions that are not featured in other historiographical accounts of postwar gender and sexuality. Yet, this chapter's argument extends beyond the fact that similar social backgrounds and the sharing of analogous experiences fostered a sense of connection. Rather, this section highlights the dynamic of repetition. The repetition of certain tropes within these thematic story clusters engendered an incipient idea of community and helped fortify the group's social identity.

## Theme 1: Origin Stories and Theories of Causation: The Trope of Uncontrollability

What causes persons such as me? What quirk of nature starts us on this road to femininity? The answer, in most cases that I have studied and in discussing this condition with others like me, stems from early childhood. Broken homes, a domineering mother, a wandering father, and only boy among many sisters [or] a boy baby instead of a girl baby as the mother wanted. All or any of these things could be responsible.<sup>38</sup>

Sharing stories of origin and causation was central to facilitating collective consciousness and constructing a cohesive group identity. While several of *Transvestia*'s writers said they had crossdressed for as long as they could remember and could not designate a specific cause or locate a point of origin, many more letter and history writers scrutinized their childhoods and uncovered parent / child relationships, unusual rearing practices, and environmental influences that they believed may have caused or triggered their unconventional desires and behaviors. Explanations varied, but the central trope of these origin stories was that most transvestites began crossdressing for reasons that were beyond their control.

Examining parent and child relationships was the most common way to uncover possible causes of transvestism. "Betty Ann" [Wisconsin] theorized that two familial social dynamics may have fostered his desires to crossdress during adolescence—his alcoholic father was not a positive role model and his mother made him help her with cleaning, washing, and other domestic chores. Betty Ann's theory tapped into a cluster of tropes that revolved around parental relationships. The tropes portrayed fathers that were weak, unloving, impossibly demanding, neglectful, or absent from the domestic picture; and mothers that were dominant, emasculating, or overly doting and nurturing. "Gisele" (Illinois) also utilized this trope cluster. He noted that growing up he had become more

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<sup>38</sup> Judie's life history "Confessing" in *Transvestia* #46 (August 1967).

“buddies” with his mother than with his unloving father. In an unusually introspective origin story, Gisele closely examined childhood family relations that may have triggered his transvestism:

What few sentiments and endearments Dad did express were reserved for my youngest sister, not me, and thus I never was close to my Father nor did we ever become ‘buddies.’ At the same time, my Father made it quite clear as to what he expected of me as his son. I was required to be his equal in all accomplishments or I would be a failure as a man in his eyes.... Did I thus turn to femininity to escape from the overwhelming pressures associated in my young mind with ‘manhood’ and the apparent impossibility of ever measuring up to the goal of being a ‘man’ in my Father’s critical judgment?... As a result of the lack of physical expressions of affection from Father, I turned to [my mother] perhaps more so than was normal for a young boy. Did I thus turn to femininity in emulation of my mother?<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, “Jeanne” attributed his transvestism to a mother who loved too much and a stern, violent father figure. “My mother had wished for a girl before I was born. I was her doll and I got a lot of attention and caresses.” Jeanne later became a “practicing TV” at the age of ten when he tried on his mother’s bloomers and corset. “In my subconscious,” he theorized, “the corset and bloomers were caresses and protection.” Jeanne described his father as “very strict, aggressive and even violent...a father but not a friend to me.” Jeanne believed his motivations for crossdressing derived from his troubled relationship with his father. “Even if it was against my nature, I became aggressive and violent like my father, being afraid to be gentle and quiet.” Crossdressing became a way “to express my softness...it being impossible to be soft and passive as a man.” Jeanne’s rationalization was unique in the sense that, in no other history that I read, did the writer explain his need to crossdress as a result of an emotionally (and presumably physically)

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<sup>39</sup> Betty Ann’s history “Betty Ann Was Created Not Born” in *Transvestia* #51 (June 1968); Gisele’s life history “Memories—Bitter and Sweet” in *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965).

abusive father. Yet plenty of writers acknowledged having less than ideal fathers, as well as, problematic mothers.<sup>40</sup>

What was also common on the part of *Transvestia*'s writers was the tendency to attribute blame to unusual rearing practices. "Paula" (New Jersey) noted that his mother kept his hair long until a late age, which he believed may have fostered within him a latent desire for feminine expression. "Misty" (Maryland) claimed that his mother had wanted a baby girl and was therefore disappointed when he was born. His mother's hope and subsequent dissatisfaction translated into her treating him like a girl throughout his early childhood. He believed that as a result of his mother's treatment he became a fetishistic transvestite who wore bloomers and panties under his trousers. The central tropes of the above writers' origin stories echoed those of numerous other writers: the desire to crossdress was instigated by domestic events, parent / child relationships, and early childhood rearing experiences that were beyond their control.<sup>41</sup>

Many of these history and letter writers' explanations mirrored those cited in the medical literature on transvestism and in fetish-oriented fiction, i.e., the child had a domineering mother or a weak or absent father; the child was kept in dresses and/ or wore his hair long until a late age; the parents of the boy had wanted a girl and treated him as one during his formative years; or the child was punished at an early age for naughty behavior by having to wear a dress. The production of causal theories was a circular process. The clinical explanations of the causes of transvestism that many writers read about in their search for answers were based on doctors' interviews with and treatment of

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<sup>40</sup> Jeanne's life history "When, How, and Why" in *Transvestia* #49 (February 1968).

<sup>41</sup> Paula's life history "Life with Paula" in *Transvestia* #53 (October 1968); Misty's life history "Misty Is No Mystery" in *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963).

those who sought psychiatric and medical help for a presumed behavioral abnormality in the first place. But once a body of clinical literature had been produced, these medical experts' interpretations could easily be appropriated by other individuals who read the reports in newspapers, journals, and books. In fact, many of *Transvestia*'s writers described having consulted the medical literature on gender and sexual deviancy in order to uncover the causes of their 'abnormal' behavior and the sources of their 'deviant' desires. "Many years of my cross-dressing life went by," explained one history writer, "before I learned that medical science had a name for men like me—a transvestite. Learning that I was labeled was somewhat of a shock, but as I thought about it, the realization came with it that if there was such a label, then more than just me were addicted to the wearing of feminine clothes." While clinical explanations became self-perpetuating and reinforcing, these interpretations were not uncritically absorbed by transvestites. Many writers adamantly emphasized that their childhoods were completely normal. And others simply could not pin-point a particular event or experience that might have caused them to want to wear feminine clothing.<sup>42</sup>

Along similar lines as the appropriation of medical theories, other explanations mirrored themes from transvestite fantasy literature and other fetish-oriented fiction that circulated among crossdressers, domination enthusiasts, and various erotic minorities. The petticoat punishment genre greatly influenced the thematics of some of *Transvestia*'s writers. The act of petticoat punishment involves a female authority figure forcing a man or boy to wear feminine clothing, most often eroticized items such as high heels, stockings, corsets, panties, and garter belts. The male subjected to this form of

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<sup>42</sup> Dorothea's life history, "Overalls and Skirts," in *Transvestia* #25 (February 1964).



punishment futilely resists all efforts to feminize him and shows disdain during the initial process yet, almost invariably, ends up enjoying the experience after a lengthy conditioning period. A writer named “Donna” acknowledged and shared a fetishistic fantasy he had created after he and a friend visited his friend’s aunt. The aunt employed a secretary and a maid. “Both were...most attractively and prettily attired,” remembered Donna, “and so it was with an unexplainable growing desire and delightful contemplation that I began to think that it would be wonderful if I could be dressed as either of them and be a secretary or a maid to a smartly attired and personable woman as they were.” The fantasy of enforced feminization appeared in numerous writers’ stories of origin. Some writers, though, many of whom disavowed the erotic origins of transvestism, argued that a transvestite’s appropriation of this fantasy into his story of origin functioned to absolve him of responsibility for his deviant desires and actions.<sup>43</sup>

While a handful of writers described questionable yet plausible origins, some writers composed accounts that were, without a doubt, grossly exaggerated or entirely fictitious. In the very first life history to be featured in *Transvestia*, a forty-two year old anonymous writer believed that his addiction to crossdressing had no source in childhood but rather began as an adult, in 1951, as a result of his forced participation in a womanless wedding. This writer incorporated into his “true experience” a few trademark conventions and a stock character of transvestite fantasy literature. The author / protagonist put up a futile protest when asked to participate in the wedding, and he had a female friend / accomplice

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<sup>43</sup> Donna’s life history “How It Was with Me” in *Transvestia* #18 (December 1962). For a study of themes in transvestite fantasy literature, see Neil Buhrich and Neil McConaghy, “Transvestite Fiction,” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 163 (1976): 420—27. Psychiatrist Robert Stoller used transvestite fiction to learn more about his patients’ psychosexual development. He contended that the fiction functioned as pornography. Robert Stoller, “Pornography and Perversion,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 22 (1970): 490—99.

who assisted in his transformation. And to top it off, the writer implemented a “passing experience” to conclude his narrative. As a measure of his authentic appearance, he reported how he was nearly gang raped by a group of male hoodlums while walking home still dressed after the wedding. Somehow I find this highly unlikely.<sup>44</sup>

Also dubious was the history written by “Bridget.” He recounted the summer of 1936, at age ten, when he became the “page boy” of his friend’s mother. Bridget’s story reflected a prevalent theme in petticoat punishment literature in which a young boy is feminized by an older, authoritative woman. “Susie” [Florida], a married engineer in his early sixties, also described beginnings that sounded fictitious. His father abandoned him at a very young age. With no father figure, he and his mother moved in with his grandmother in a house in the backwoods of Kentucky. With the father out of the picture, his mother, who (of course) had always wanted a girl instead of a boy, practically reared him as a girl and helped him dress and style his hair. He claimed that he even wore dresses to Sunday school. “Marylynn” [Wyoming] focused on several early formative experiences in great narrative detail. Most of what he wrote sounds embellished, as his remembrances of childhood also replicate themes from the petticoat punishment genre. According to Marylynn, his very strict and devout grandmother would frequently punish him for bad behavior. The punishment entailed making him wear a dress and curling his hair. Later on, his older sister (i.e. female accomplice) confided to him that she had always wanted a sister. She subsequently helped him dress and apply make-up. Bridget, Susie, and Marylynn’s narratives reflected themes from transvestite fantasy literature,

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<sup>44</sup> Anonymous writer’s history “A Doctor Becomes a Transvestite” in *Transvestia* #4 (July 1960).

particularly the fetishistic practice of enforced feminization carried out by an overbearing, strict, and dominant female figure.<sup>45</sup>

The tropes emerging from medical and fetish-oriented cultural discourses were repudiated by several writers. A husband and father of five children, “Eileen” [Virginia] countered the common medical and fetishistic literary tropes of origin by stating that his early life offered no instances of petticoat punishment, a poor father figure, or a dominant mother. The fact that a writer had named three popular causes that bore no influence on his own life and did this several months before the two year anniversary of the magazine, demonstrates the pervasiveness of these origin narratives and how rapidly they had become absorbed into transvestites’ vocabulary, folklore, and self-definitions. Later in the decade, in 1966, “Marjorie” [Ontario] wrote that his life is a “complete rebuttal of the theories of experts.” He claimed that despite having been completely surrounded by females as a child, feminine influences did not steer his transvestism. His desires began much later in life, or so he maintained. He failed to acknowledge the possibility that the seeds of transvestism were sown as a child in this environment and only blossomed in adulthood due to a triggering experience. Indeed, some writers were not as rigorous as others in locating origins and theorizing causes. And some just did not care when and how their desires originated.<sup>46</sup>

The histories and letters that related origin stories mirroring themes and storylines from transvestite fiction and medical discourse are somewhat dubious in terms of whether

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<sup>45</sup> Bridget’s life history “In the Beginning” in *Transvestia* #79 (1973); Susie’s life history “50 Years a TV” in *Transvestia* #78 (1973); Marylynn’s life history “It All Began” in *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969).

<sup>46</sup> Eileen’s life history “The Wonderful World of Eileen” in *Transvestia* #16 (August 1962); Marjorie’s life history “My Odd TV Life” in *Transvestia* #39 (June 1966).

or not they represented true experiences. The degree to which some writers may have embellished and fictionalized cannot be definitively known. Most of these kinds of histories, however, appeared in the early issues of *Transvestia*, suggesting that, in later years, Prince either weeded out those she thought sounded fictitious or that individuals who were prone to stretch the truth stopped writing to a magazine that was increasingly becoming shaped in terms of respectability.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of their degree of truthfulness, origin and causation stories are important for the simple fact that they were repeated over and over again. In this sense, it really does not matter whether or not they were true, and it does not matter that writers described diverse and competing origins. The overarching trope of origin and causation stories was that the author started crossdressing for reasons that were beyond his control. It was the repetition of the trope of uncontrollability that fused competing stories of causation. In one collective breath, writers argued that they were not accountable for their actions. For example, “Bobbie” contended that he was kept in dresses and his hair kept long until the age of five. Thirty-one year old “Nancy” remembered that in the 1930s, due to difficult financial times, his mother saved money on underwear by having him wear

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<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of transvestite fantasy literature and an examination of the differences between the experiences of transvestites and their fictional counterparts, see Hugo Beigel and Robert Feldman, “The Male Transvestite’s Motivation in Fiction, Research and Reality,” *Advances in Sex Research* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 198-212. Beigel and Feldman analyzed seventy-three of novels and short stories and twenty unpublished manuscripts. According to Vern Bullough (1993), Beigel and Feldman “argued that the theme of external compulsion presented in the fantasy literature does not at all resemble the transvestite’s true etiology. In fact, they wondered if the early scientific attribution of transvestism to external forces, particularly the theme of being cross dressed as a child, was a case in which the researchers had been fooled by their clients, who had given them fantasy versions of their real lives.” In this chapter, Bullough also discusses his research team’s own analysis of transvestite fantasy literature, summarizing themes from a random sample of 96 works (short stories, novelettes, novels) available after 1950. According to Bullough, none on the psychological pain and anguish typically experienced by ‘real-life’ transvestites appears in the fantasy literature. “These sharp differences between fact and fiction support Beigel and Feldman’s argument that a major goal of this literature is to create a world in which the hero is innocent, so that he can escape the guilt and punishment that accompany cross dressing.”

his sister's panties. Is it any wonder, they both seemed to ask, that they would continue to desire dressing in feminine clothes throughout childhood and adolescence?<sup>48</sup>

## Theme 2: Early Dressing Experiences: Stealth, Guilt, and Tactile Delights

Regardless of how writers remembered the origins of their transvestism or theorized its causes, they all had to confront their desires, deal with feelings of shame and guilt, and find ways to make their secret dreams of feminine expression become realities. Some writers harbored urges to crossdress either partially or fully but did not have a means to satisfy their yearnings. In vivid recollections of childhood and adolescence, *Transvestia*'s writers recounted the barriers and obstacles that stood in their way of fulfilling their desires. A trope of triumphing over insurmountable and overwhelming odds emerged in their narratives. As the following representative early crossdressing history from "Millie" testifies, it was both a writer's circumstances and individual qualities that created the conditions of possibility for his transvestism to find expression.

"Millie" had been crossdressing for thirty-five years since the age of seven. In his history, he detailed the progression of his desires and practices from childhood through his teenage years. He illustrated his cunning and resourcefulness in finding ways to crossdress and acquire a wardrobe despite his circumstances of living in a large family inside close living quarters. Millie distinguished the origin of his desires from other transvestite narratives that attribute it to enforced feminization. Rather his transvestism, as he characterized it, "...developed on [his] own part, and without help from anyone, by

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<sup>48</sup> Bobbie's life history "Bobbie in TV-Land" in *Transvestia* #20 (April 1963); Nancy's life history "My Year" in *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962). The myth of the over dominant mother and her role in male emasculation was supported in a flood of mom-bashing popular books in the 1940s. See, Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (1942); David Levy, *Maternal Overprotection* (1943); and Edward Strecker, *Their Mother's Sons* (1946).

a love for beautiful clothing and feminine finery.” He recalled an early incident of seeing his sister’s pink brassiere hanging over the back of a chair. He was fascinated. At the time, he could not figure out what it was used for but loved the feel of the fabric. Later on, he found a pink panty girdle on the clothes line. Those incidents caused him to begin looking closer at the clothing his sisters wore. He started sneaking into their rooms and into their closets to admire their wardrobes. Eventually, his curiosity and fascination led him to start trying on various items. Millie later accumulated a wardrobe of his own by scavenging through trash cans in his neighborhood. Taking great care to keep his secret from his family, he hid the discarded clothing he found under a loose floor board in a storage shed behind the house. Soon he became braver and developed the habit of wearing his feminine clothes under his masculine ones from time to time.

At age twelve, Millie moved with his family to a larger house where he got his own room. This situation gave him more privacy, and he began sleeping in sheer nighties and silk pajamas. After school he worked odd jobs just to save money so that he could buy a nicer wardrobe. He also made bus trips to neighboring towns to make purchases. Shopping in stores, he told sales clerks that the feminine items he purchased were “gifts for [his] sisters.” Eventually, he graduated to wearing lingerie under his regular clothing nearly all the time. He described some close calls of almost getting caught, including one time during gym class. However, he never got caught. In his late teens, he enlisted in the merchant marine during WWII. The military greatly curtailed his crossdressing, but he managed to purchase feminine garments and wear them in his hotel room while in port. Millie’s account of his early crossdressing experiences was representative of many other writers’ accounts of overcoming odds. To turn their fantasies and desires into realities,

they employed and relied upon stealth and slyness. Each adapted to and usually triumphed over his circumstances.<sup>49</sup>

Guilt and shame often accompanied early dressing experiences. Remembering and sharing these feelings in their narratives must have helped foster a sense of connection and commonality among the readership. “I was indeed,” confessed “Crystal”, “a very lonely closet TV and felt great guilts [sic], doubts, and fears of exposure and shame. As we all have, I read all I could find on the subject of men in skirts but all it did was convince me that I was sick and if discovered, death was a better alternative. This kind of subjective and uninformed thinking had me contemplating suicide on more than one occasion.” These feelings also caused him to destroy his feminine clothing in a “radical purge.” The act of purging, as it was described by most all the history writers, involved destroying or discarding a hidden stash of clothing in order to assuage a sudden bout or extended period of intense shame and guilt. Writers told of how after burning or throwing their feminine clothes away, they would promise themselves to never crossdress again. Yet, invariably, the inexorable desire returned, and they would begin to assemble another secret wardrobe. As Crystal said regarding a post-purge period, “Things would be fine for a few weeks and then back I’d go buying all new things again.”<sup>50</sup>

Much of the shame and guilt that transvestites had to overcome was perhaps induced by the erotic nature of their early crossdressing practices. For example, “Nancy” was sure that he had “invented a new sin.” Writers carefully elaborated on the erotic dimension of crossdressing in their letters and histories. “The combination of drives of early puberty

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<sup>49</sup> Millie’s life history “Millie Finds Herself” in *Transvestia* #63 (1970).

<sup>50</sup> Crystal’s life history “I’d Do It All Again, Only Better” in *Transvestia* #41 (October 1966).

and the desire to express them in women's clothing," wrote Nancy, "is a great deal for a sexually immature mind to comprehend. Who can discuss the soft sheen of a satin slip with the boys on the corner without fear of dire consequences?" More explicit than most other writers who explored the relationship between eroticism and crossdressing, Nancy vividly described the sensations he experienced at age fourteen when he first tried on a pair of stockings. "All the bolts in heaven shot through my entire body, again and again," he recalled. "It was a shattering shock of such strength that I shuddered with ecstasy.... The tactile feel of the softness of femininity dominated my days and nights." He followed these words with a description of the social and psychological consequences that followed his "great delights and countless precious moments." He wrote:

But, it was also a period of great frustration, for I could never accept the most obvious element of my relationship to [transvestism]: it was a permanent part of my life. In this time, I lived constantly in an aura of secrecy, listening for footsteps, attempting to re-fold pieces of clothing the way I found them, fantasizing all day over what I hoped to find that night. Whatever there was, was never enough.... And so it has been all my TV life—furtive, piece-meal, and very unladylike.<sup>51</sup>

Many writers characterized their first dressing experience as an innocent curiosity, a prank, or a punishment devoid of sexual connotations. Yet, a compulsive desire followed one or more crossdressing episodes. For example, "Dorothy" (Massachusetts) frankly acknowledged the erotic aspect of his later adolescent crossdressing practices. "As I grew of age, all of this activity, of course, would end in masturbation because dressing had become an erotic thing for me." Similarly, "Marilyn," recalled that the intensity and tempo of his desires increased during his high school years when the clothes worn by his female classmates became sexually exciting to him. "I still remember the view of a white

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<sup>51</sup> Nancy's life history "The Real Me—A Girl" in *Transvestia* #74 (1972).



satin slip during the first few weeks of my first year. The young girl's blouse had simply risen an inch or two above her skirt, allowing the slip to blouse over the skirt a bit. I didn't observe long for fear that my 'over-sized' eyes would be noticed."<sup>52</sup>

Another aspect of eroticism concerned the erotic charge one received from touching feminine clothing. "Debbie Lee" highlighted the sensual feel—what I refer to as "tactile delights"—that feminine undergarments gave him. "My greatest desire," he confessed, "was to see, touch and feel next to my body anything with lace and ruffles, preferably of satin or taffeta. I guess my TV beginnings must have been fetishistic because I remember how much I loved to wear my sister's bloomers and fondle and cuddle the laces and satins next to my skin." Other writers also reported loving the sensual feel of silk, satin, nylon, taffeta and other fabrics they considered "thrilling" to the touch. Some also enjoyed wearing very tight and constricting clothing. Others were fascinated by the "frills", "ruffles," "flounces", and "frou-frou" of feminine undergarments and dresses. One writer considered silk bloomers "an exquisite second skin." "The joy of being a transvestite," he remarked, "consists of the delightful feel of these beautiful garments—the soft silk embracing my legs, and the cute little flared skirt swirling about my knees. I never feel so near God as when I wear girl's clothes."<sup>53</sup>

As these examples indicate, for most all transvestites, the desire to crossdress began as a sexual outlet, and although seldom acknowledged, was entangled with erotic rewards throughout the life cycle. What is significant about the life narratives featured in *Transvestia* was how writers tended to openly acknowledge the relationship between sex

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<sup>52</sup> Dorothy's life history "TV from Puritan Land" in *Transvestia* #56 (April 1969); Marilyn's letter in *Transvestia* #13 (February 1962).

<sup>53</sup> Debbie Lee's life history "This is My Life" in *Transvestia* #50 (April 1968); \*Sharon's life history "Femme Highlights" in *Transvestia* #30 (December 1964).

(eroticism) and crossdressing during pre-adolescence and puberty yet obscure, downplay, or erase these associations in adulthood. For example, “Francene,” (Massachusetts) a twenty-two year old day mechanic and gas pumper, spent an inordinate amount of time recounting the origins of his crossdressing and describing the early development and evolution of his desires and practices. He located his “interest in feminine clothing” at the age of five or six when he would secretly watch his older female cousins undress. Gazing at their underwear would give him “a tingle.” As a pre-teen, he developed a fascination with panties and other feminine undergarments and soon started trying on his cousins’ panties. “When I put the panties on,” he wrote of his first time, “I got an awful warm feeling inside me along with being, or at least feeling a little dizzy. Those panties had a softness and coolness I had never felt on me before. From then on I would go to my cousins’ room as often as possible and put on their panties, slips, dresses or anything I could get my hands on.” At age nine, he dressed in full wardrobe for the first time. Pretending to be a mother, he would baby-sit his infant sibling while fully dressed. He recalled during puberty looking at all the girls’ clothes at school and imagining himself as the wearer of them. Francene’s early history markedly shifts from fully acknowledged erotic associations with feminine undergarments to de-eroticized role-play and feminine identification during adulthood. If erotic rewards continued in adulthood, we do not know, because Francene conspicuously did not say.<sup>54</sup>

The correlation between sex and crossdressing was a kind of open secret among *Transvestia*’s gender community. In their narratives, writers carefully finessed the subjects of eroticism and fetishism. True, for a few of the more fetishistic crossdressers

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<sup>54</sup> Francene’s life history “This Is the Way It Was” in *Transvestia* #49 (February 1968).

who contributed letters and histories, erotic rewards were the *raison d'être*. For most others, though, the sexual nature of the activity was a source of shame and guilt, especially during adolescence, and as such, the desire to crossdress needed to be managed or controlled. Most writers narrativized their management of these erotic yearnings, which highlights the main point of this thematic cluster of early experience stories. As with stories of origin and causation, the retelling of childhood and adolescent crossdressing experiences, including one's experiences with the erotic component of transvestism, incited mutual recognition among most of *Transvestia*'s readership. In this case, the overarching theme that connected these early experiences was the writer's triumph over various mental and environmental obstacles.

### Theme 3: Doing Heterosexuality and Performing Masculinity

I was soon dubbed a 'sissy'; and (I can now admit it) knowing it was all too true, resented it violently. Even then I preferred girls—preferred being with them, and being like them. But the resentment at the epithet forced me into a false image, and so I worked at the hated task of being 'all-boy' As the years passed, like an actor in a long-running play, I became quite proficient in my role; even to the extent of stifling most of my feminine desires.<sup>55</sup>

As historian James Gilbert observes, the years following the Second World War “have often appeared to be, primarily, about the perils and prospects of becoming an adult and particularly about growing up to be masculine or feminine...in a time of uncertain and changing concepts of masculinity....”<sup>56</sup> A concern with masculinity certainly pervaded the letters and histories sent to Prince. In fact, *Transvestia*'s writers

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<sup>55</sup> \*From Judy's life history “The Three Stages of Life” in *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963).

<sup>56</sup> James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2. For broad social and cultural histories of manhood see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) and E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

forged identificatory bonds through a steady deployment of tropes surrounding heterosexual manliness. Some letter and history writers, including the one featured in the epigraph above, displayed an ironic self-reflexivity with their astute recognition that masculinity represented a sort of charade one performed in order to conform to stifling gender norms. Most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers, however, were highly invested in 'traditional' models of Anglo-masculinity and adhered to middle-class ideals of achievement and success.

While the normality and masculinity of most any man who enjoyed periodically dressing in the clothing of the 'opposite' sex would be questioned in most eras of American history, this was especially the case during the postwar period when the promotion and policing of heteronormativity and the patriarchal nuclear family intensified. "The trappings of gender failure were all around us in the 1950s," contends sociologist and scholar of masculinity studies Michael Kimmel, "and American men discovered what happened to men who failed, especially the sons of men who failed as breadwinners and fathers. They became homosexual, they became juvenile delinquents, they became Communists—soft, spineless dupes of a foreign power, who were incapable of standing up for themselves."<sup>57</sup> As if to remove any doubts regarding their normality and masculinity, *Transvestia*'s writers sought to prove their heterosexual manliness by describing their achievements as middle-class and professional (white) men.

The narrative of a twenty-eight-year-old business manager named "Annette" (the introduction's opening case study) is a case in point. According to Annette, other than his "unusual hobby," he described his life as normal and successful, and he listed his

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (1996), 237.

achievements and credentials just to prove the fact that he was “all man.” A few writers, including Annette, further validated their claims by producing supportive and laudatory letters from family members. The mother of Annette vouched for her son’s manliness in a short note published in issue number ten. She wrote that a mother “dreams of a son as being the essence of manhood; the acme of masculinity.” Attesting to his good citizenship and financial success, she asserted that Annette is “highly respected as a man. He holds several positions for the city and he has been business manager for a firm of substantial income.” His mother even vouched for her son’s sexual attractiveness: “He is admired by all women because he is truly a handsome hunk of a man.” Lastly, she praised Annette for his role as “a father and husband [who] is above reproach; he adores his family and home.” The mother portrayed her son as the prototypical postwar male—a devoted father, loving husband, and masculine breadwinner. She issued these props in spite of any behavioral quirk and unusual practice that might suggest otherwise.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the many self-accolades and the praise foisted onto them by family members, status anxiety and gender uncertainties pervaded many writers’ narratives of success and manly achievement. *Transvestia*’s crossdressers learned at an early age that crossdressing was incongruent with the ways they were expected to act and behave as boys and as young men. “Barbara” (Illinois) recalled a childhood experience in which his mom allowed him to wear some of her nightgowns during a long recuperation period from sickness. Barbara loved the soft gowns. He later experimented trying on other items from his mother’s wardrobe. At one point, he proudly presented himself in full feminine garb to his father for approval. Predictably, his father derided his son’s behavior and destroyed

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<sup>58</sup> *Transvestia* #10 (August 1961).

his innocent joy with sarcastic remarks. “Days earlier I had learned the magic of dressing; now I had learned something of the guilt and shame which usually accompany it.”

Barbara’s crossdressing experiences increased with the onset of puberty. He described his adolescence as miserable and filled with guilt, shame, and broken promises to himself to stop crossdressing. “Time and again, I would solemnly renounce it all and plunge myself into some terrifically masculine activity in order to ‘prove myself’ only to return eventually with renewed interest and zest.” He described a “nagging sense of inadequacy about [his] masculine role.”<sup>59</sup>

Other writers also expressed a sense of inadequacy about the social and cultural expectations of the male sex role. “I simply do not know,” wrote “Ann” [North Carolina], “how to act, to feel as one with the group, to join the general male attitudes of ‘horsing around,’ bragging, story and joke telling, going for a night out with the boys, or gaping into a television set at sports event.” “Kathy” [California] revealed that he had been the captain of his high school football team and vice president of his class and had dated girls regularly as a teenager. “I was to all appearances,” he explained, “a successful young man. Yet I continued to ‘dress’ and I was bewildered that such a thing could be so powerful in the face of all my masculine success.” In college, he joined a fraternity and gained quite a reputation as a “ladies’ man” among his brothers. “I felt sure that insight through learning and success with women would finally cure me of an ailment which I now knew had a name.” But no cure came, and soon he began to worry about where his life would take him if he continued crossdressing. “Could it be that I was to be alone for

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<sup>59</sup> Barbara’s life history “The Way It Was” in *Transvestia* #54 (December 1968).

all of my years? Would I ever be a success? How could I reconcile my behavior with my desire to marry and raise a happy family?”<sup>60</sup>

While diverse and competing models of masculinity existed in the 1950s and 1960s, there were, at the same time, tremendous social and cultural expectations placed on white, middle-class men to marry and to support their wives and children. A sea of expert opinion and popular sentiment bolstered and sustained the ideology of the nuclear family ideology and breadwinner ethic that structured the lived experiences of “men in the middle,” including many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers. So widespread were these expectations that for an adult man to deviate from or fail to conform to the breadwinner role made him socially, mentally, and sexually suspect. “In psychiatric theory and in popular culture,” notes Barbara Ehrenreich, “the image of the irresponsible male blurred into the shadowy figure of the homosexual. Men who failed as breadwinners and husbands were ‘immature,’ while homosexuals were, in psychiatric judgment, ‘aspirants to perpetual adolescence.’”<sup>61</sup>

Despite the historical backdrop of Cold War consensus and conformity, the traditional ideologies of manhood that animate *Transvestia*’s letters and histories have a curious presence. After all, by the very practice of crossdressing and channeling feminine sensibilities, these men were certainly defying, albeit temporarily, dominant notions and ideals of heterosexual manhood. Why, then, this mix of uncertainty and hyper-masculine posturing? At the center of these writers’ anxieties and doubts and manly boasts resided

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<sup>60</sup> Ann’s life history “Life, Liberty, and the Business of Happiness” in *Transvestia* #91 (1977); Kathy’s life history “Personal History” in *Transvestia* #54 (December 1968)

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1983) 24.

the specter of homosexuality. The disavowal of homosexuality was a common trope and central to the performance of masculinity. “Donna” [Pennsylvania] offered his own version of the standard heterosexual disclaimer. “In spite of my desires, I greatly liked girls and although I would have to admit to being on the shy side with girls, I went out with them whenever the opportunity and my finances allowed.” The fear of potentially *being* a homosexual had plagued many writers during their teen and young adult lives and propelled them into hyper-masculine endeavors. At age eleven, “Jean” had heard that all males who crossdress are homosexual. Repulsed, he compensated for his secret desires by pursuing “the manly arts and sports with vigor and tenacity to ‘prove’ to [himself] and to all the world that [he] was not only male, but a superior male.” Like Jean, “Karin” [California] also doubted his heterosexuality for a period of time. He wrote that the fear of homosexuality stayed with him through four years of armed service and until very recently when he discovered *Transvestia* and came to know other heterosexual men with the same desires.<sup>62</sup>

Karin’s enlistment in the military was not unique among the transvestite men who wrote their histories for *Transvestia*. Well over half of history writers served in a branch of the military. Irrespective of the military draft, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of these transvestite men served in the armed forces during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam. They were invested in heroic and militaristic notions of masculinity even as they secretly desired softer expressions of femininity. For many of these men, serving in the military proved to be the ultimate

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<sup>62</sup> Donna’s life history “How It Was With Me” and Jean’s life history “I Could Not Win Till I Lost” in *Transvestia* #18 (December 1962); Karin’s life history “From the Beginning to...?” in *Transvestia* #43 (February 1967).



expression of manliness and test of their manhood. Like a number of *Transvestia*'s writers, twenty-three year old "Eileen" joined the Marines voluntarily to assert his manhood. "I responded to my instincts by being super masculine and berating feminine things, even while secretly longing [for them] almost constantly." He rose to the level of first lieutenant and served in Vietnam. It was there on the frontlines—where "life got to be an important commodity"—that he made himself the following promise:

I swore while in Vietnam that if I lived, I was going to be just the sort of person I wanted.... I would never put myself in any position that would prevent me from expressing my femininity.... It required a new life style, a divorce, being brutally honest and a lot of sacrifices, but I wouldn't change a thing. I have the rest of my life ahead of me and I shall enjoy it.<sup>63</sup>

Transvestite veterans described how they managed and satisfied their desires to crossdress during military service. For some writers, the freedom and independence from their families that serving overseas afforded also provided them the opportunity to actualize their secret desires and realize their fantasies. For example, "Bobbie" [Illinois] joined the Navy in 1944. "I had some time and money of my own and I started to accumulate a modest wardrobe. While my shipmates boozed it up, I was shopping and trying out my new acquisitions in a cheap hotel. I never had any guilty feelings about this." For others, however, military service greatly curtailed their opportunities to crossdress. A veteran of the Korean War, "Lee" [New York] remembered being "shipped to the Orient and [finding himself] in a world far removed from the one which [his] fantasies conjured." He recalled that "the endless days of filth and danger seemed only to accentuate the desirability of feminine clothing and living." After the war, Lee lived the single life and accumulated the wardrobe he had dreamed about overseas. Another

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<sup>63</sup> Eileen's life history "The Evolution of the Femme Self" in *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

veteran, thirty-one year old “Nancy,” served in the air force for four years. “Needless to say, this curtailed any TV activity as I feared being discovered and summarily discharged. On different occasions I purchased a slip, panties, or nightie for a weekend on pass, then I discarded them afterwards.” “Ann” [Florida] joined the Air Force in 1951 “to be free to travel and accumulate money with which to buy the wardrobe [he] so desperately needed.” However, he soon discovered that all his privacy was eliminated. Some transvestite service men, though, relied on cunning in order to crossdress and worked around privacy barriers. Stationed at a base in Missouri, “Judy” recalled that at nights when his two roommates were fast asleep he would retrieve a bathing suit that he had hidden in his locker, slip into it, and return to bed.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of masculine success and military service, *Transvestia*’s writers knew that their desires and behaviors placed them in direct opposition to their culture’s dominant ideals of manhood, which is why, in their narratives, they conspicuously gesture to their manly accomplishments. As Michael Kimmel observes, “countless studies of hypermasculinity explain masculine excess as a compensation for insecure and anxious gender identity.”<sup>65</sup> To a large degree, the dual personality ideology that many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers adopted was an effective strategy for managing the contradictions inherent in the very notion of heterosexual transvestism. Indeed, by the dominant culture’s logic, heterosexual transvestism was a contradiction in terms. Dividing and separating the masculine and feminine personalities, then, served to

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<sup>64</sup> Bobbie’s life history “Bobbie in TV-Land” in *Transvestia* #20 (April 1963); Lee’s life history “The Facts of My Life” in *Transvestia* #15 (June 1962); Nancy’s life history “My Year” in *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962); Ann’s life history “The Small and Troubled World of Ann Randall” in *Transvestia* #21 (June 1963); Judy’s life history “Just Me” in *Transvestia* #47 (October 1967).

<sup>65</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (1996), 245.

preserve the privileges of the masculine self and to protect it from the taint of femininity, even though they relished expressions of femininity.

*Transvestia*'s gender community was simultaneously a product of Cold War culture as well as an alternative to it. Scholarly literature and popular memory have painted an image of the Cold War era as rigidly conformist with one prevailing standard of masculinity. More recent scholarship has complicated this portrait of postwar manhood and masculinity, contending that gender was never as universal and uniform as commonly mythologized. Rather, the postwar era saw a proliferation of masculinities and femininities. *Transvestia*'s gender community represented one small but significant variation of the sex/gender relationship. A few of *Transvestia*'s writers conceptualized their transvestism as a rebellion against hegemonic models of masculinity. The most transgressive example came from "Ann" [North Carolina]. One of a few critical voices, he repudiated the stifling, narrow, and rigid form of masculinity that had gained cultural hegemony in the decades following the Second World War. Ann wrote his history in the mid 1970s. A pro-feminist man, Ann offered a critical appraisal and indictment of Cold War masculinity. His words are worth quoting extensively:

A psychiatrist attaches much importance to a concept called 'identity.' Every person is supposed to make one thing abundantly clear, namely, what his or her 'identity' is. And of course, for a man, that means feeling the appropriate pride in being a male, the master of the world, God's gift to creation. And the male heterosexual TV, in particular, is supposed to be strongly aware that he is a male 'underneath it all.' .... I have also in a more general sense become strongly aware of the absurdity of the exaggerated 'maleness' of our whole civilization, its merciless scorn and arrogance, its ice-cold cynicism and materialism.... I have strongly perceived the importance of the modern Women's Liberation movement; not just another social movement of today, but perhaps the only chance left, our only hope: a sisterhood of all mankind to replace a brotherhood of man infested by greed, hatred, and intolerance.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ann's life history "Life, Liberty, and the Business of Happiness" in *Transvestia* #91 (1977).

Many of Ann's critical views reflected those of Virginia Prince, Susanna Valenti, and a few other thoughtful observers who were influenced by second wave feminism. They all connected much of the violence and injustices around the world to dominant structures of masculinity in American society. Granted, they could not see the supremacy of "whiteness" refracted in its hegemonic form, but they understood that a narrow and brute form of masculinity was intricately connected to the domination, exploitation, and the exercise of power over women and sexual minorities.

Yet even while serving as evidence of the existence of alternative models of gender, *Transvestia's* community still indicates that postwar gender roles and norms, while not ubiquitous or always followed, exercised tremendous power. The fear of sexual deviancy or better, the fear of becoming stigmatized as sexually deviant, greatly structured this community's ideology, styles, aesthetics, and practices. With the exception of Ann above and a few others, doing heterosexuality and articulating dominant models and discourses of masculinity figured heavily in these writers' narratives and lived experiences. There is no better illustration of the heterosexual imperative than a letter that was published from a twenty-four year old crossdresser named "Donna" who had just discovered the magazine. Donna's letter illustrates how single (i.e. non-married) crossdressers with dubious sexual pasts encountered and negotiated the magazine's sexual and gender norms. Donna wrote:

...I will not try to hide anything from you and your staff. I have had a few HS [homosexual] experiences....I'm not going to say I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing, that would be just an excuse. I knew perfectly well that it was wrong, but I did it anyway. Out of these experiences came disgust, loss of self-respect, just deep down inside, I was sick of myself. These places I went to were the only places I knew of where I could go and not feel odd, but I was odd and I did not fit in there either. [Donna did not elaborate on where he went but one may assume gay bars.] I find that I can know and meet transvestites anyplace in the

world through your publication of *Transvestia*. To me this is one of the basic ways of relieving our guilt feelings.... It is a realization that we are not alone and that we can have friendships and correspondence with happy and contented persons with the same thoughts and views. It means to me that I do not have to be an outsider or a loner any more.... At one time I thought of becoming or wanting to become a trans-sexual. This I could never do.... I might have disqualified myself for Phi Pi Epsilon sorority. I surely hope not and I pray that I am accepted.<sup>67</sup>

Donna worried that his prior homosexual experiences and transsexual inclinations might prevent him from being welcomed into the national sorority and, more generally, from being accepted by the readership of *Transvestia*. For Donna, the stakes of being able to join both communities were high. Having considered transsexuality, he must have had a strong sense of crossgender identification and intense desires to crossdress and perhaps live socially as a woman. He also described being an outsider and a loner. In these regards, Donna's search for peace of mind and community placed him with others who lacked the cultural resources and social capital to acquire symbolic membership in a postwar white male community of middle to upper class professionals. For many crossdressers like Donna, the community and organizational network that *Transvestia* spawned served as primary communities of identification, albeit underground ones.<sup>68</sup>

In sum, the performance of heterosexual manliness in these life narratives may have been the vital trope that linked men with otherwise varying (and potentially divisive) crossdressing experiences, patterns, and aesthetics. Writers textually deployed various markers, signs, and emblems of virile heterosexuality and manly achievement. Certainly, in many cases, writers' descriptive trappings of hegemonic masculinity and the litany of

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<sup>67</sup> Donna's letter in *Transvestia* # 54 (December 1968)

<sup>68</sup> This dynamic of white racial formation and the relationship between gender, race, citizenship, and nation have been described in the context of the early national and antebellum periods by Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).

achievements they enumerated matched their real lives. Yet their preoccupation with these symbolic deployments signaled very real anxieties regarding their status in the world. The symbolic deployment of the trope of heterosexual manliness functioned, then, to validate their claims to normality and respectability.

While many of their non-transvestite contemporaries—the gray flannel dissidents, playboys, beats, and hippies—were revolting against marriage and the breadwinner role, many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers were embracing this role and retreating into domesticity. In this sense, doing heterosexuality and performing masculinity served to disassociate their insecure identities as heterosexual crossdressers from a slew of other stigmatized groups whose members also engaged in crossdressing. Fear of being lumped with gays, transsexuals, and other gender and sexual variants was the source of their anxieties and impetus for their bravado. Therefore, *Transvestia*’s gender community was both assembled and guarded by a vigorous discourse of hyper-masculinity and by symbolic attachments to the norm (and social imperative) of reproductive, marital heterosexuality.

The argument of Part Three of this chapter, “Telling Gender Stories,” has centered on the repetition of three narrative clusters in the letters and histories that readers of *Transvestia* sent to the magazine. These clusters featured themes and tropes that facilitated connection and sparked mutual recognition among the magazine’s readership. This argument, of course, depends on reception, which is always a tricky issue. Fortunately, the letters and histories provide clues to the effect that storytelling had on writers in respect to community formation. Part Four of this chapter, then, will present evidence illustrating that letter and history writers did articulate a common social identity

and a shared sense of fate—essential ingredients for the formation of a community beyond the realm of text.

#### Part Four: Forging Community

It's a cinch that aside from a few dedicated medical men, no one who is not a TV will fight for us. So we have to fight for ourselves. I don't mean we have to stand on a street corner and shout, 'I am a transvestite'. That isn't necessary, but all of us should support TV projects wholeheartedly, all of us should want to meet others like ourselves, trust each other more and stop shying away from each other with the comment, 'You don't understand, if my family and friends knew.'<sup>69</sup>

A crossdresser named “Dorothea” wrote the above impassioned words in a letter that was published in *Transvestia* in 1960. Adopting the language of protest and self-determination—“we have to fight for ourselves,” Dorothea strongly asserted the necessity of forging unity, solidarity, and sociality among the hundreds of scattered crossdressers that comprised the magazine’s readership. As a storytelling medium, *Transvestia* became a forum for many men who crossdressed to share common stories of desire, identity, and community. Dorothea’s letter was one of many that documented an emerging collective consciousness among many of the crossdressers who subscribed to the magazine. These transvestites were beginning to imagine a space for their feminine personae that extended beyond the private world of fantasy and fetish. Some, like Dorothea, were even becoming politicized and envisioning a transvestite community. It bears repeating that I use the idea of community loosely to describe the unique social formation that was created by the readers and writers of *Transvestia*. These transvestites certainly did not comprise a community as traditionally defined by common locale and face-to-face contact. They did,

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<sup>69</sup> Dorothea’s letter in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

however, inhabit an underground textual world—a cultural and social imaginary—of their own making. And in some urban locales this textual community merged seamlessly with (or sometimes helped create) actual transvestite social circles and networks.

Reading and writing to *Transvestia* promoted solidarity and peace of mind and facilitated a group consciousness among self-described heterosexual men who enjoyed dressing and behaving as women. Before the publication (and each individual's discovery) of this magazine, many crossdressers had little or no conception of themselves as being part of a larger group. "It is reassuring," wrote "Marge" (Mississippi), "that we can see that we are no longer alone." "Veronica" exclaimed, "At last I belong to a family, yes, truly a family of shared interests, drives and an almost personal contact with others of our cult." Many of the letters and histories sent to the magazine reveal a trope of lives formerly lived in alienation, secrecy and confusion. "Prior to reading your magazine," wrote Sheila, "I honestly didn't know very much about the subject of transvestism and if I were 'right' in the head. [My wife and I] are very happy that there are other people in the world that have similar interests and I'm not alone in enjoying this wonderful thing." Another crossdresser "Abi" said, "For the first time in my life, I can look myself and the world straight in the face without feeling that I am a sneaky, dirty, odd sort of individual and certainly not worthy of anyone's love, understanding or admiration." With the removal of shame, Abi moved closer to developing a sense of pride in his transvestism. Other writers clearly articulated pride. Their rhetoric is far removed from the language of shame and guilt. "Let there be no apologies for our condition," proclaimed "Rosemary." "We are what we are and it is incurable, so let's not just enjoy it with reluctance but with zest, giving pleasure to those in our confidence." The peace of mind, solidarity, and pride



shared by these and other writers indicate that many in the readership had begun the process of articulating collective identity, the key ingredient necessary for forging a community.<sup>70</sup>

The idea of community fostered a genuine desire for connection and sociality. Many writers became willing to correspond, meet, and socialize with other crossdressers. This kind of movement *out* of what was popularly referred to as the “locked-room” stage of transvestism first necessitated the development of the idea that something personally and socially meaningful could be obtained in a group of like-minded individuals. On one level, *Transvestia*’s textual community fostered that radical idea and on another level the textual community *was* that idea. Making contact with other crossdressers was socially equivalent to the first steps of ‘coming-out’ in the gay community when one establishes some form of social contact with another gay person or with a sympathetic group or subculture. As such, meeting others took courage since many transvestites (like gays) harbored a debilitating shame of their private activities and guarded their secret vigilantly. And even for self-assured crossdressers, there existed the social risks in corresponding, meeting, and socializing with other transvestites.

A crossdresser named “Betty,” who had “hoped and prayed for years that something would come along to tie together the TVs,” represented a growing number of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers who were beginning to imagine moving beyond the private and secretive realm of individual desire. Inhabiting the textual space that the magazine provided helped Betty conceptualize the “locked-room” as a pointless and empty place. He wrote:

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<sup>70</sup> Marge’s letter in *Transvestia* #80 (1974); Veronica’s letter in *Transvestia* #27 (June 1964); Sheila’s letter in *Transvestia* #62 (1970); Abi’s letter in *Transvestia* #59 (October 1969); Rosemary’s letter in *Transvestia* #64 (1970).

TVs are usually secretive and do not betray their secret readily. It seems one of our traits is to go off in a corner, dress up, and feel content.... Maybe I am only speaking for myself but a few others I have known say the same thing. Here we are, all dressed up—so what??? Now comes the question—where do we go from here??? About all there is to do is walk around the apartment until the inner urges are satisfied and then undress again and become the same old fellow again.<sup>71</sup>

Writing during the magazine's first year of publication, it is clear that Betty had already been captured by the idea of community. He could envision the possibilities that a shared cultural medium could offer crossdressers in respect to communication, social cohesiveness, and potential face-to-face interactions. The obliteration of the "locked-room" mentality could only be accomplished by the kind of social formation I have been describing as a textual community. And, again, it is worth repeating that, on another level, the textual community *was* the desire expressed by these writers of wanting to make something socially and personally meaningful out of their "femme-lives."

Overtime, an increasing number of writers envisioned a political dimension to this collective exodus from the locked room. A kind of social consciousness found expression in the desire to produce personally and socially empowering knowledge about one's condition and place in society. The narrative of a writer named "C.W." indicates that he was becoming inspired in political ways. Not only did C.W. express a newfound sense of camaraderie, he also articulated what I would characterize as a call for transvestite knowledge production. "Until now," he wrote, "I have kept my secret to myself, [and] life has been very lonely and without meaning.... To find true companionship and mutual understanding with people like myself is now my aim in life. Yes, I want to dedicate the rest of my life to transvestism, to a better understanding of what it is, to find whether it has a place in the society in which we live." "Mary Jane" [New York] had felt that he

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<sup>71</sup> Betty's letter in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).

“could not contribute anything” until he gained knowledge of his condition and received acceptance from his wife. “We both feel that we should now become active members of the transvestite community. Both of us feel we can learn much and perhaps someday others can learn from us how to live happily in conjunction with transvestism.” Notably, this writer actually used the word “community” and did so as early as 1969.<sup>72</sup>

The knowledge that *Transvestia*’s writers constructed was used to build a community of mutual understanding and shared fate. Consider the following example:

The deep natural understanding of each others problems is one of the things that knits a close relationship between us girls. We all have common troubles and we can help each other in the solution of our individual difficulties. But again I say, no one can do it alone. By yourself you’ll surely lead yourself down the path of ultimate and complete unhappiness, but with the help, understanding and co-operation of your sister TVs, you too can have a rich and happy life.<sup>73</sup>

“Ankie” and others wanted to help their closeted, guilt-ridden, and lonely “sisters.” In these letters, C.W., Mary Jane, and Ankie all conveyed a missionary or activist impulse—a calling into what may be interpreted as service and activism. “I am, for the first time in my 34 years,” wrote another crossdresser, “beginning to accept my self for what I am. I have you to thank for this and not my expensive shrinks. Keep up the excellent work and please let me know if I can do anything to help you in advancing ‘our’ cause.” Another poignant example of the service many writers felt inspired to offer after being helped themselves by the magazine came from “Judy” (Wisconsin):

When I first started reading TVia and what you had to say I hoped and wished that you were right. I accepted what you had to say with an almost blind faith. I grew then to believing you were right. I took that belief with me the day I faced a psychologist for an hour. Almost the first words from my mouth were ‘I am a self

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<sup>72</sup> C.W.’s letter in *Transvestia* # 5 (September 1960); Mary Jane’s letter in *Transvestia* #64 (1970).

<sup>73</sup> Ankie’s life history “You Too Can Have a Rich Life” in *Transvestia* #28 (August 1964).

accepting transvestite'.... I want to share what I have found with as many of my 'sisters' as possible. How can I be of service?<sup>74</sup>

These rhetorical calls to action, service, and activism from *Transvestia*'s writers stemmed from a growing sense of shared fate and a genuine concern for fearful, confused, and lonely "unfound" transvestites. For some, the problem was grave, as they knew from experience, hear-say, and from the popular press where feelings of loneliness and shame could lead. For instance, one anonymous writer wrote to Prince to offer his encouragement in her public relations and recruitment efforts. In his work as a priest, he had known of several cases of men and boys found dead by their own hands and dressed in girls' clothing. "Their last mute witness to the society they were leaving told the cause of their suicide—told it in death, as they were not allowed to tell it in life." To be sure, in their visions of community and articulations of the forms of service required to be a good 'citizen' within this community, many of the writers quoted above did not possess the language to articulate the actual mechanics of organized transvestism. However, they did imagine its birth and deeply felt its necessity.<sup>75</sup>

The rhetoric and tone of writers' articulations of community noticeably changed in the later half of the 1960s and especially in the early 1970s. For example, "Page Drew," a twenty-six year old writer from Oklahoma, spoke with a tone of militancy as he passionately expressed a sense of shared fate with other crossdressers. "I don't wish to act in a manner that would bring trouble to my sister, but I am willing to fight publicly if necessary for our rights or for one of the girls who might need assistance." Page Drew

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<sup>74</sup> Letter in *Transvestia* #97\* (1978); Judy's letter in *Transvestia* #86 (1976).

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous writer's letter in *Transvestia* #66 (1971). Also, "Carol," one of my living contacts, remembered an adolescent suicide from his hometown involving a male who had dressed in feminine attire and hung himself.

and other (usually younger) crossdressers appropriated the rights discourse characteristic of the black civil rights movement and the subsequent liberatory movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. However, as mostly middle and professional class men with socially conservative mindsets, not all writers, even those of the younger generation, embraced the strategies of direct action and radical protest and absorbed the language of identity politics. A few reacted disdainfully against the social and political liberalism and against the rights-based demands and advances of other minority groups. For the majority of writers, leaving the private fantasy world of the 'locked-room' entailed joining *Transvestia*'s textual community and not a broader coalition of other gender and sexual minorities.<sup>76</sup>

The textual and the social worlds that crossdressers created overlapped. *Transvestia*'s textual community extended a preexisting correspondence culture and merged with and created informal social circles and networks of transvestites in many of the larger cities of the United States. Correspondents reported with delight the contacts and friends they made through the magazine's personal ads. Moreover, they wanted other readers to experience the happiness and reassurance that came with greater degrees of sociality and interaction. "Through your help," reported one crossdresser, "I was put into direct contact with a number of fine, concerned people. To read about another is one thing, but to commune with another is so much greater."<sup>77</sup>

More than simply functioning as a correspondence service or as a medium to establish direct contact between handfuls of readers, *Transvestia* more significantly assembled an

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<sup>76</sup> Page Drew's letter in *Transvestia* #67 (1971). It may be that the ones who became more politicized were the transvestites with a strong sense of cross-gender identification.

<sup>77</sup> Letter in *Transvestia* #72 (1972).

‘audience’ and offered them a common identity narrative. To be sure, this cultural imaginary or textual assemblage provided an important foundation (and pool of members) for the actual making of a nationally organized and cohesive social network. But this ‘audience’ first had to be turned into a community of like-minded people. Many of *Transvestia*’s writers did come to see themselves as a “group,” a “cult,” a “family,” and a “community” through the production, circulation, and consumption of stock identity narratives and the repetition of identificatory themes and tropes within these narratives.

I now want to situate this storytelling community within the broader society of postwar America and explore some of its members’ ideological maneuverings and some of the ways they related their group’s social identity to mainstream society. As doctors, lawyers, engineers, police officers, bureaucrats, civic leaders, and other respectable figures and as crossdressers, this group was intimately familiar with the contours of postwar gender and sexuality. As subjects situated between privilege and stigma—honor and shame—*Transvestia*’s heterosexual transvestites collectively exhibited a complex subjectivity that saw them straddling the boundaries between the mainstream and the sexual margins. From their complex positioning, they simultaneously unpacked cultural discourses about the social meanings of masculinity and reinforced the rigid bifurcated gender regime that stigmatized them in the first place. Still, this cohort of transvestites sought to carve out a respectable position (and, for some, a home) within their era’s gender system for persons like themselves.

“Genevieve” [Texas] wrote a letter that underscored the fact that most white heterosexual crossdressers who read the magazine were positioned well within

mainstream society and lived extensive and fulfilling lives apart from the transvestite textual community they joined when reading the magazine or corresponding with or socializing with other transvestites. He wrote:

My elation and excitement over at last finding a potential close friend in the hobby comes to a man (me) who already has MUCH to be elated about. I have a happy home, wonderful wife, lovely daughters, satisfactory income, good insurance plan, perfect health, several hundred friends, enjoyable hobbies, several talents, boundless energy etc. Yet, I was as enthused over gaining this new friend (Charlotte) as I would be if I was a lonely bachelor without friends in the world. I guess it boils down to this...my masculine self is care-free and full of fellowship and activity, but my feminine self is lonely and in need of companionship....<sup>78</sup>

As a self-described heterosexual and gainfully employed male and as a husband and father, Genevieve's "twin brother" was safely positioned within a larger, more influential demographic constructed through white, middle and professional class, and heterosexual male privilege. The typical periodic crossdresser had one foot in the normative mainstream and the other in the social margins. Many members of this cohort of transvestite men faced contradictions and tensions that erupted between two radically different social worlds. Prince's advice to divide and separate the two personalities, the main tenet of the dual personality philosophy as described in the introduction, actually served to safeguard the social and cultural privileges of the masculine self. Of the letters and histories analyzed, no writer acknowledged what may have been a key motivation for cultivating distinct masculine and feminine personas—the protection of one's social status as a white, heterosexual male citizen.

As greater numbers of heterosexual transvestites began to envision a legitimate social identity extending beyond the private realm of fantasy and fetish, they encountered contradictions, tensions, and problems that forced them to negotiate the two divided

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<sup>78</sup> Genevieve's letter in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960). I know that Genevieve is white because of the accompanying photographs.

worlds, to make difficult choices, and to question their allegiance to one or the other while weighing the costs and benefits of each. Genevieve, above, seemed to be at the beginning of this process. Undoubtedly, his status-consciousness and sense of belonging to a privileged social station would have to be re-examined if he were to begin investing “herself” into transvestism through more extensive social contact and higher levels of participation in *Transvestia*’s gender community, not to mention, greater degrees of crossgender identification.

Many writers described periods in their adult lives when they faced difficult choices between either living out their desires for femininity or for following the normative path that a patriarchal society had paved for its successful male citizens. Crossdressers who possessed or developed a strong sense of crossgender identification often encountered the most difficult problems. For example, a minister named “Merrilee” provided a dramatic portrait of the struggle he faced as a closeted transvestite caught between his love of the very real gendered self he had cultivated for over fifteen years and his devotion to his family. “My job required a fair amount of traveling,” he explained, “and Merrilee went with me....”

She grows more beautiful as the years go by and I have a special lock on my car trunk so that she will not be discovered. Now I am at the point where I feel like throwing everything over and letting Merrilee be around always. I am desolated. I have two beautiful children, a devoted wife, and yet, my every thought is of Merrilee. I want to leave them....What will I do? I can’t give up my precious clothes. Those odd moments when the real me can come out. I can’t give up my family. I’m a mess because I am unwilling to go on as I am.”

Merrilee conceptualized his problem as a dichotomous struggle between a private “real me” and a fabricated public self. To be sure, more than a handful of writers considered their “femme-selves” to be their “real selves.” A number of these writers acknowledged



the immense difficulty in managing contradictory desires and maintaining the proper balance and separation between masculinity and femininity. As Merrilee's situation attests, being married and having a family presented huge dilemmas. "Rita" [Illinois] wrote about reaching a point where he felt he must try to arrive at an understanding with his wife. He explained that his wife had at one time been accepting of his transvestism but had grown intolerant. He described the agonizing frustration involved when former avenues for expression are suddenly closed. In his case, he abstained from corresponding, attending meetings, and crossdressing for three years. "Perhaps you will say I am just a weak sister" he wrote, "but I love [my wife], my family and my job."<sup>79</sup>

Like Rita, several other letter and history writers described how their desires to crossdress strained aspects of their masculine lives. To explain why he had been out of the crossdressing scene for a long period of time, "Donald" said that transvestism "is not a positive condition for [him] at this stage in his life. My financial interests are being concentrated on a few 'must' areas, so economics too, are a factor." Another crossdresser "Marie Therese" said that the presence of his feminine self "has meant a constant diversion of her brother's energies." The 'brother' "has been relatively successful in his professional life," Marie claimed, "but in himself he knows that he has not realized the professional potential he possessed and this is because he has not been sufficiently single-minded in its pursuit."<sup>80</sup>

The tensions, contradictions, and social anxieties expressed by these writers were also described by a twenty-two-year-old crossdresser named "Diana" (Washington, D.C.).

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<sup>79</sup> Merrilee's letter in *Transvestia* #99 (1979); Rita's letter in *Transvestia* #77 (1973).

<sup>80</sup> Marie-Therese's life history "Reflections in a Damaged Mirror" in *Transvestia* #63 (June 1970).

Diana also represented someone who was beginning to calculate the risks and costs, including financial, involved in joining *Transvestia*'s gender community. He wrote:

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for offering me at least the beginning of reassurance in a hope I had almost lost—that a transvestite could be a transvestite and still be an intelligent and contributing member of society. I was really beginning to feel that I could be no more than a sort of disgusting parasite, whose mind, ideas, and ability to produce would be completely ignored because of one desire which needed very much to be fulfilled, but which society had chosen to judge 'unacceptable.' And when one has to stand alone against society, he finds himself beginning to suspect himself of all sorts of horrible things and feeling nothing but destructive guilt. But to find a group of individuals who have the same desires I have, and who are attempting to deal with them maturely, but honestly—now I have hope again.... It's hard to think even of being called by a feminine name—Diana is the name I should like to take. Lack of financial affluence, the time required to make contact with other TV's, etc. are going to push my goals farther away than I would like; but to know that my goals are now within reach, makes the waiting less painful.<sup>81</sup>

Although young and not yet established financially, Diana invested heavily in the powerful postwar cultural script that read men must produce and be contributing members of society—manly breadwinners. At one time Diana feared that by engaging further in crossdressing he would undermine his ability to become a productive male citizen-subject. Also, with his frank admission to lacking financial resources and time, Diana uncovered the class ideal that structured the ideology, aesthetics, style, and practice of the narrow form of transvestism promoted in the magazine. While the letters and histories indicate that the magazine attracted men from a variety of occupations and social stations, they also show an increasing association between transvestism and middle-class whiteness. Tacit racial and overt class-based markers became inscribed into the social identity that formed around *Transvestia*'s gender community. These racial codes and class markers became constitutive of the group's public image.

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<sup>81</sup> Diana's letter in *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963).

Only a few writers unpacked the complex entanglements of race and class that enabled the middle-class whiteness of true transvestism to gain hegemony and eliminate alternative expressions. Diana, above, was one of those writers who (unintentionally in his case) brought to light what was seldom acknowledged in the narratives of other letter and history writers and by the magazine—namely that the cultivation of one’s femme-self required money, time, and resources. There were only a handful of letters, including Diana’s and the letter written by Donald that was quoted above, which exposed what I would call the “ideal of TV abundance.” This ideal was bolstered by narratives that richly described garments, wardrobes, vacations, and public excursions with no hint of the material and social capital needed to own these items and engage in such activities. Nevertheless, Diana, not yet a member of the producer, professional, and managerial class, did not seem to hold any resentment, partly because he was not barred from this community. The allure of the form of crossdressing promoted in the magazine held that any heterosexual crossdresser who dedicated himself to cultivating his “girl-within” in a respectable and balanced manner could rise to the level of ‘authentic’ femininity displayed in the pages of the magazine. Even the self-photographs of readers, adorned with all the cultural signifiers of white female virtuousness and middle-class respectability, were not objects of class envy but rather models for adoration and emulation. In these respects, *Transvestia* fostered an ethos of social mobility and inclusion.

Having found a like-minded group, Diana tentatively yet optimistically took the first step of selecting a “femme-name.” By promising to cultivate his feminine persona, he further associated himself with the tenets of a new transvestite social identity, one that

was based on the idea of dual personality expression. But, and this is most significant, when he theorized the origin of his desires and described the obstacles he had to overcome to find free expression—when he structured these formative memories and experiences in an autobiographical narrative that repeated tropes featured in life histories and letters he had previously encountered in the magazine, Diana, in effect, wrote himself into *Transvestia*'s gender community.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FASHIONING IDENTITY AND CLAIMING RESPECTABILITY

As Virginia Prince's part-time assistant, Mary, a transvestite with a strong sense of crossgender identification, handled secretarial tasks at Chevalier Publications. During Prince's extended public relations trips, Mary also answered letters and advised and counseled *Transvestia*'s readers. Mary had been working at Chevalier for two years when she contributed her life history to *Transvestia* in 1969. What we learn from her history is that after her mother died in 1966, Mary began to seriously think about sex-reassignment surgery. She underwent electrolysis and began taking hormones to induce feminine characteristics. During this time, Prince and Mary frequently argued about the benefits of genital surgery. Mary desired surgery because she felt that the results of the operation would make her a "real" woman subjectively and in the eyes of society. However, she eventually arrived at Prince's belief that gender identity, behavior, and presentation need not conform to sexual anatomy. What she really wanted, then, was a "change of gender" rather than a sex change. Consequently, in late 1967, Mary decided to live full-time—socially and privately—in the female gender role.

In her history, Mary underscored the fact that her decision was not made on a whim and emphasized to the readers of *Transvestia* that transitioning from a life of periodically

and privately dressing as a woman to living socially as one on a permanent basis involved several personal sacrifices:

You don't just decide to take this step [to full-time living as a woman]. I had a good job with a secure future. This would have to be given up. I knew I would have to live on savings for at least a year while going to school and getting established. You think awhile before you give up a job that you like, with people who like and respect you. You know that you will have to move from a house you have lived in for a number of years. Then there are many of the friends you had whom you will never hear from again, because you know that they would not accept your new ways of life.

Mary also described the hardships endured when crossdressing ceases to function as just a “thrilling” conduit for self-expression and an erotic charge. She acknowledged that the “realities” of womanhood hit home “after an experience such as shopping in 90 degree weather, high heels, tight girdle, and hot wig.” Furthermore:

When you do get home, there is the house to care for, perhaps laundry to do and dinner to prepare. Think about these things! If you live alone, you are the one who must do them. If you have an understanding GG [genetic girl], who will help you, count yourself lucky. A question—would she still be understanding and helpful, if you went full time? Living this life a few hours or even a day once in a while is one thing, but day after day is something else. The business of dressing, make up, and hair-do takes on a new meaning, and must be done quickly yet adequately. No longer do you have the luxury of spending a couple of hours or more ‘getting ready;’ there just isn't time.

With these cautionary remarks, Mary stressed the fact that many aspects of feminine living—the “femme-life” idealized and fetishized by most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers—take on less glamorous meanings when conducted out of necessity and when taken from the framework of fantasy to the level of actually living the everyday life of “real” women. Cultivating an authentic and passable feminine appearance became a “business” and less a leisure practice or an act of pleasure. Still, with the statement “if you live alone, you are the one who must do them,” with respect to domestic chores, she betrayed an underlying assumption that it is the duty of wives to fulfill household labor.

In her history, Mary reflected on the transition she made and said that she was happy that she did not follow through with surgery. “Eventually I realized that I was not a transsexual and that surgery was not for me.” She claimed to know many transsexuals who wished they had not had the surgery. According to Mary, all but a few had to have additional surgeries due to complications. “Life today is better than I had ever dreamed it could be. I have achieved my original goal (to be a woman), but I have done it by my own efforts and not just from the necessity following an irreversible act of surgery.” Mary’s statement reflected the belief that she could become a legitimate woman without extensive bodily alterations, especially castration of the male genitalia. The validity of her self-definition rested on a crucial distinction she made between anatomical sex and subjective gender identity. For Mary, gender identity trumped bodily sex.<sup>1</sup>

Mary’s history illustrated the identity-work characteristic of a person in the “male-woman” or “transgenderist” category, one of several “trans” identities depicted in the pages of *Transvestia*. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the generative power of *Transvestia*’s storytelling in letters and histories spawned a textual community and helped produce group consciousness among its readers. In this chapter, I remain within the magazine’s textual space and examine how letter and history writers variously negotiated, complicated, and destabilized the category of heterosexual transvestism—writing themselves into and against the mode of identity known as “feminiphilia” and the practice of “femmepersonation.” I inspect more closely writers’ self-portrayals (identity-work) along what I call *Transvestia*’s spectrum of gender variance. Using a racial and class-based framework of respectability, *Transvestia*’s crossdressers collectively engaged in a taxonomic enterprise of naming, classifying, and differentiating types of gender and

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<sup>1</sup> Mary’s life history “Mary Makes It” in *Transvestia* #62 (February 1970).

sexual variance. This process of categorizing yielded the following original nomenclature: “femme-personators,” “transgenderists,” and “whole girl fetishists.” These terms were added to an already familiar lexicon of “trans” labels, including “fetishistic transvestites,” “crossdressers,” “transsexuals,” “female impersonators,” “drag queens,” and “street queens.” Some of these types overlapped in practice and everyday life, even though *Transvestia*’s writers often perceived them as distinct.

I divide this chapter into two parts. Part One describes the “hierarchy of stigmatization” that *Transvestia*’s writers, including Prince, created out of these identity types and uncovers the symbolic exclusions and social oppositions that they deployed to sharpen the boundaries of each category.<sup>2</sup> The hierarchy of stigmatization that I lay out is based on my interpretation of *Transvestia*’s hundreds of letters and life histories, as well as Virginia Prince’s editorials and Susanna Valenti’s columns. Of course, this analysis privileges those who wrote most of the letters and histories—the heterosexually-oriented periodic crossdressers, most of whom subscribed to the tenets of feminiphilia. Part Two delineates the range of gender variant identities that individual writers fashioned within the pages of the magazine. The self-making that took place can be situated within a broader historical framework of the postwar “taxonomic revolution” and “border skirmishes” engaged in by doctors and those who identified as transsexuals, transvestites, and homosexuals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Hierarchy of stigmatization” is Erving Goffman’s concept. See, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> See Joanne Meyerowitz’s path breaking scholarship on this taxonomic revolution (2002), chapter 5, “Sexual Revolutions.” Meyerowitz focuses on the social practice of taxonomy engaged in by transsexuals, along with the “differential diagnosis” carried out by doctors who treated and studied transsexualism. My focus centers on taxonomic production and contestation within the pages of *Transvestia*. Therefore, I am providing a more detailed account of the transvestite perspective.



## Part 1: Taxonomic Production and *Transvestia*'s Hierarchy of Stigmatization

The letters and life histories featured in *Transvestia* indicate that readers self-identified in a variety of ways, employing a multitude of terms that were culturally available to them. “TV” and “transvestite” were the labels most often used to self-identify. These two terms could signify a variety of identifications, desires, styles, and practices associated with crossdressing. To signal an association with the dual personality or ‘girl within’ mode of identity, writers sometimes utilized Prince’s lexicon of “true transvestite,” “femmiphile,” or “femmepersonator,” often abbreviated as “FP.” (They used Prince’s terms more frequently during the 1970s and less so in the 1960s. This lexicon became outmoded in the late 1970s and obsolete in the 1980s.) Writers who more or less lived full-time as women often described themselves as “full-time transvestites” or “male-women” and later, in the mid to late 1970s, as “transgenderists.” It was not until the later half of the 1970s and early 1980s that some writers began referring to themselves as “cross-dressers.” Lastly, a few letters and histories came from individuals who identified as “transexualists,” an antiquated term for “transsexual.”

A fair number of *Transvestia*’s writers experienced what historian Joanne Meyerowitz refers to as a sense of “crossgender identification,” a profound sense of being or wanting to become the other gender than the one assigned at birth. Crossgender identification could yield a life of periodic crossdressing, a life of permanent living as the gender of one’s choice, or a quest for bodily change to match one’s perceived gender identity. While crossgender identification and transvestism are technically separate phenomena, self-identified transvestites did, in fact, experience these intense longings associated with crossgender identification.

Although it is difficult to know the exact statistics of who or what groups comprised the magazine's readership of several hundred, it is hard to believe that a magazine like *Transvestia* did not, at least initially, attract a motley group of gender-variant folk with varying styles, practices, degrees of intensity, and modes of identity. The representations of male-bodied gender diversity featured in the letters and histories published by Prince probably represented only a portion, albeit a large one, of the magazine's potentially diverse readership. Without question, thousands of individuals who crossdressed moved in circles and networks outside of *Transvestia*'s gender community. In fact, *Transvestia*'s readership represented only a small slice of a much broader social formation of gender, sexual, and erotic minorities in the United States.

Within the pages of *Transvestia*, though, this diverse nation of sexual and gender 'outcasts' existed mainly as an abstraction, and its citizen 'deviants' were often represented as unredeemable, repudiated 'Others.' There were some exceptions. In a few letters to the editor that Prince published, some writers documented the wider diversity and even situated *Transvestia*'s textual community *within* this broader phenomenon as opposed to outside of or against it. For example, two letters acknowledged the assortment of gender and sexual non-conformity that existed in postwar American society. The first of these letters came from "Rita" [New York]. Rita loved lingerie, high heels, panty hose, and pretty dresses but had never gone out in public dressed as a woman. He represented a rare example of a self-identified "true transvestite" who acknowledged familiarity with a range of desires, interests, and practices engaged in by other crossdressers but encouraged the readership to stop disparaging those who deviate from the norms established in the magazine. His letter read:

It has been my pleasure in life to meet quite a few TVs like myself, except that most of them differ from one another in many ways such as some are gay, some like bondage and paddling, others love to be dressed in leather or rubber.... Some TVs frown on others if they stray from the straight and narrow path of just dressing like a woman. I think we should all stop and think of our strong desire to dress up in pretty finery and stop censoring others who have desires just as strong for other things while enjoying the art of being a TV at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

Given the many admonishments directed toward non-respectable forms of crossdressing and the ridicule and scorn exhibited by other writers towards homosexuals and fetishists, Rita's tolerance for and defense of these identities, behaviors, and practices is striking. More importantly, Rita's letter indicated the existence of other sexual and gender subcultures that thrived outside the 'sanitized' cultural imaginary of *Transvestia*.<sup>5</sup>

Rita's letter was written in 1960, along with the following one from "Dorothea:"

There are degrees and variations among TVs just like in any other group. This applies to intelligence, knowledge, intensity of TV drives, frequency of desires to dress and the extent of dressing. By this I mean some of us are content in dressing periodically, some want to do it more frequently and some want to do it all the time. Some are content with only hosiery and lingerie; others must be complete as to dress, makeup, figure, voice, mannerisms, etc.<sup>6</sup>

As Dorothea astutely recognized, "transvestism" was not a monolithic social category in the 1950s and early 1960s. Granted, it is not evident whether Dorothea, like Rita, considered homosexuality and bondage as harmless variations within the broader category of transvestism. Nonetheless, Dorothea did acknowledge that many stylistic, aesthetic, and other variations existed among men who enjoyed crossdressing. Most notably, he did not assign value or rank to the variations he listed. Rita and Dorothea's

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<sup>4</sup> Rita's letter in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Evidence of these other forms, expressions, and groups abound in underground publications like *Bizarre* and *Exotique* and correspondence mediums like *La Plume*, *Contact*, and *Clique*. The history of sadomasochism as a cultural style in America is explored in a fascinating dissertation: Bienvenu, Robert V. II. *The Development of Sadomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States*: Dept. of Sociology, Indiana University; 1998 Feb.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothea's letter in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

acceptance of the variety and diversity of styles and practices associated with crossdressing were rare articulations in the pages of *Transvestia*, and it is not surprising that both letters were written and published in 1960, when the push towards respectability and promotion of “true transvestism” (later feminiphilia) had not yet gained force. The next ten years would typically see most of *Transvestia*’s writers engage in a collective struggle to tame the multiplicity and censure the more ostensibly erotic and fetishistic strands of crossdressing that Rita and Dorothea delighted in.

### The Top Breeders and the Bottom Feeders

As the years passed, Prince, columnists, and readers constructed a hierarchy of crossgender and transvestite taxonomies. I refer to this ranking creation as *Transvestia*’s hierarchy of stigmatization. The term illustrates the simple fact that all of the types within the hierarchy were socially stigmatized. Also, the expression turns on the irony that the makers of the hierarchy, a contingent of the readership known as femmepersonators, were themselves stigmatized in the eyes of most Americans. Still, the creators of this hierarchy sought to fashion a distinct social identity for heterosexual transvestites and to eradicate the public’s conflation of their group with homosexuality and transsexuality.

The makers of the hierarchy relegated those who crossdressed primarily for sexual gratification to the bottom. These bottom groups included transvestite clothing fetishists who dressed solely for erotic rewards, homosexuals and street queens who were presumed to crossdress only for sexual favors, and any “kink” group, such as bondage enthusiasts, whose crossdressing was incidental to some other (presumably sexual) purpose. “Enid” [Nevada] alluded to some of these groups. “I lived for about three and a half years and worked for 14 years in San Francisco and—as you might imagine—saw

evidence of almost every revolting aberration the human animal is capable of.” Virginia Prince prescribed “wisdom, moderation, and perspective” in crossdressing primarily in order to distinguish heterosexual crossdressers with a sense of aesthetics and respectability from the unsavory character of the fetishistic crossdresser. “There are two general kinds of males interested in crossdressing,” she contended, “those who have a feeling for the feminine gender role, and those who are fixated on the fetishistic, erotic level where the clothes simply serve to stimulate and satisfy the masculine personality and do nothing to unlock, release or aid in the development of a feminine personality.”<sup>7</sup>

In her later columns, Prince seldom shied away from acknowledging the relationship between eroticism and crossdressing. “I think it is safe to say that 95% of all FPs start out crossdressing with sexual involvement.” Typically, at an early age, these males developed an erotic association with certain items of feminine clothing, such as high heels, nylon stockings, satin night gowns, taffeta dresses, or silk panties. During their pre-teens and adolescent years, most derived sexual rewards from the touching or wearing of these articles of clothing, as well as, entire outfits. While Prince never denied that crossdressing originated as an erotic activity or might continue to serve as a sexual outlet throughout adolescence, she did challenge the assumption that the erotic impulses that fueled early compulsive behavior patterns remained the same throughout the life cycle. Other factors and motivations, she contended, came into play as the sexual novelty waned over time. Prince blamed the psychiatric professions for misconceptions otherwise:

M.D.s who see patients and listen to them relate how they become erotically excited by dressing, have come to see this eroticism as the principle hallmark of transvestism-femmiphilia, and you can read it in the literature and medical dictionaries over and over again. What they never learn, because they never get a chance to see it, is the development of the gender-personality aspect of the

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<sup>7</sup> Enid’s letter in *Transvestia* #89 (1977); Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #28 (August 1964).

individual and its greatly overshadowing the erotic aspects. People who have achieved sufficient acceptance of themselves to have developed at least the beginnings of a feminine personality have already begun to overshadow the erotic aspects of crossdressing.

Prince's life experiences developing a "gender-personality" and her research surveys confirmed for her that sexual rewards decreased as one got older. Moreover, she argued that the erotic does not necessarily signify orgasm. "Lots of thoughts, attitudes, and actions are erotic in nature yet may not, for various reasons, result even in an erection, much less orgasm."<sup>8</sup>

Prince asserted that, in most cases, fetishistic crossdressing gradually progressed to aesthetic transvestism, along with, if circumstances allowed for such, a growing sense of identification with whatever cultural and social models of femininity a crossdresser had become accustomed to emulating. The result was the blossoming of a second personality. According to Prince, after the fetishistic stage, three levels of behavior would gradually sort themselves out. Some individuals continue to fetishize their special article or articles of clothing and therefore remain within the first level or category of transvestite fetishism. Other crossdressers gradually incorporate additional articles of clothing until they discover satisfaction in wearing an entire outfit. Individuals in this second level simply crossdressed and did not attempt to cultivate a feminine persona. Prince believed that the third behavior pattern represented the largest group, a faction she termed the "femmepersonators." These were crossdressers who possessed "feelings of femininity above and beyond the merely visual and tactile satisfactions of wearing clothes,"

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<sup>8</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #65 (1970); Prince wrote her most honest and candid column about the relationship between eroticism and heterosexual crossdressing in this column which was entitled "Eroticism and Femmiphilia."

although their experiences varied widely in intensity and development. Basically, the third group developed an awareness of gender (a “gender-personality”) that clothing fetishists and “simple” crossdressers purportedly lacked.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, at the top of the hierarchy stood these “true transvestites”—the femmepersonators or feminiphiles (FPs)—who successfully divided and balanced their masculine and feminine personalities. As “Shelia” [California] proudly wrote in his letter to Prince, “I also learned the varying degrees of TVism. I am more than happy to say that with both of us [Sheila and ‘his’ masculine self] working together, our one body has risen to the highest level of TVism, that being the group calling themselves FPs.” Similarly, “Judy” [Connecticut] contended that he had “moved along to the stage of true femmepersonation rather than simple transvestism,” while “Joan” preferred the term “feminiphile” over “transvestite.” “It doesn’t have the vulgar connotations of transvestite,” Joan explained. “I think it should be used to denote a heterosexual TV.”<sup>10</sup>

Those who identified as femmepersonators believed that their renditions represented a more authentic and truer image of femininity, based on their own definitions and criteria, of course. To rise above “simple transvestism” and reach the level of femmepersonation,

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<sup>9</sup> Prince was never fully clear about how one transitioned from transvestite fetishism to femmepersonation until a column she wrote in 1978 offered more detail. In this column, entitled “Sex and Cross Dressing,” she described the point when a typical transvestite discovers that crossdressing can have meaning beyond eroticism and can function other than as an outlet for sexual desire. She wrote: “This discovery is usually made when the individual for some reason decided to leave the clothes on AFTER the orgasmic release has taken place. Prior to climax the pleasure and excitement are entirely erotic, but when that has been released and reduced by orgasm, eroticism is at a low ebb. If, however, the clothes are left on for a half -hour or more the individual may find that, ‘Gee, it’s kind of fun being a ‘girl’.’ That is, he begins to make acquaintance with his ‘girl within.’ Since this too is a pleasure it will tend to be repeated on subsequent occasions until the individual finds that sex or no sex, dressing has a lot of reward and satisfaction connected with it. It is this transition that changes the person from a transvestite—one who crossdresses—a TV, for short, to an FP—a femmiphile—one who is a lover of the feminine.”

<sup>10</sup> Sheila’s letter in *Transvestia* #42 (December 1966); Judy’s life history “The Three Stages of Life” in *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963); Joan’s letter in *Transvestia* #83 (1974)

though, entailed rigorous self-improvement—often articulated as development of one’s “femme-self.” Because they were reared and socialized to be men, these writers who aspired to reach the “FP level” believed that they needed to nurture and train their “girl-within.” This group did not implement a formalized step-by-step program of feminine socialization or create a how-to manual so much as they issued a multitude of directives, advice, and guidelines in their letters and histories. Generally, the process involved the mantra to “practice, practice, practice.” The ideal was to emanate uniquely feminine virtues through a respectable rendition and de-sexualized presentation of femininity. Embracing white and middle-class notions of femininity, Sheila, Joan, Judy and other FPs placed themselves above fetishistic crossdressers and others whose gender presentations and crossdressing styles they perceived to be less respectable and inauthentic.<sup>11</sup>

Also at the top of this collectively constructed hierarchy were those individuals, including Prince and her assistant Mary (the opening case study of this chapter), who made the decision in the late 1960s to live full time as women without having sex-reassignment surgery. They called themselves “full-time transvestites” or sometimes “male-women,” and later, in the 1970s, some began referring to themselves as “transgenderists.” The male-woman or transgenderist category was not conceptualized as a higher level above periodic, aesthetic crossdressing (i.e. femmepersonation). Rather, it was perceived as a lifestyle and state of consciousness or being that one might achieve only if his individual circumstances favored it. Most individuals who became male-women and transgenderists possessed a strong sense of crossgender identification and were either single or divorced and therefore ‘unencumbered’ by marriage and familial

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<sup>11</sup> I go into greater detail regarding these dressing and behavioral guidelines in the next chapter.



responsibilities. Some in this group seriously considered the idea of having a sex change but reconsidered after an intense period of soul searching.

In the pages of *Transvestia*, femmepersonators and transgenderists elevated crossdressing from a practice that was commonly and clinically perceived as a base, sexual peculiarity to an artful, beautiful mode of gender expression. Viewed within the lens of femmepersonation, crossdressers were not the compulsive, masturbating ‘weirdoes’ popularly depicted in the tabloid and pornographic press. Instead, the magazine and the philosophy of dual personality rendered them respectable citizens—good husbands and loving fathers—who just happened to enjoy expressing the femininity that was suppressed by a society invested in the “pink and blue division.” This respectable framing, however, necessitated making other distinctions from groups precariously close to femmepersonators and transgenderists.

#### The Middling Groups:

#### Female Impersonators, Drag Queens, Whole Girl Fetishists, and Transsexuals

With femmepersonators and transgenderists at the top and clothing fetishists and other “kink” groups at the bottom, the middle of the hierarchy comprised a motley group of female impersonators, transsexuals, and non-FP transvestites with various clothing styles, aesthetic tastes, and modes of gender presentation.

A sizeable number of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers enjoyed female impersonator shows, and a few envied the glamorous looks and embodiments that drag queens perfected on stage. A crossdresser named “Ana Bertha” remembered when he and his male buddies jokingly went to “see the gay queens” at a local club. But for him the experience was no joke. “I wanted to look just like that queen I had seen, dressed as she was and with face

made up as hers was!” “Marilyn” remembered a summer visit to Finnochio’s, a popular tourist night club in San Francisco that featured female impersonation shows. “To see these female impersonators truly ‘set me off.’ I was thrilled that there were those who could dress as girls and in public too! I too wanted to dress up, even though it would not be in public.”<sup>12</sup>

A few self-identified transvestites even dabbled in amateur female stage impersonation. *Transvestia* columnist Susanna Valenti sometimes performed in the impersonator show at the vacation resort she owned in upstate New York. In his letter to Prince, “Eloise” [Massachusetts] related his initial foray into impersonation when he played a female part on stage. Tellingly, after describing this “chance to live his dream,” he offered a few admonitions that showed his disrespect for the lewd performances done by many professional stage impersonators. “We don’t need to be afraid of female impersonation on stage in the proper atmosphere,” he contended, but we should “avoid any of the standard ploys of the night club type shows, especially the lewd routine of the typical M.C. [sic] and the stripteasing. As Eloise’s admonition suggests, the envy and admiration many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers felt towards professional female impersonators (who typically identified as straight men) and drag queens (who almost always identified as gay men) could quickly turn if they judged either’s performance of femininity as a lewd enactment or crude appropriation. Many heterosexual crossdressers considered the typical drag queen’s style too flashy and unladylike, definitely not the kind of appearance any self-respecting FP would want to emulate. Simply stated, many transvestites, especially those oriented toward femmepersonation, thought that the poor

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<sup>12</sup> Anna Birtha’s life history “The Life of a Mexican Sister” in *Transvestia* #51 (June 1968); Marilyn’s letter in *Transvestia* #13 (February 1962).

and working-class (and non-white) drag queens with their outlandish styles and antics made a mockery of femininity.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, drag queens and female impersonators also held unfavorable opinions of heterosexual transvestites. According to Esther Newton in her classic ethnography *Mother Camp* (1972), the Midwestern professional stage impersonators and drag queens of the 1960s that she interviewed utilized the derogatory term, “transy drag,” to condemn other stage impersonators and drag queens who presented a ‘real’ and thus non-glamorous feminine stage appearance. For any one of their peers guilty of “violating the glamour standard” with an everyday, ordinary appearance and performance of femininity, they bestowed this unfavorable descriptor onto him. An appearance designated “transy drag” directly linked the violator to the kinds of ‘ridiculous’ and ‘hideous’ non-stage enactments of femininity that professional female impersonators and drag queens perceived to be the province of the “lone wolf” transvestites.<sup>14</sup>

Also situated in the middle of the hierarchy were crossdressers who enjoyed dressing completely but did not strive to improve their appearance, mannerisms, and level of authenticity. Many of *Transvestia*’s femmepersonators considered these other transvestites as just “men in drag.” However, FPs also knew that any man in full drag or complete feminine attire, no matter how crudely made up, was uncomfortably akin to themselves in the eyes of the public. In 1968, Sheila Niles, a columnist of the magazine,

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<sup>13</sup> Eloise’s letter in *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America* (University of Chicago Press: 1972), 51 and 52. “...the effect of the female impersonator subculture is to socialize individual deviance so that it is brought under group control and legitimized. Those who have not joined the social group or merged their individual deviance with the cultural forms are considered the real deviants. Female impersonators do not refer to themselves as transvestites....To female impersonators, the real transvestites are the lone wolf isolates whose individual and private experiments with female attire are described as ‘freakish.’ To them, the transvestite is one who dresses as a woman for some ‘perverted’ sexual purpose outside the context of performance (either informal, as in the gay bar, or formal, i.e., professional).”

popularized the derogatory term “whole girl fetishist” to classify these “unruly,” “lazy,” and “stubborn” types of crossdressers who for whatever reason did not behave very “ladylike” when dressed. Whole girl fetishists were presumed to get their sexual kicks from wearing entire outfits as opposed to the typical transvestite fetishist who utilized one or two articles of clothing. For many readers of *Transvestia* and members of Phi Pi Epsilon, the term perfectly encapsulated their annoyance at crossdressers who would not adopt the behavioral codes and dressing guidelines associated with femmepersonation. “This class of crossdresser,” observed Prince, “generally has no particular feelings of femininity; he doesn’t feel himself when dressed to be very different from what he usually is, and his general behavior bears this out.” The pejorative deployment of the whole girl fetishist category was a further attempt on the part of Prince and other FPs to define authenticity as having a convincing feminine appearance and respectable deportment. Attaining this level of authenticity entailed creating a feminine persona from head to toe and from within and without. Doing anything less was deemed substandard. The stigma assigned to the category of whole girl fetishism derived from the assumption that one’s failure or unwillingness to fashion oneself in the mode of true femininity automatically signaled fetishistic impulses.<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, Prince and others did allow for growth and advancement into the FP category. Therefore, whole girl fetishism was not applicable to ‘sisters’ who were on the path to femmepersonation. Some transvestites may have been judged deficient in their attempts but not for lack of trying. The main problem with those perceived to be whole girl fetishists, then, was that they did not strive for any standard of perfection. They purportedly achieved just enough of a feminine look to stimulate sexual excitement. With

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<sup>15</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #65 (1970).

orgasm, the ‘masquerade’ ended. Crossdressing, then, was the means to a sexual end, rather than a means to a higher plane of virtue, morality, and respectability—the qualities that FPs associated with true femininity. Respectable and aesthetically skilled “true transvestites” now had a classification for these dissidents. The whole girl fetishist category served as a linguistic tool to elevate femmepersonators and distinguish them from a deviant group of individuals whom they presumed were undermining their group-image and hurting their cause for public acceptance.

The transsexual was the final type to be featured within the hierarchy’s middling ranks. As a pervasive and potent symbol within the magazine’s pages, it warrants a more extensive discussion than that paid to drag queens and whole girl fetishists. Transvestites’ attitudes regarding transsexuality were mixed. Celebrity transsexuals, such as Christine Jorgenson, Charlotte McLeod, Roberta Cowell, and Tamara Rees, whose sex-change surgeries garnered unprecedented media publicity in the mid-1950s, were heroines to many of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers. However, some correspondents also displayed disdain, prejudice, and resentment towards ‘ordinary’ individuals who had sex-reassignment surgery. Reading between the lines, I detect a great deal of envy as well. Certainly, transvestites whose gender identities were strongly oriented toward the feminine but who were also ‘psychologically attached’ to their penises were ambivalently envious of and repulsed by transsexuals. Quite a few of *Transvestia*’s writers described early childhood feelings of desperately wanting to be miraculously changed into girls. As young adults, these same individuals often read with intense interest the sensationalized stories about sex change published in the popular press. Some crossdressers, including

Prince, even made scrapbooks of collected news clippings pertaining to transsexuality and crossdressing.

This interest in the category of transsexuality evokes another linkage between transvestites and transsexuals. Numerous letter and history writers conceptualized transvestism not as a distinct category in itself but rather as a stage *en route* to transsexuality. Envisioning a continuum, they believed that transsexuality was the logical endpoint to increasing degrees of crossgender identification and levels of crossdressing activity. Indeed, for several individuals within *Transvestia*'s gender community, periodic crossdressing did turn out to be a temporary phase or, as Joanne Meyerowitz puts it, a "training ground" en route to transsexuality.<sup>16</sup> A letter from a crossdresser named "Cathy" (Pennsylvania) illustrates this overlapping and blurring of types:

I have been, ever since early childhood, a confirmed trans-sexual, whose one consuming desire regardless of what I said and did to the contrary, was to make the one way switch.... I thank God for showing me that the key that unlocks the door to the joy of free expression is not the surgeon's scalpel, but a single word. ACCEPTANCE. The social pressures brought to bear by Western culture's refusing to acknowledge the socially beneficial attributes of persons who have found and wish to express their total personalities, are what lead some down to the road of trans-sexualism. For me, without the special magic of the word acceptance, [transsexuality] may seem the best or only answer. But the acceptance, even partial, by that one person who is dear to you—father, mother, wife or sweetheart—should prove all you need to make you realize that life CAN be bearable with the equipment with which you were born.... Stop and weigh the pros and cons. As a TV, you can mix the best of both worlds; have a family, a rewarding job (usually much higher paying than a GG [genetic girl]) and the pleasures of hobbies that give vent to both sides of your expression.

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<sup>16</sup> Prince and other writers mentioned more than a handful of *Transvestia* subscribers and former members of Phi Pi Epsilon who had "done the deed" or were planning to do so. "The process of sorting and separating," writes Meyerowitz, "sometimes included a shift in self-identification. In the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, social networks emerged that served as training grounds of sorts for transsexual identity. In major cities would-be transsexuals increasingly learned about the possibilities of hormones and surgery through circles of MTF crossdressers, professional female impersonators, drag queens, and later, butch lesbians" (170).

As I will describe later in Part Two of this chapter, Cathy represented others who exhibited transsexual ‘tendencies’ or who even identified as transsexual but settled (some happily; others regretfully) for periodic crossdressing or for a life of full-time feminine living minus surgical procedures. Cathy’s letter also demonstrated the tendency of many transvestites to hold transsexuals in low regard. In Cathy’s case, the maltreatment was insinuated. Cathy viewed her decision not to have surgery as a matter of acceptance of the way God had originally made her. In her mind, she was able to untangle “free expression” of her feminine gender persona from her male sexual anatomy. Consequently, she portrayed post-operative male-to-female transsexuals as persons who *failed* at self-acceptance. In Cathy’s mind, she played it smart. Despite the intense yearnings for bodily change she experienced, Cathy, like so many others who wrote to *Transvestia*, disrespected transsexual identity.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their envy, admiration, and respect for transsexuals like Christine Jorgenson, most readers held ‘average’ transsexuals in low regard and considered them tragic, pathetic, or delusional individuals. Readers were quick to point out that post-ops often had to take low paying jobs and that many, out of desperation, entered prostitution to make ends meet. The perceived *social* costs of surgical castration—the fear of what life would be like without having the status in society that having a penis conferred a male—undermined their desires for surgery and influenced the decisions of most transvestites who had at one time or another considered undergoing a sex change operation. This castration anxiety was often veiled in an expressed notion of wanting to have the best of both the masculine and feminine worlds. But in these formulations, the masculine world is implicitly privileged and absolutely dependent on having a penis. Moreover, the

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<sup>17</sup> Cathy’s life history “Cathy Finds Herself” in *Transvestia* #31 (February 1965)

masculine embodiment of femaleness had no corresponding or reverse equal. Female masculinity or the feminine embodiment of maleness was an unimaginable scenario according to their phallogentric thinking.

The ambivalent views held by *Transvestia*'s crossdressers towards transsexuals may have been influenced by Prince's stances. Prince wrote more columns about transsexuality than homosexuality and clothing fetishism combined. In the debate regarding whether transvestites and transsexuals are different identities by degree or by kind, she subscribed to the latter. She was highly invested in refuting the notion held by many experts and her readers that transvestism was a point on a continuum that begins with fetishistic crossdressing and ends with transsexualism. Curiously, given her tendency to acknowledge and recognize fluidity and range, she never once in her columns developed a notion of a range or spectrum that would make progression into transsexuality theoretically possible, therefore disagreeing with SusannaValenti and other transvestites over the category of "incipient" transsexuality.

Unfortunately, Prince never clearly accounted for her stance against the idea of a continuum. She was more preoccupied with distinguishing transsexuals and transvestites, possibly because the former had dominated the media headlines since 1953 and also because dozens within *Transvestia*'s readership were taking advantage of the increasing availability of sex reassignment surgery. As this operation became more available in the United States after the mid-1960s, Prince embarked on a mission to persuade heterosexual crossdressers from considering and obtaining the surgery. While her intentions were well-meaning, Prince's relentless efforts to draw these distinctions and warn crossdressers against surgery led her to espouse some mean-spirited positions that



degraded transsexuals as a group. Her columns featured what amounted to an erasure of transsexual subjectivity. Most disturbingly, her perspective framed transsexuals as failed individuals. Her representation of transsexuals was encapsulated in a crude pun she employed on more than one occasion: “While I feel whole, transsexuals feel hole.” Prince explained that what she meant by this phrase was that transsexuals allowed their gender identity to originate between the legs rather than from between the ears.<sup>18</sup>

Written in 1968, “You Can’t Add by Subtraction” was Prince’s first column written entirely about transsexuality. In this column, Prince strongly advised and warned her readers against sexual reassignment surgery. By her account, the sex change operation was now easier to obtain than it had been before the emergence of gender identity clinics in the United States. She listed New York, Baltimore, and Los Angeles as places that offered the surgery. By her own calculation, she could think of at least six former readers of *Transvestia* who had undertaken the surgery and several others waiting their turn. Her attitude concerning this trend was simple and direct: “...the number of persons asking for and achieving it does not make me happy. I am disturbed.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to warning her readers of the high expense and poor success rates of the surgery, Prince tried to persuade them that they did not need the surgery in the first place in order to live or be socially accepted as women. Moreover, she attempted to convince her readers that most of them would not even *qualify* for the surgery. Using her own observations as evidence, Prince asserted that surgery may be beneficial for about twenty percent of crossgender identified individuals, whom she believed to be “true transsexuals,” but that it was a very bad idea for the remaining eighty percent of

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<sup>18</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #91 (1977).

<sup>19</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #50 (1968).

individuals. In this eighty percent, she included drag queens whom she contended desired more authenticity, which she believed entailed a “front door for sexual partners;” repressed homosexuals whom she thought lacked “the courage to acknowledge it openly and who utilize the surgery as a means of morally justifying the act;” and misguided heterosexual transvestites whom she contended failed to realize that a change in gender is preferable to a change in sex. According to Prince, individuals in all of these groups shared an ignorance of the difference between sex and gender.

Prince defined “true transsexuals”—the twenty percent for whom surgery was justified—as biological males who “felt inadequate, inappropriate, inefficient, and uncomfortable in the masculine gender role and who were also inadequate and unhappy in the male sex role.” In other words, true transsexuals, according to Prince, failed at **both** the sex and gender role; they were inadequate as males and uncomfortable as men. With this two pronged criterion, Prince disqualified from surgery most of her readership. With respect to one’s suitability as a candidate for surgery, what did failure to fulfill the sex and gender role exactly entail? By Prince’s standards, if an anatomical male with a sense of crossgender identification had never been married and fathered children and if he had never held down a respectable job or successfully accomplished other tasks associated with the male sex/gender role, then he might be a true transsexual and therefore a suitable candidate for surgery. Prince’s criteria for transsexuality were premised on the notion of a failed identity in relation to heteronormative standards of manhood that she failed to interrogate and hold to critical and historical scrutiny. She was

especially disturbed and distraught by the large numbers of “misguided TVs” who sought what she considered a dangerous and expensive path of no return.<sup>20</sup>

Prince’s writings in the 1960s and 1970s erased transsexual subjectivity and ignored the processes involved in *becoming* a transsexual. Although she acknowledged having several transsexual friends and even though she did not rule out surgery all together for those who qualified (by her own standards) as “true transsexuals,” Prince never completely accepted or understood transsexual personhood. For example, in one issue she reprinted a letter she had received a few months prior from a self-identified transsexual. The letter read: “I am sorry I have to disagree strongly on what you wrote to me. Transsexuals (me, personally) are NOT gay or homosexuals. They have the mind of a woman, and think and want to satisfy a man like a woman does.” The writer of this letter would never have identified as a homosexual because she genuinely felt that she had “the mind of a woman.” After the reprint of the letter, Prince responded in a comment to her readers: “Can you believe that? How do you manage to NOT be homosexual when you want a hole so that you ‘can satisfy a man the way a woman does’?” Prince could not grasp or was unwilling to accept the idea that transsexuals claim to *be* women in the first place. Betraying her heterosexual bias, she contended that the only thing a sex change allowed a male-to-female transsexual to do that a non-surgically altered transvestite could not do was have sexual intercourse with a man. She argued that transsexuals and the doctors who operated on them confused and conflated the differences between sex and

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<sup>20</sup> “Change of Sex or Gender” (Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #60 December 1969) represented Prince’s clearest articulation to her readers of why a change of gender is preferable to a change in sex. Here, Prince discussed the dangers and downfalls of the operation. I find it annoying how she based her entire argument on the statistic, which is entirely speculated on her part, that only 20 percent of those seeking the operation are, in fact, “true transsexuals.”

gender. But she failed to realize that merely understanding the differences between sex and gender did not solve the problem that transsexuals faced, which was a deeply felt incongruity between anatomical sex and gender identity.<sup>21</sup>

Prince rather opportunistically emphasized the chauvinistic thinking behind the entire concept of a sex change—that it was based on the faulty assumption that womanliness derives from a female’s sexual organs—that the vagina defines womanhood. Despite her many assertions regarding the completely arbitrary linkages society makes between masculinity and the male body and between femininity and the female body, Prince ultimately valued her penis and tended toward phallocentric thinking. While she was quick to point out that many transsexuals equated having a vagina with womanhood, she failed to recognize her penchant for equating having a penis with manhood. “The reason that we are TVs or FPs to begin with,” she wrote in a column, “resides in the fact of our maleness and thus our interest in and attraction toward the female and things feminine. To remove the source of that maleness [i.e., the sexual anatomy] is to remove the source of the very drive that made us TVs in the first place.” Here, Prince displayed her unshakeable investment in the penis and its direct association with maleness. Why would removing the sexual organ of a male affect his desire to crossdress or express femininity? Prince devalued transsexual identity when she made its existence depend on a lack or some kind of a failure on the part of those who claim the identity to meet socially privileged, hegemonic, yet, in reality, arbitrary standards.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, sex reassignment surgery was an incredibly invasive alteration of the body, and Prince was right to caution those readers who were in too much of a rush to

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<sup>21</sup> Reprinted letter and Prince’s response in *Transvestia* #94 (1978).

<sup>22</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965)

obtain it, thinking it would solve all their problems. Yet, as this brief discussion has shown, Prince was not without her biases, blind spots, and dogmatisms with respect to transsexuality. Perhaps the most frustrating thing about her columns on transsexuality was her unwavering sense of being right all the time and knowing exactly the motivations and inner desires of those individuals in the “eighty percent” who, by her judgment, had no business getting the surgery.

Interestingly, even as the desire for bodily change and obtainment of surgery became the lines of demarcation separating transsexuals from transvestites, the two categories often overlapped, as many self-identified transvestites, including Prince, took hormones and/or at various times in their lives flirted with the idea of sex change. And as we will see later in this chapter, Prince’s transition from periodic crossdressing to full-time living as a “transgenderist” greatly complicated prior theories and stances.

### Symbolic Oppositions and the Politics of Respectability

As a run through the *Transvestia*’s hierarchy of stigmatization has shown, letter and history writers constructed gender taxonomies through processes of exclusion, opposition, and differentiation. That is, they articulated who they were by delimiting who they were not. The categories they demarcated, then, served as means of containment, with lines carefully drawn to seal in purity and keep out contamination. These taxonomic practices occurred during a period when other sexual and gender minorities were also distinguishing themselves from one another in a “climate of mutual aversion.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This phrase comes from Joanne Meyerowitz (2002). As she writes, transsexuals “defined themselves not just with reference to their differences from the mainstream but also with reference to other ‘deviant’ options they rejected for themselves” (179). Meyerowitz notes how Gayle Sherman, an MTF transsexual, separated herself from crossdressers: “‘I wasn’t then and I’m not now a transvestite. I don’t get sexual pleasure out of dressing as a woman.’ Some transsexuals expressed the desire to live as a ‘normal’ woman

*Transvestia*'s writers, particularly those who subscribed to the dual personality philosophy, claimed respectability through a discourse on virtue, morals, and manners. Originally coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in an African-American context, the "politics of respectability" that *Transvestia*'s crossdressers waged saw them assign an inferior status to groups deemed less respectable and by implication, less moral. They adopted a tactic typically used by members of marginalized groups to make their group appear more respectable to mainstream society by denigrating and repudiating other marginalized groups—"by foisting the stigma of transgression onto others." Homosexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites "lived in a social order in which status derived in part from upholding norms of propriety," observes Joanne Meyerowitz. "Asserting one's upstanding middle-class status meant rejecting other behaviors tainted as vulgar, lower class or deviant."<sup>24</sup>

Practicing the politics of respectability within a postwar context, *Transvestia*'s writers repudiated drag queens, fetishists, and transsexuals, but they displayed a particular obsession for distancing themselves from homosexuals. "I do not know any other TVs except some gay boys who go drag just for kicks," asserted "Alice" (Florida). "With me, it's much more—in fact I eat, sleep think and feel like a woman." Alice articulated his desires to crossdress as more legitimate and by implication, authentic, than homosexuals whom he believed dressed only "for kicks." Although it is unclear, Alice may have been distinguishing his gender presentation and orientation from gay street queens. If this were the case, then it shows Alice's ignorance of this particular homosexual subculture, as

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or man as opposed to living as a 'queer' or a 'freak.' In this sense, transsexual surgery occasionally had overtones of upward mobility" (184).

<sup>24</sup> Meyerowitz, 177. Evelyn Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

many street queens claimed a similar authenticity that Alice was highly invested in. It was just that social class and other important differences between heterosexual transvestites (white, middle to professional class) and street queens (poor, urban street youth, many black, Latino, and Asian) yielded varying styles and modes of gender presentation.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, “Betty” [California] posited an authentic identity based on his difference from an unredeemable homosexual ‘other.’ “I love women very much and have several girl friends,” he claimed. “I’m completely a heterosexual and do not care for the prissy homos that act like girls. With me, when I am a girl—I AM A GIRL!!! From the inside out...it is not an act... I feel that a true TV feels feminine throughout the entire body when she is dressed up.” For many heterosexual transvestites like Betty, one’s crossdressing practices and gender identity had to be distanced from homosexuals who did not crossdress but who behaved effeminately. Betty claimed a feminine authenticity that ‘flaming’ homosexuals presumably lacked, despite their girlish mannerisms. By extension, Betty, like Alice in the previous example, presumed that his heterosexuality safely differentiated him from the homosexual fringe. The letters from Alice and Betty attest that, for many FPs, the enactment of femininity (or the male embodiment of the feminine) entailed more than *exteriorly* presenting (or creating the illusion of) a feminine appearance. Rather, for them, an important element of interiority resided in their self-definitions that validated their claims to authenticity. Put simply, many writers of the FP caliber conceived the practice of crossdressing as an exterior manifestation or reflection of an interior feminine self (also articulated as a personality or persona) that was every bit as legitimate as the masculine self. However, as we have seen, they usually claimed this

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<sup>25</sup> Alice’s letter in *Transvestia* #6 (December 1960).

legitimacy for themselves and failed to recognize as genuine the claims made by others to feminine interiority.<sup>26</sup>

Femme impersonation; transvestism; fetishistic transvestism; transsexuality; female impersonation; whole girl fetishism—these were some of the categories known to *Transvestia*'s readership. Two of them, femme impersonation and whole girl fetishism, were produced within *Transvestia*'s textual community in order to further delineate differences that would likely go undetected by many mainstream observers but were important markers separating respectability from deviance among many FPs and regular TVs. *Transvestia*'s taxonomic production and hierarchy of stigmatization were important components of the broader social process of taxonomy engaged in by a nation of gender and sexual outlaws in the decades following the Second World War. The historical significance was no less than the making and sorting out of the categories of transgender. Some questions remain: how did writers 'move' within the boundaries of these taxonomies? How did they articulate their own gender identities in relation to the categories made available to them in the magazine and in relation to the narrow parameters set forth by Prince and other adherents of dual personality expression? These questions are the focus of the second half of this chapter.

## Part 2: Fashioning Identity along *Transvestia*'s Spectrum of Gender Variance

While *Transvestia*'s crossdressers collectively constructed a hierarchy of identifications and while they tended to fashion identity through symbolic exclusions and a politics of respectability, letters and histories also suggest that a number of transvestites were not as "true" as Prince and a sizeable number of her readers imagined them to be. It

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<sup>26</sup> Betty's letter in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).



is reasonable to presume that those who encountered the magazine evaluated and measured their identities, experiences, and desires in relation to those they read about in *Transvestia*'s columns, letters, and life histories. Many embraced feminiphilia, subscribed to the dual personality ideology, and practiced femmepersonation. Some, however, revised, challenged, or outright rejected these ideas. In these processes of negotiation and contestation, each must have defined for him or herself an identity in accordance with or in opposition to (or somewhere in between) these prescriptive models.

The second part of this chapter will document several articulations of identity along *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance, beginning with individuals who expressed modes of identity in line with the identifications and practices promoted by Prince and ending with folks who drastically departed from the norms of femmepersonation. My intent is to draw your attention to the most prominent 'identity stakes' along this broad range of male-bodied gender diversity. Whereas Part One examined taxonomic production, Part Two explores how individuals wrote themselves into and against the categories and types that were collectively and discursively produced.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Before getting to this, though, I want to offer a few caveats. First, "trans" identities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were never fixed. With respect to matters of identity-construction and negotiation, it is important to remember that each letter and history captured a particular moment of reflection and articulation. These histories and letters only captured 'textual snapshots' of the identity-work of their writers. In this regard, it is worth remembering that identities are seldom fixed objects and are never static. Rather, they shift according to changes in historical and cultural contexts, and they transform over the life course in relation to various situational factors. Second, these textual snapshots were encapsulated in an autobiographical mode of writing and, as such, were subject to the conventions characteristic of that genre. Furthermore, these articulations were packaged for a specific audience, namely Prince and the magazine's readership. The respectability that defined the magazine may have shaped each writer's self-presentation. Lastly, there is the question of the role Prince played in the editorial process. Future research on my part will tackle these issues surrounding the textual conditions of production and reception. For now, keeping these caveats in mind, let us examine *Transvestia*'s letters and life histories for the spectrum of identifications writers internalized and presented.

### Feminiphiles / Femmepersonators / True Transvestites

As previously described in Chapter One, “feminiphilia” was coined by Prince and defined as love of the feminine. She described it as a condition in which normal heterosexual men felt driven to dress in women’s clothing and create a feminine persona for aesthetic and self-actualization purposes. Describing this brand of transvestism as a “condition” was a curious choice given that “conditions” are usually constructed against a normative category or state of health. This may have just been a slight oversight on Prince’s part as she was quite knowledgeable of transvestism’s tangled history with medical discourse. Perhaps she could not imagine a way to define outside the scientific mode. Regardless, the end result, in this case, involved a re-appropriation of the term. Crossdressing as a “condition”—often described as a bizarre sexual compulsion—was reformulated into an affirmative mode of identification and also reconstituted, especially within *Transvestia*’s textual community, as a disciplinary technique for molding a particular form of transvestic selfhood. A male crossdresser who adhered to the tenets of “dual personality expression” and “femmepersonation” cultivated a second personality—a feminine self or persona—to express his desire to look and act the part of a real woman. In a manner that preserved the heteronormative gender dichotomies of the postwar era, those who self-defined as femmepersonators (FPs) or followed the guidelines of femmepersonation separated the feminine persona from the masculine self. In many of their minds, mixing the two would “make an unholy mess out of things.” Because the “femme-self” was less formed than the masculine self, it needed to be nurtured and developed through periodic practice in behaving like a true lady, with all of the class and racial markers Prince and many other FPs associated with the term “lady.”

As a specific historical product of the Cold War era, femmepersonation and the dual personality mode of expression functioned on a number of levels. They were the “politics” that FPs practiced in order to claim respectability and redefine themselves outside the realm of deviance. They were a strategic response to strictures that forbade any expression of femininity on the part of ‘normal’ men. And as a standard of measurement, femmepersonation functioned as a ‘disciplinary technique’ that socialized individual deviance by regulating potentially adverse forms of expression and bringing them under group control.

It is necessary to point out that Prince only invented creative labels for the dual personality mode of identity. Therefore, for some transvestites, Prince’s terms only *named* pre-existing feelings they had of harboring distinct masculine and feminine personalities.<sup>28</sup> However, few, if any, formally detailed how one might develop the feminine self and manage both personas within the context of postwar gender strictures. More than anyone else, with the possible exception of Susanna Valenti, Prince codified the guidelines for dual personality expression. Her taxonomic work and prescriptive guidelines helped manufacture a mode of being within the broader category of transvestism. Dual personality, as it was formulated, yielded another type of “trans” personhood—an option—for hundreds of crossdressers to adopt if they so chose.

Although a vast number of the readership (judging by the letters and histories) saw themselves reflected in the ideals associated with dual personality expression, most did not employ the actual terms Prince coined in 1961, “feminiphile” and “femmepersonator,” into their identity narratives. This may have been because these

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<sup>28</sup> For example, “Annette,” who wrote his history in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960), articulated a sense of having distinct masculine and feminine personalities several months before Prince established the tenets of what she, in late 1960 and throughout 1961, called “true transvestism” and later “feminipilia.”

terms sounded terribly awkward. Instead, letter and history writers most often referred to themselves as “TVs,” which was shortened slang for “transvestites.” Even Prince used her terms infrequently, that is, until 1970, when she began a conscious effort to utilize the terms of her invented nomenclature. Around the same time, she strongly insisted to her readership that they also drop the old terms, “transvestite” and “TV,” and instead adopt “femmiphile” or “femmepersonator” or their abbreviation, “FP.” Some of those who wrote letters and histories after 1970 complied with Prince’s request, perhaps because they also were tiring of the media’s misapplication of the term transvestite for those who by their criteria were drag queens, transsexuals, and street queens. As late as 1979, a crossdresser named “Jody” (Montana), who at the time of his writing was a new subscriber and had only recently accepted his femme-self, wrote: “I am very happy to have a new name for the kind of person I am—femmiphile.”<sup>29</sup>

However, it also appears that Prince created the appearance of compliance and uniformity in the final product. I have found evidence in the original *Transvestia* proof files that are housed in the Special Collections at California State University at Northridge indicating that after her 1970 directive, Prince edited the terms that letter and history writers used to self-identity. Many of the original letters feature pen marks that slash over terms such as “TV” and “transvestite.” Written above them are Prince’s terms. It is reasonable to assume that these changes were done by Prince. To be sure, dozens of the original letters and histories in the proof files indicate that their writers did employ the official terms of dual personality expression. “Jody,” in fact, actually used the term “femmiphile” in his original letter.

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<sup>29</sup> Letter in *Transvestia* #98 (1979).

Prince and columnists encouraged aspiring femmiphiles, femmepersonators, and true transvestites to embrace respectability and distance themselves from those they considered sexual deviants and fetishistic crossdressers. But how did *Transvestia*'s writers situate themselves within and against this new category and negotiate its disciplinary functions? A transvestite named "Phyllis" (Michigan) said that he had "lost, or better, replaced, an all compulsive urgency, ringing like a fire alarm, that made [his] dressing a clandestine type of thing....

A thing, not of beauty, but needed and always ridden with guilt. Now, with your help, I find I can savor the anticipation, much as one looks forward to a good play or meeting an old friend; no more like an animal stalking its prey on which to glut itself. Consequently the end result finds me a gentle and respectable Phyllis, unlike the secretive, often garish girl of the dark of yore.

Phyllis interpreted his former self as a guilt-ridden TV of the "locked-room stage."

Although he did not explicitly indicate fetishistic inclinations, Phyllis described prior desires and practices that represented those often attributed to fetishistic transvestites. A hint of illicit sexuality haunted both his analogies. He employed the phrase "ringing like a fire alarm" to describe his "compulsive urgency" to crossdress. A more explicit note of erotic compulsion resided in the second analogy that compared his former insatiable desires to that of a gluttonous animal stalking its prey. Phyllis credited Prince and the magazine for helping him adopt more respectable dressing habits and to develop a disciplined mindset. Phyllis achieved respectability only with the removal of the secrecy and illicit nature of the practice. Yet, a hint of eroticism still lingered, as his new habit of savoring the anticipation before periods of crossdressing simply redirected the sexual stimulus from the actual experience of dressing in women's attire onto the anticipation of the activity. Still, Phyllis recorded a transformation to what he considered a higher, more

aesthetic, and more respectable expression of transvestism. His former feminine persona was a “garish” girl. By implication, his new femme-self has learned the respectable codes of dress and behavior advocated by Prince and the magazine’s fashion columnist, Susanna Valenti. Phyllis, then, wrote his ‘femme-self’ into the category of feminiphilia.<sup>30</sup>

Others also made a home within the ideological parameters of dual personality. In the femmepersonation narrative, self-identified FP’s and those who call themselves transvestites but subscribe to many of the tenets of the dual personality philosophy continually strived to achieve their ideal of feminine authenticity. “I admire the qualities that women possess,” remarked “Nancy,” “and hope that I’m expressing some of them now and will express more as I acquire more insight.” FP narratives also featured subjects who self-regulate their behaviors, hone their skills, and assiduously monitor their progress. Consequently, these narratives documented improvement, evolution, and transformation. Nancy contended, “I’ve taken a certain pride in Nancy and have done my best to perfect her makeup, dress, and mannerisms and to make her as authentic as possible.”<sup>31</sup>

A crossdresser named “Judy” pinpointed an exact moment when he believed his dressing practices shifted from narcissistic self-indulgence to a higher plane of respectability. He described the transformative moment as follows:

Last night after I had dressed and put on my makeup, I was doing what I usually do, looking at my reflection. It seemed to me rather suddenly that I really didn’t need the thrill of watching myself any longer. I decided to put the mirror away and after I had done this I found something had changed within me. I was no longer Charles, pretending to be Judy, I was Judy. I was a woman. I knew all the while that I was still a man, but that part of me was now in the background. The various things in the room, sports car magazines, guns, clothing, etc., now

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<sup>30</sup> Phyllis’ letter in *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964).

<sup>31</sup> Nancy’s life history “My Year” in *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).

belonged to my 'brother' and these things which meant so much to him did not interest me in the least and I didn't have to think constantly about whether or not my movements were girlish because I felt natural, relaxed and confident, in any situation. My future wife's pictures were no longer of the woman I loved, but of a dear friend....

Judy's narrative represented a textbook expression of the feminine persona that FP's believed was created when one worked to cultivate femininity. With his use of the word "thrill" in his letter, Judy hinted at former crossdressing practices based primarily on erotic rewards. Putting away the mirror was an interesting narrative choice and represented a significant gesture. The action symbolized Judy's rejection of the male-manufactured fantasy image he had created and it also signaled his repudiation of the panoptic power he had waged over the 'woman' imprisoned in the mirror. Further, the mirror's disposal marked a transformative moment, as Judy narrates what he perceived to be an instantaneous change from sexualized narcissism to a secure feminine identity. "I was Judy. I was a woman." The narrative, then, dramatized, indeed, took great dramatic license in describing what may have been the author's experience of coming to feel more confident in his feminine presentation and perhaps in his evolving belief that his feminine persona—"Judy"—was every bit as legitimate and 'real' as the masculine self that had been under construction from prior years of socialization and cultural interaction.<sup>32</sup>

In his narrative, Judy adopted the "girl within" metaphor to dramatize his transformative experience. This metaphor was used to describe two gendered personalities that adherents of dual personality believed resided in one male body. In his narrative, Judy did not eradicate the masculine self but rather placed it "in the background," thus allowing his "sister" to take over. Judy's narrative replicated others whose authors initially encountered the textual world of the magazine as 'lower

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<sup>32</sup> Judy's letter in *Transvestia* #27 (June 1964).

specimens.’ But with instruction and practice, they progressed to higher forms of aesthetic expression, and they internalized modes of identity on par with Prince’s emphasis on creating and cultivating a de-eroticized feminine persona and on dressing and behaving respectably. Beauty, grace, sweetness, passivity, and respectability—these were some of the qualities that FP’s commonly associated with an idealized image of middle class, white womanhood, as well as, the traits that they believed safely distinguished them from fetishistic crossdressers and whole-girl fetishists.<sup>33</sup>

Within this socially homogenous group of men, it is not surprising that these racial and class inflections were left unexamined, if not totally unstated. Many FP writers exalted ‘Traditional Womanhood’ and emulated conventional models of femininity. For example, the above mentioned crossdresser named Nancy placed high value in receiving social acceptance as a respectable woman—to be “accepted as I appear to be, just another woman shopping, strolling, going to the movies, etc.” Nancy’s presentation of femininity evoked codes of whiteness and the trappings of high social class. He enacted the fantasy role of a white lady of leisure engaging in acts of consumption and exercising a seemingly unrestricted range of public mobility.<sup>34</sup>

The performance of these models of femininity entailed engaging in the activities and taking up the hobbies associated with women of leisure and other models of femininity they emulated. For example, “Darlene” (Arizona) lived out dichotomized gender roles:

When I play chess, read science fiction, study psychology, work math puzzles, play logic games, or otherwise involve myself in depth thinking, I wouldn’t consider dressing in feminine clothes. The idea would never occur to me.... Now when I want to oil paint, write stories, play my guitar, or just plain relax I wear the feminine garments for that experience. I’m happy doing housework, cooking,

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<sup>33</sup> Prince published no letters that described regression from a higher state of transvestism to a lower order.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy’s life history in *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).



ironing, washing, learning to sew, learning to set and style hair and just plain being 'Darlene.' I like drive-in movies, long walks, and window shopping. I enjoy the company of my wife as a girl friend.<sup>35</sup>

As Darlene's statements show, not only did an FP create a unique personality for his femme-self, he also gave "her" stereotypically feminine interests and hobbies. FPs wrote as if the feminine personas they cultivated represented completely different beings with unique personalities of their own. "Jean," who practiced his "F.P.ing" with "great care and utmost discretion," maintained that he feels great happiness in living two lives but much prefers his "femme-self." He described the differences between his masculine and feminine personas. "My male nature is quiet and reserved, mild-natured and of even temperament. The 'Girl' is cheerful and fun-loving, though not overly demonstrative. 'She' is a 'Lady' at all times." As for managing his dual personalities:

My open public disclosures are decidedly male and incur no indication of the existence of another [feminine]'self.' My private life centers about the female personality within me that is the more natural existence. To experience the transference into the feminine world is exhilarating and inspiring beyond words. I become a whole being and live life to its fullest, which contrasts to my otherwise average existence.

Jean ended his history with words of wisdom for others who were suffering through inner turmoil. "No one knows better than I the price of such a conflict. I could not win, until I lost. And in the end, I am the Victor. I live in peace and happiness and beauty—at least part of my life."<sup>36</sup>

As it was articulated in the pages of the magazine, the identity-work of periodic crossdressers and femmepersonators speaks to complex questions at the intersection of gender politics, the politics of fantasy, feminism, and power. Is there an essence to

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<sup>35</sup> Darlene's letter in *Transvestia* #64 (1970).

<sup>36</sup> Jean's life history "I Could Not Win Till I Lost" in *Transvestia* #18 (December 1962).

womanhood that only genetic females can acquire? Are all the trappings of conventional femininity male-manufactured, created for men's pleasure and to serve their needs? With their descriptions of being and becoming suburban housewives, ladies of leisure, girls next door, and other iconic emblems of femininity, *Transvestia*'s writers undoubtedly emulated gender stereotypes. At the same time, however, many of them sincerely felt that their renditions of femininity reflected interior modes of being. In many cases, crossgender identifications resided uneasily with sexist perceptions and appropriations of femininity, as well as, fantastic misconceptions of what 'real' womanhood entailed during this historical period. Were their renditions of femininity playful yet unrealistic fantasies or were they modes of being that emanated from within? This line of questioning will be pursued further in the next chapter. Yet the impetus of these questions derives from the anxious tension between essentialist and constructionist understandings of identity. And in respect to *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance, this tension proved to be most taxonomically productive.

#### "Transvestites are born, not made": Essentialists / Hobbyists Debates

As is evident from prior excerpts from *Transvestia*'s letters and histories, a tension existed between conceptualizing transvestism as an identity or mode of being versus regarding it as a practice or hobby. This is an important distinction to grasp because it yielded different identifications along *Transvestia*'s range of gender non-conformity. This tension infused the narrative of a reader who introduced himself as "a 45 year old male woman who answers to the name of Joyce." Joyce said that he dresses and works as a man for forty hours a week while the rest of the time he dresses, acts, and lives as a

woman. As a measure of this dedication to feminine living, he reported that he wears his hair shoulder length and has his ears pierced. Joyce claimed that he had never felt guilty about dressing and acting as a woman. “Everyone has a hobby of some kind,” he explained. “Mine is dressing and living as a lady.” Here, Joyce normalized crossdressing by characterizing it as a hobby, no different than collecting baseball cards or building model airplanes. Recently, he had moved into a new apartment as a woman. He described this new experience as follows:

What a difference in the way my neighbors treat me. Yes, they see me dressed as a man going to and coming from work, but they treat me as a woman who wears masculine attire to work in. My life as a woman is wonderful and I LOVE IT, but on the other hand I also like being a man. They both have a good many advantages. A sex change operation is out! I don’t want one and have never at any time even entertained the thought of one.... I am a transvestite and very proud of the fact that I am.

Joyce’s essentialist understanding of identity harmoniously coexisted with an understanding of his feminine persona as a “hobby.” This combination yielded three uncomplicated identifications as a “male woman,” a working “man,” and a “transvestite.” Joyce’s history was representative of transvestites who articulated crossgender identity both in ways that suggested an essentialist understanding of themselves as a gender minority—as a unique ‘species of being’—and as otherwise ‘normal’ men with simply an unusual hobby.<sup>37</sup>

Usually in these narratives, the intensity of the author’s desire for feminine expression did result in essentialist language and articulations of identity. “Betty” (Pennsylvania) expressed his desire to crossdress in the language of essentialism when he described transvestites as people who are “sexually males but mentally and spiritually are women.” Similarly, “Jeannette” understood his transvestism to be an “innate” and “a profound and

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<sup>37</sup> Joyce’s life history “It Can Be Done” in *Transvestia* #55 (February 1969).

basic part of me.” He described an experience staying in a woman’s hotel in New York City. “When one is a woman or in a state of beingness as a woman staying at a woman’s residence hotel is the natural womanly thing to do—an achievement not in male sexual excitement, but in feminine beingness.” His essentialized understanding of transvestism as an “innate” and “profound” part of his self served as a passport that legitimized “Jeannette’s” presence in the female sphere of a woman’s hotel.<sup>38</sup>

Another particularly telling example of this coupling of intense desire and essentialist rhetoric came from “Dominique.” Dominique documented a failed attempt to break his crossdressing habit—a three month period in which he refrained from crossdressing and from corresponding with and meeting other transvestites. During this time, he consulted weekly with a psychiatrist. He described the futile results of the attempt and the lessons learned as follows:

This left such emptiness in my whole self that I almost went to the rocks with that experience....The feminine part of myself is a real portion of my life that could not be destroyed by such methods as psychiatry.... Strange as it may seem to a lot of people and maybe to you too, I feel that in order to be a complete and well adjusted male I must give my feminine personality freedom of expression. This is an integral part of myself and I swear I shall never again attempt to destroy a so important portion of my nature. Without this God given duality of personality, I often wonder how life can be ever full and worth living. As of now, I shall attempt to give my femme life more of its rightful demand, and I shall give the girl within the freedom of expression she demands.”

Dominique expressed dual gender identities very much in line with the idea of dual personality espoused by Prince. He even used the metaphor of “the girl within” and described femininity as “integral” to his sense of self-hood. Dominique self-identified in an essentialist framework. He viewed his dual identity as “God given” and with the use of the word “nature,” as something biologically ingrained. For Dominique, the emotional

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<sup>38</sup> Betty’s letter in *Transvestia* #2 (March 1960); Jeannette’s life history “Some Experiences in My ‘Woman Project’” in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).

pain he experienced during his months of “treatment” only served to strengthen his desires and validate his crossgender identity as an *essential* truth of his existence.<sup>39</sup>

By contrast, some of *Transvestia*’s writers expressed their transvestism *more* in terms of a fun practice or a hobby and *less* as a core aspect of their sense of selfhood. They linked feminine expression to motivations other than to ones stemming from natural, biological, or God-given essences. For instance, “Gloria” (Pennsylvania) wrote:

I have no guilt feelings, rather an intense feeling of well-being when dressed in feminine attire. I know that I will never give it up, and I don’t want to. Dressing relaxes me [to] no end and is a wonderful escape from life’s problems.... There must be untold thousands who would join our ‘Club’ if they ever had the opportunity to ‘dress.’ They just have never been initiated.<sup>40</sup>

While still regarding transvestism as an integral aspect of his sense of self, Gloria more strongly characterized crossdressing as a relaxing hobby. Escape from the problems of manhood underlined his primary motivations for crossdressing. As a means for relaxation, then, crossdressing was no different than any other leisure activity or hobby a person would take up in order to unwind. His statement that others would become transvestites if they could only experience the therapeutic benefits he associated with the practice was representative of other writers who did not view the desire to crossdress as an innate essence or natural, in-born proclivity. They instead believed it was a learned practice, and, as Gloria purported, one only had to be “initiated.”<sup>41</sup>

A debate ensued within the pages of the magazine between the essentialist and hobbyist camps. As if directly countering those who articulated transvestism as merely an

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<sup>39</sup> Dominique’s letter in *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Gloria’s letter in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).

<sup>41</sup> Prince and columnist Sheila Niles had a series of debates in *Transvestia* regarding nature versus nurture as it related to transvestism. Prince took the environmental side whereas Niles argued for the biological.

enjoyable and relaxing practice, “Marie-Therese” contended that the ‘girl within’ “is not simply a hobby and she cannot, like the stamps or the chessmen or the print catalogues, be put away in the closet till next time. When she is once out of the closet psychologically, there is no putting her back.” Essentialist beliefs are not surprising given that many writers understood their transvestism to have originated at birth or infancy. “My own theory,” asserted another transvestite “is that the TV syndrome has its beginning in very early infancy at the time the baby is forming the first beginnings of his self image. TV is not an acquired habit (like smoking) but a personality defect imprinted on the brain from earliest infancy. It’s almost like being left handed.” Another crossdresser theorized even earlier origins, contending that “the precondition toward femininity which I recognize but cannot explain, I hold, has its origins in the endocrine structure of my body. I take it to be, therefore, genetic and congenital.... Transvestites are born, not made!” Sometimes an essentialized understanding of transvestism resided in uneasy tension with Prince’s early belief that crossdressing should be practiced periodically and in moderation and always with the knowledge that one is biologically male and socially obligated to fulfill the male gender role in one’s family and public life. Essentialist understandings yielded several crossgender and transsexual identifications along *Transvestia*’s spectrum of gender variance.<sup>42</sup>

### Crossgender Identifications and ‘Transsexualist’ Tendencies

Several of *Transvestia*’s writers used essentialist language that pushed their self-definitions beyond the established tenets of femmepersonation in respect to the frequency

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<sup>42</sup> Marie-Therese’s history “Reflections in a Damaged Mirror” in *Transvestia* #63 (June 1970); \*Rhonda’s life history “It’s a Long Road” in *Transvestia* #66 (1971); \*Jo Anne’s life history “How It Began” in *Transvestia* #20 (April 1963)

and intensity of their desires to crossdress. With respect to intensity, consider the following excerpt from the narrative of “Georgette”:

In addition to the love of the clothes, there is a deep, deep desire to be a girl, and a deep, deep feeling that I should be a girl.... I think feminine thoughts, can act like a woman with the greatest of ease, and use feminine expressions in preference to typically male ones.... I would love to be a girl in every minute physical detail. As I am one in mind and—who knows? In spirit.

Georgette titled her life history “I Am a Transvestite,” but her articulation of identity suggested a mode of being more along the lines of transsexuality than the form of transvestism advocated by Prince in the early 1960s. Georgette probably held a broader definition of transvestism, but that is beside the point. Georgette’s “deep, deep desire to be a girl” and her desire to be a girl “in every minute physical detail” destabilized the category of heterosexual transvestism in significant ways. Georgette’s articulations represented the experiences and modes of being of many other writers with crossgender identifications and transsexual leanings. These writers found a home within *Transvestia*’s textual community but stretched its boundaries to include individuals with crossgender identities, which may be defined as those who possessed an inexorable sense of being or wanting to become the other gender than the one assigned at birth (plus or minus the desire for surgical alterations). Georgette voiced a sense of crossgender identification despite identifying as transvestite.<sup>43</sup>

Two other writers also expressed crossgender identities and transsexual leanings and described practices that surpassed the parameters established for feminiphilia. “H.K.” (Wisconsin) wrote: “Believe me when I say that living a woman’s existence is just as much a part of me as my arms and legs. Will society ever believe that we have the soul of women in our heart, mind, and body so that we can be accepted as women without the

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<sup>43</sup> Georgette W.’s life history “I Am a Transvestite” in *Transvestia* #30 (December 1964).

fear of punishment?” H.K. considered femininity to be a core aspect of her being, a conceptualization that was not unlike the average FP except that, for H.K., any sense of masculinity seemed buried or non-existent. The strength of her feminine gender identity was evident in another part of her letter where she revealed thoughts of suicide after an arrest for “masquerading as a woman” and after a judge’s subsequent mandate barred her from dressing as a woman in public for an entire year. Although her year of probation had ended in 1957, H.K. still remained afraid of crossdressing in public and only did so in private. But, according to her, not even private dressing could alleviate her depression. Public excursions and social validation of her crossgender identity proved crucial to H.K.’s well-being.<sup>44</sup>

The same could be said for “Eleanor” (Connecticut) who wrote that “all my life I have wanted to be a woman, to live and dress as a woman, to take my place in life and take the secondary role of a woman which I honestly feel I can fulfill. I am inadequate as a male.” Eleanor’s words indicated a mode of crossgender expression more along the lines of what was becoming (or in some parts of the country had become) the prevailing narrative of transsexuality. First, admitting to feeling inadequate as a male placed Eleanor outside of Prince’s notion of dual personality, in which the dual masculine and feminine personalities each deserved equal but separate expression. Furthermore, Eleanor did not characterize her desires to dress and behave as a woman as an escape from the requirements of manhood, but rather she described suffering from a failed sense of herself as a man. Wanting permanently to take the “secondary role” of a woman distinguished her from femmepersonators, who typically desired periodic feminine expression and wanted the best of both gendered worlds. Although Eleanor expressed no

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<sup>44</sup> H.K.’s letter in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).



desire for a sex change, she seemed to want to live permanently in the feminine gender role and to actually *be* a woman. Interestingly, despite the cultural availability of the term, Georgette, H.K., and Eleanor did not identify as transsexual.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, only a few of *Transvestia*'s letter and history writers self-identified using the classification "transsexual." For example, "Winfie" (California) self-defined as both a transvestite and a "transsexualist." "My transsexualism," she wrote,

is known only to myself. At times the desire to be a woman in form is excruciatingly intense but at my age I realize that there is no hope for a change.... I should like to be a woman, but know that this is not possible for me so accept my state with the best grace I can. I know that physically I am a male, but my mental state and my emotions are feminine.<sup>46</sup>

At the time of her writing in the early 1960s, Winfie's statements complicated the notion of transsexuality as a post-operative identity category. For many doctors and "transgendered" individuals in the 1960s and 1970s, the accomplishment of sex-reassignment surgery did serve as a convenient line that demarcated transsexuals from other groups that crossdressed, including transvestites. Yet, Winfie's age prevented her from obtaining the surgery she wanted in order to transform her anatomical sex. Should the definition of transsexuality include those who intensely desired surgery but for whatever reason could not accomplish it? As Meyerowitz's research has shown, the advent of sex-reassignment surgery in the 1950s and the demands for it afterwards precipitated the need to distinguish transsexuality from transvestism (and homosexuality).

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<sup>45</sup> Eleanor's letter in *Transvestia* #5 (October 1960).

<sup>46</sup> Winfie's life history "The Wish to Be a Girl and Wear Girl's Clothing" in *Transvestia* #18 (Dec. 1962).

Due to the blurriness between transvestism and transsexualism, the request for surgery became the defining characteristic of transsexuality.<sup>47</sup>

Several others who wrote letters and histories described how, at various points in their lives, they had flirted with the idea of having surgery. “Myrtle Ann” [Oklahoma] described how she had longed to be transformed into a woman, even before Christine Jorgenson became a media sensation in 1953. In more recent years, Myrtle Ann solicited the aid of a surgeon on the possibilities of surgical alteration but was turned down because she was married with children and too old. A psychiatrist advised Myrtle Ann to partially satisfy her yearnings by beginning a life of periodic feminine expression. For three years, she shopped, dined, and traveled en femme, and she took charm and sewing classes. Myrtle Ann wrote that she was even offered a job as a woman but declined the offer due to the job’s low pay. (Tellingly, the author did not unpack the male privilege that she unwittingly exposed at that moment in her narrative. One wonders if she realized that she had appropriated some of the glamorous aspects of womanhood minus the burdens.) Myrtle Ann’s new life as a part-time woman seemed to alleviate the stress that had plagued her former years as a closeted transsexual. Recently, the opportunity for surgery became available to her, but she decided against it. “If you are to be truly a woman,” she explained, “you must earn the right by practicing, practicing, practicing.” At the time of her writing, Myrtle Ann enjoyed “being” a woman almost all the time except when working. She probably represented scores of other readers of *Transvestia*

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<sup>47</sup> “By the 1960s,” Meyerowitz asserts, “many of the doctors who wrote on the topic...saw transsexualism as an extreme version of transvestism. Although they distinguished crossdressing from crossgender identification, the doctors could not draw the boundary as firmly as they might have wanted.... Ultimately, they acknowledged, their diagnoses relied on their interpretations of their patients’ self-descriptions. Without any physical measures to guide them, the doctors often returned to the request for surgery itself as the primary distinguishing feature of the transsexual condition. Although they noted exceptions, they reconfirmed, as [Harry] Benjamin wrote, that ‘the request for a conversion operation is typical only for the transsexual and can actually serve as definition’” (176).

who, if life circumstances had permitted, would have gotten the surgery to change their genital sex. Instead, depending on their individual situations, they settled for a life of periodic feminine expression and, for a few, full-time living as a woman without surgical alteration. In later years, the categories of “transgenderist” and “male-woman” would emerge as options for Winfie and Myrtle Ann and other crossgendered individuals, some desirous of sex reassignment surgery, others not, but all expressing a belief that they *are* women despite what biology, anatomy, or culture might dictate.<sup>48</sup>

### Challenges, Negotiations, & Integrated Personality

The dual personality or “girl within” philosophy that was heavily promoted in *Transvestia* was critically interrogated by several letter and history writers. “Denise” wrote that he could “neither confirm nor deny what others had said, that a feminine personality will gradually develop after a long period of crossdressing.” With respect to his own practices and as an explanation for failing to develop his girl-within, Denise said that he did not alter his male personality when dressed in women’s clothing, (a key component for cultivating the feminine persona, according to most femmepersonators). Denise also admitted to what he articulated as the “narcissist level” and an “overpowering sexual aspect” of crossdressing. Prince and others who subscribed to the dual personality philosophy would probably have argued that Denise was stuck in the fetishistic stage of transvestism and may have classified him as a “whole-girl fetishist.” Another example, “Georgette,” who knew of *Transvestia* for six years “on and off through those dirty book stores in L.A.,” had a history of crossdressing replete with guilt.

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<sup>48</sup> Myrtle Ann’s letter in *Transvestia* #61 (1970).

Perhaps his uneasiness with his desires and practices explained why he “never felt the development of a separate feminine personality.”

I feel hard pressed to place myself exactly within the framework of an FP as described in TVia. I don't feel as two personalities sharing the same body. There is no clear (or even predominant) division between 'me' and 'her.' My ego, self, Id, or whatever, is a totality that lives with contradicting feelings and loves.

Although Denise and Georgette could not locate themselves within the dual personality framework espoused by Prince and other femmepersonators, they both enjoyed the magazine. Denise credited the magazine for providing him a sense of belonging. The greatest value it gave to Georgette was “a chance to see how others feel and react to the same emotions, circumstances, and problems I'm encountering.”<sup>49</sup>

Georgette above contended that his “ego, self, id, or whatever is a *totality* that lives with contradicting feelings and loves” [Emphasis added]. In this statement, he described yet another mode of identity that was expressed in letters and histories—what I will term the “integrated personality.” The philosophy of integrated personality began to emerge after the mid-1960s when the impending sexual revolution(s) began to loosen Cold War gender norms. Prince gradually realized that the rationale for creating separate and distinct gender personas would be undermined in a culture in which hard expressions of masculinity were softening in many parts of the United States. The question became: how might true transvestites continue to explain their need to crossdress in order to express a forbidden femininity when men from the mid 1960s and on could, without the same degree of social sanction and ridicule, express qualities and attributes that had previously been deemed unmanly?

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<sup>49</sup> Denise's letter in *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961); Georgette's letter in *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

In the more open-minded and culturally permissive atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s, Prince began to write less about the absolute necessity of keeping the masculine and feminine aspects of one's personality separated and began theorizing how one could and should integrate both in order to become a more "complete" human being. Prince adopted new concepts as she realized that the dichotomously gendered culture she grew up in was rapidly fading. "As a matter of fact," she contended, "in today's world, it is becoming less and less necessary for a male to change gender (let alone sex) as a means of expressing his inner femininity, because it is gradually becoming more acceptable that a male should express qualities formerly considered to be feminine."<sup>50</sup>

In "Androgyny-Gynandry: The Integrated Self," Prince explored the concept of "androgyny" and promoted the idea of integrating traditionally masculine and feminine elements. She had clearly moved away from the "divide and separate" philosophy of the early 1960s and now advocated adopting an androgynous personality and theorized a future with less restrictive gender roles. Moving away from her former stances, she encouraged FPs to assimilate the traits of femininity into their masculine lives. However, Prince did not necessarily draw the conclusion that an androgynous state of mind called for androgynous dress. Judging by her photographs in the 1970s, she still enjoyed dressing as femininely and conventionally as possible. And she was careful to note that she was "not suggesting any ridiculous behavior like wearing red nail polish to the office, or wearing non-fly slacks." What she did suggest was that once a transvestite "has come face to face with the inescapable fact that he does have a girl within...he [should]...

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<sup>50</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #92 (1977).

express feelings, carry out activities and in general be himself without such inhibitions as formerly.”<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, the dual personality philosophy did not fade away, even in the sexualized society of the 1970s. But a younger generation of readers began not only to adopt more eroticized styles of femininity but also to articulate integrated selves. “I understand that I am one person, with both masculine and feminine aspects,” explained “Bob” [Kentucky], “thus I am not changing sexes, but expressing one aspect of me that hasn’t been expressed much in the last 35 years.... Now I decide whether or not to do something solely on the basis of whether I want to do it rather than ‘is it masculine or feminine.’” “Eileen” also represented the younger generation of FPs, many of whom grew up in a less rigidly bi-gendered society and who wished to move beyond the gendered dichotomies that structured the worldview, styles, and practices of the older generation of crossdressers. Twenty-three years old at the time of his writing, Eileen displayed a complex understanding of the range of transvestite and crossgender identifications. “Crossdressers,” he wrote, “range all the way from drag queens to transsexuals, and there are many stopping places in between.” As a younger person who was less invested in the strict gender dichotomies of the 1950s and early 1960s, Eileen was able to more easily embrace the notion of the integrated personality. “I have taken the girl within and broken it down to a ‘think pink’ sort of thing....”

I am constantly observant of what is going on around me, of styles, fashions, and how girls act and think, when they are just being people. But even more than this, I think I have finally succeeded in unifying my personality, so that I can be happy in either role. To be honest, I can’t think which one that I prefer the most. I know that I wouldn’t want to be without either one. Be yourself, and in the words of our generation ‘do your own thing!

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<sup>51</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #33 (June 1965).

Eileen adopted contemporary styles and was not caught up in the more traditional models of femininity idealized by older transvestites. To be sure, writers in the 1970s still operated within a dualistic framework of gendered behaviors, traits, and activities, as was evident with Eileen's "think pink" approach. Yet, the desire to wear women's clothing did not have to be explained using the elaborate (and oftentimes tortured) "dual personality" rationalizations that writers in the early 1960s used to justify and normalize their practices.<sup>52</sup>

To understand themselves and explain themselves to others, most of *Transvestia*'s writers in the 1970s appropriated the hyper-individualist and self-therapeutic ethos of the "me-decade." They fused older tenets of the dual personality philosophy with a "do-your-own-thing" and countercultural mentalities. As "Tecla" [California] explained, crossdressing "provided an avenue for attempting to truly know myself in deeper ways than were possible before." Self-defining in the 1970s, he described the benefits of the "girl within" in language that sounded wonderfully psychedelic and countercultural:

Give her a chance. She can bring a gentleness and understanding into your life that you might never have known; a consciousness of beauty, color and form that one might never feel otherwise. She can teach you to FEEL things within you that so many of us have been taught to ignore in our world of so-called masculine logic. We can begin to savor the joy of acting on our feelings with no obligation to explain. And, in doing so, we open into a more complete entity—as a bud opens to become a rose.

In his subsequent advice to other transvestites, Tecla employed older techniques (e.g. divide and separate the two selves / establish a balance between the two personas) to achieve new results: psychological completeness. "When we establish her place in our life it must be defined clearly so that we both understand its boundaries, and that neither

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<sup>52</sup> Bob's letter in *Transvestia* #97 (1978); Eileen's life history "The Evolution of the Femme Self" in *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

part will be threatened. As you contribute to her, she will return the compliment and the result will be measured not in terms of masculinity or femininity but in the wholeness of the individual.” Tecla and others’ articulations of the integrated personality serve as historical evidence that some of the cultural and social lines separating masculinity and femininity were less sharp in the 1970s, at least, within some “trans” communities.<sup>53</sup>

### A Few Rejections

If most of the letters and histories that Prince published fell within or just outside the parameters she helped construct around femmepersonation, a few letters expressed complete disdain for the cornerstone of the dual personality mode of identification—the belief that it constituted a legitimate (minority) social identity. Below is an excerpt from one of only a few critical letters that Prince published:

While I enjoy your magazine, it is something of a mystery to me, in spite of the objectives printed inside the front cover—why you bother. I should think you could spend your energies elsewhere with great reward to yourself and society. Sure, it is nice for our little group to have the magazine, correspondence, etc., but it is true finally that we are neurotic people who, like all neurotics, can live with our own compulsions, as many do—or get treatment. There is no more reason for us to be understood as a group than for people who compulsively wash themselves or save string, need to be understood....<sup>54</sup>

The letter was signed “Jack,” an obvious refusal to participate in the custom of signing off with one’s femme-name. Jack’s conceptualization of transvestism as a neurotic and compulsive behavior countered Prince’s narrative that it was a respectable practice of a statistically marginal but otherwise normal group of men who merely desired to express

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<sup>53</sup> Tecla’s life history “Beyond Sex—Growth in a Lifetime” in *Transvestia* #82 (1974).

<sup>54</sup> Jack’s letter in *Transvestia* # 27 (June 1964). Prince wrote that some people accused her of not publishing critical letters. She countered these accusations with the explanation that she seldom received critical letters. She believed that would-be critics did not bother taking the time to write and disgruntled subscribers showed their disdain by dropping their subscriptions as opposed to taking the time to write.



traits that had been arbitrarily assigned to individuals with female sexed bodies. The implications of Jack's letter were harsh: the desire to dress as a woman and express one's inner femininity was not a legitimate basis for a social group identity. While other writers conceptualized crossdressing as a hobby, few internalized and replicated the stigmatizing medical models and language of psychiatry as Jack did when he used the descriptors "neurotic" and "compulsions." In his letter, Jack did not describe his own crossdressing practices, but one can infer that he was a transvestite by his less than respectful reference to "our little group." One may reasonably assume that he had not created a feminine persona. Jack probably enjoyed reading the fictional stories in the magazine and corresponding with other crossdressers. It is possible that he may have been a fetishistic crossdresser or a whole-girl fetishist. Even if his letter concerning the pointlessness of transvestism as a social category represented a minority position among *Transvestia's* letter and history writers, it nevertheless presented another voice that contested the nature and parameters of transvestite identity.

### Identities in Flux

*Transvestia* became a forum for men who identified as heterosexual transvestites and others who practiced crossdressing in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to share stories of identity in their letters and histories. Prince conceptualized *Transvestia* as a tool that would help advance the cause of a particular 'breed' of transvestite—heterosexual men who cultivated and periodically expressed de-eroticized and respectable renditions of femininity. However, if published letters and histories are any indication, the magazine attracted transvestites who exhibited a range of gender identities and crossdressing styles,

aesthetics, and practices. The making of transvestite and crossgender taxonomies within *Transvestia*'s gender community represented a form of productive power—one that was met with equally powerful processes of negotiation, contestation, and rejection on the part of individuals.

“Marie-Therese” was perceptively philosophical regarding the role individual agency plays in the process of identity formation. “Identities are in the first instance like dresses, we try them on for size.” Although it is true that identities are never as fluid as postmodernist thinkers have claimed, it is also true that they are never entirely fixed. Marie-Therese seemed to recognize the blurriness, instability, and agency that characterized *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance. To extend Marie-Therese's metaphor, if the magazine represented a catalogue for readers to ‘shop’ for dresses (i.e. identities), *Transvestia* was also analogous to a mirror. The magazine “gave me a general look into the area of transvestism to which I could compare myself,” wrote an introspective subscriber. “Through looking into the thoughts and the behavior of those involved, I had something to compare and reflect on my own thoughts and behavior.” Many readers saw their reflections in the letters and histories featured in the magazine; others did not. The modes of identity promoted and featured in the magazine suited many readers just fine. Others reconfigured the idea of dual personality to their liking. Still others completely rejected the notion of the girl-within, believing it to be outlandish and just plain silly.<sup>55</sup>

These crossdressers assembled in an important textual space of their own making. This space, created through a process of collective storytelling, provided a unique

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<sup>55</sup> Marie-Therese's life history “Reflections in a Damaged Mirror” in *Transvestia* #63 (June 1970); Letter in *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

vantage point for this cohort of crossdressers (who uniquely inhabited privileged and marginal subject positions) to rationalize their desires, dignify their practices, delineate a range of transvestite and crossgender taxonomies, collectively construct a hierarchy of identifications, and wage a politics of respectability against those on the bottom rungs. Each in turn claimed a place, and for many, a home, on *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance. And few had any regrets. Most writers ended their identity narratives with proud and unapologetic affirmations of who they are and what they enjoy doing. "We may never know the why of it," proclaimed "Kay" (Michigan), "but as for me, I don't care. I've read Virginia's erudite discourses and Susanna's speculations, but all I know for sure is that it's a delicious disease that I have no desire whatever to be 'cured' of, and that when I give my hair that last little push in front of the mirror before I go out the door, I'm in Seventh Heaven and perfectly willing to tear up my return ticket."<sup>56</sup>

#### Coda: Moving towards Transgenderism—Virginia's Dream Home

The late 1960s, particularly that tumultuous year of 1968, marked a turning point in Prince's gender subjectivity. Just as her assistant Mary had done several months prior, Prince decided in the autumn of 1968 to live full-time as a woman rather than dress periodically. This momentous decision greatly complicated her place on *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance, as it undercut a prior component of her philosophy regarding crossdressing, namely that it should be practiced periodically, with perspective, and in moderation. As a point of comparison, the following words from 1965 represent

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<sup>56</sup> Kay's life history "Kay for Kathryn" in *Transvestia* #28 (August 1964). Another prominent characteristic of many of these histories and letters was each writer's propensity for optimism in the face of stigma and various obstacles.

her early “dual personality” perspective and are interesting to place alongside her decision three years later:

I have had the experience, now that Virginia lives as much as she does and gets about everywhere, of having people who know me as Virginia and see me as a relaxed and comfortable woman often say ‘why don’t you live that way all the time’. They are not thinking of surgery but just of living. Sometimes I am afraid the fascination of this new life gets out of hand and we lose the perspective necessary to enjoy it. When we go too far in the femme-direction we are riding up the other side of the pendulum swing.... So let’s not forget that we are all built in a male way and have been brought up in a masculine framework which has its costs but also its compensations and let us say a word for and give a little credit to the ‘boy without’ as both the source and the support of the ‘girl within.’

At this time in her life when these words were written, Prince contended that the persona of “Virginia” was dependent on “Charles”—that the enjoyment of crossdressing and the satisfaction of cultivating a second personality (somehow) derived from her maleness. This column also re-emphasized Prince’s views on moderation and perspective. Prince believed that after acceptance of the “girl-within” is achieved, one needed to be careful not to go too far in the direction of feminine expression to the point where one lost all sense of one’s self as also a man. The goal for heterosexual crossdressers, especially ones with families and responsibilities, should be to maintain a balance between the masculine and feminine personalities. Prince’s views, however, would gradually change as she lived more of her life in the social role of her feminine persona, including traveling around the United States en femme on various public relation trips.<sup>57</sup>

The year 1968 marked seismic shifts in Prince’s gender identity. In her columns that year, Prince wrote about several personal experiences that led her to completely accept herself “genderally” as a woman despite being anatomically male. One of the most important columns that reflected her changing gender consciousness was featured in the

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<sup>57</sup> Virgin Views, “Something for the Boys,” in *Transvestia* #36 (December 1965).

February 1968 issue of *Transvestia*. In this column, Prince described a house she had recently purchased—“Virginia’s” new home. The house afforded privacy and opportunities for Prince to be her femme-self whenever she wanted, and she described Virginia’s ultra-feminine bedroom and boudoir in lush detail. Living in such a hyper-feminine environment gave her a new perspective on femininity and what it meant for her life. “A large part of femininity,” she reflected, “is a social response to a social set up (whether just housewifery or just being a female in a male dominated society) rather than an external manifestation of inherent differences from the male. All of a sudden, I find myself IN the ‘job’ that calls for a [feminine] reaction and presto it seems to unfold and open up inside me, and I find abilities, interests, fascinations and satisfactions that I didn’t know were there.” Having created a physical environment that allowed for full-time expression, Prince was beginning at this point in her life to conceptualize “Virginia” as more “real” than ever before. This column featured vivid descriptions of the daily acts of living and working that facilitated her self-transformation:

Inside of the house I can dust, vacuum, iron, mop up, cook, clean up, sew, paint, and whatever else a woman needs to do. If Charles needs to come to life as he does part of most every week, he does so with no confusion for either me or anyone else. This therefore is OUR house, though primarily Virginia’s.... I find myself doing all manner of things in MY house that any woman would do and doing them without any feeling of ‘now I am a woman so I must do this and I should do that’ and all such artificiality. I simply find myself doing them and enjoying the doing....

In spite of what Prince claimed, these chores and activities were performed in a conscious manner, but inhabiting this space and moving about in this environment afforded an authentic level of meaning that, in her mind, lacked the “artificiality” of role-playing that characterized typical expressions of periodic crossdressing. The result was that the persona of “Virginia” took on a quality of realness through these daily acts of living and

working in her house as a woman. “To BE in the situation where a woman normally finds herself,” Prince explained, “and then finding that womanly interests and satisfactions come forth [brings] complete happiness. Not a giggling, gushing kind of pleasure, but a deep down awareness of having come to being at last and truly me, me, ME!... I’ve come ‘home’.” Prince further explained that by “home” she did not mean a place or a higher level of accomplishment in respect to crossdressing. She maintained that “It is rather a sense that there is no longer any frustration over goals and desires unattained because there are no more goals to be yearned for.” Virginia’s dream home was not only a haven to luxuriate in hyper-femininity. The house represented the “integrated personality” Prince had been increasingly promoting since the mid-1960s. Prince described how she had been living out this philosophy in her new house and how these experiences had given her a sense of not playing either a masculine or feminine role. “I know now that my human self encompasses both Charles and Virginia and that both can and must live, not just in the mind, but in the flesh, in communication and interchange with other humans.”<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, as it turned out, Prince was premature in her conclusion that she had attained her goals with respect to gender expression. Later in the same year, she would come to want to live full-time as a woman. In her column in the August 1968 issue, which was entitled “My Goal Achieved,” Prince recounted her visit to a weekend nudist therapy retreat earlier that summer and described an experience that forced her to confront and reconcile a contradiction that had bothered her for years:

For about 20 hours I was as naked as the day I was born but for those same 20 hours I was still Virginia to myself and to all the rest. Although there could be no doubt as to my maleness (sex), nobody seemed inclined to doubt my femininity

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<sup>58</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #49 (February 1968).

(gender), and I was treated in all respects as one of the girls by men and women alike. So from that time on I knew and know that I AM Virginia and Virginia is for real. This is the end of the road in the self-acceptance battle– *to be able to know and maintain one's gender orientation in spite of the visible evidence of maleness*. [My emphasis]<sup>59</sup>

Prince's narrative of self-acceptance and social validation followed years of soul-searching. In columns after the ones in 1968 in which she narrativized her gender transformation, Prince would have to rationalize and explain her decision to live permanently as a woman to readers who pointed out what they considered a contradiction in relation to her previous stances, if not an outright hypocrisy. Prince later told her readers that she regretted publishing "My Goal Achieved," admitting that it was not very wise in light of the many wives who read the magazine and who would surely fear that their husbands would take a similar path. She admitted that her enthusiasm for her self-discovery clouded her judgment, and she assured her readers that while she had gone further on the "gender train" than any other heterosexual crossdresser, she had not "jumped the rails." "I merely came to a point where I have extended the feminine phase into a long term condition of life, but Charles is always with me, anatomically, physiologically and mentally.... My change has not been one of sex but one of gender." In 1971, she further testified that "Me, myself, and I reside and originate in my head, not my genitals." And almost ten years after her transition she continue to maintain that "I have managed to get my self image, my self identity out from between my legs and into between my ears. In short my identity as a woman does not either depend upon nor is it hampered by the state of my genitals. I am perfectly comfortable with the designation of

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<sup>59</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #52 (August 1968).

‘male woman’ even though to most people that seems a contradiction in terms because they can’t separate sex from gender.”<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, it is out of Prince’s subsequent rationalizations where we get the term “transgenderal” in 1969 and, in 1978, “transgenderist,” which would later be appropriated and politicized by trans activists in the early 1990s as the pangender, umbrella term “transgender.” Prince invented this new semantic category so as not to exclude herself and individuals like her (those who had undergone all sorts of bodily changes short of castration and who socially and privately lived as women) from the FP community she helped form. She also sought to linguistically differentiate herself and her kind from transsexuals, a category that seemed precariously close to the “male-woman” or “transgenderist” identity she now assumed. Although she had begun constructing and describing this new category in 1969 to deflect claims that she was on a path to transsexuality, it wasn’t until 1978 that she actually used the term “transgenderist” in print, which she defined as an anatomically heterosexual male who lived socially and privately as a woman without having a sex change operation. For the readers of *Transvestia* and members of Phi Pi Epsilon, “transgenderist” became a higher level of femmepersonation and an identity category and lifestyle that could be achieved only if an individual’s life circumstances (e.g., financial independence and lack of familial obligations) allowed for such a transition from periodic expression to permanent living.

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<sup>60</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #53 (October 1968); Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #56 (April 1969); Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #66 (1971); Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #89 (1977). One complaint regarding the “My Goal Achieved” column was registered in a letter Prince reprinted from “a very old friend.”: “Most of your readers think that you are everything good about TVism and are the ultimate in FPism and pure in all ways. What your article has done is to plant a great deal of doubt in their minds as to just what you are.... When all this is added to your story of running around in the nude, kissing a man, having him hold you and the other things, no matter what the occasion, I think that a lot of people think you have gone off the deep end. I would think that the GG’s [wives] who read it would all be set back...because you have given them proof that TVs just don’t want to put on a dress to express feminine feeling inside them but really want to go much further, and this is what they fear most” (*Transvestia* #53 October 1968).



Prince's transition was deemed viable because she was divorced, had no young children to support, and was financially stable.<sup>61</sup>

Prince pioneered a way of living her subjective gender identity both in private and in public. While some crossgender identified transvestites followed suit and while others came to identify as transsexuals and obtained surgery, most transvestites remained within the parameters of periodic crossdressing. Eventually, by the end of the 1970s, "transvestite" and all variations of the term "femmepersonator" would become nearly obsolete and replaced by the term "cross-dresser." Today, the pages of *Transvestia* document a past era of transgender history and taxonomic contestation when 'trans' identities were being constructed and fought over on the ground level by a variety of gender variant individuals and groups, many of which would help shape and fill the category of "transgender" in the 1990s. *Transvestia*, then, represents a major battlefield in the early gender wars that were fought among the overlapping cultures of gender variance that emerged in postwar America. In this chapter, I have highlighted one ranking system—a hierarchy of stigmatization that *Transvestia*'s letter and history writers collectively erected within its pages and across the cultural imaginary it spawned. *Transvestia*'s crossdressers and the constituents of other gender subcultures would continue to use print and other media to mark, fashion, parse out, and contest their

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<sup>61</sup> While a few scholars have credited Prince with coining the term, transgenderist, they have not pinpointed the exact source location. At the Western Regional Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in Santa Barbara, California in June of 1978, Prince read "The Transcendents or Trans People," which was later reprinted in *Transvestia*. This is the earliest place in print that I have uncovered Prince's use of "transgenderist." The main points of this paper was to distinguish between sex and gender, to illustrate how individuals have historically and sociologically become gendered in a binary system, and to describe three classes of people who transcend the gender binary: transvestites, transgenderists, and transsexuals. Through more recent archival research, I have uncovered earlier references to "transgenderist" made in print in 1976 by the editors of a magazine called the *Journal of Male Feminism* and by crossgender activist Adriadne Kane in an interview with the *Gay Community News*. These earlier references bring me to question if Prince was the actual originator of this term.

gendered identities, desires, and practices long after Prince retired as editor in 1979. In this chapter, I have also delineated a range of identities and identifications featured on the magazine's spectrum of gender variance. In the next chapter, I consider the codes of dress and conduct created by the spectrum's most prominent inhabitants—the periodic crossdressers who adhered to the tenets of femmepersonation. This was the group that had, quite literally, the most visible presence in the magazine, as it was their photos that Prince published to further wage a politics of respectability.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “A WOMAN IS A WOMAN IS A WOMAN”

“At least it confirms what we all have suspected, that ‘genuine’ girls are almost as phony as TVs!”<sup>1</sup>

“Marcia,” a crossdresser from the Midwest, looked forward to the monthly beauty kits he received as a member of the World of Beauty Club. A kit containing fragrances, creams, soaps, and other beauty products arrived each month at his apartment, the only place (we learn in his letter to *Transvestia*) where “Marcia gets to assert herself.” Only occasionally could he attend Phi Pi Epsilon parties and socials as his feminine persona. For as long as Marcia could remember he had dreamed of wearing women’s clothing. He had a particular fascination with wearing soft, sheer, and beautiful lingerie and other “items of intimate feminine apparel.” However, Maria was not just interested in wearing women’s undergarments for that “feeling” that he said was “very difficult to explain.” More than anything, he wanted to perfect an authentic feminine appearance from head to toe. To achieve this goal, he developed several innovative methods to improve his feminine look and image. For example, using strips of foam rubber, he crafted an elaborate “special effect” that made his thin legs and narrow hips look fuller and rounder. “I am constantly striving to make Marcia a better and more convincing looking woman,”

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Niles in his review of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in *Transvestia* #31 (February 1965).

he said. “I’m constantly striving to better my voice, my walk, [and] all my actions around the apartment; I’m slowly learning how to eat and drink without ruining [my] lipstick.”<sup>1</sup>

To be or to become a woman entailed appropriating the cultural accouterments and adopting the mannerisms that socially and culturally signified a ‘woman’ during that era. The heterosexual transvestites who comprised *Transvestia*’s gender community and who gravitated around Phi Pi Epsilon typically subscribed to middle-class notions of respectability and disliked being associated with other groups that practiced crossdressing. In this respect, they developed their femme-selves through a regulatory culture of dress and strict codes of conduct. In their letters to the editor and life histories, *Transvestia*’s crossdressers created an on-going discourse and social script on appropriate and inappropriate ways to dress, behave, and comport. Fashion and conduct, therefore, represented the central fronts in which the magazine’s columnists and readers waged a politics of respectability against drag queens and fetishistic crossdressers.

The textual constructions of self in *Transvestia* provided the captions to a fascinating visual archive of photographic presentations of self that Prince published in the magazine. To examine the conduct guidelines and dress codes and these photographs, I divide this chapter into three parts. In Part One, as one way of entry into the magazine’s fashion and behavioral discourse, I spotlight *Transvestia*’s most prominent fashion

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<sup>1</sup> *Transvestia* #68 (1971) letter from Marcia.

columnist, Susanna Valenti, whom I will refer to as Susanna.<sup>1</sup> Susanna, who coined the metaphor of “the girl-within,” prescribed tasteful, non-sexualized styles of dress and morally upright conduct for those who aspired to the level of femmepersonation in their private activities and public excursions. Fashioning the right look in order to “pass” as an anatomical woman on the street was of upmost importance for crossdressers who ventured outside the home. “Passing” not only garnered higher self-esteem but also ensured greater protection from the risks associated with detection, if it worked. I therefore take a brief detour to discuss transvestites’ stories of passing and some of the horror stories that resulted from *not* passing.

In Part Two, I discuss how that it appears that most readers of *Transvestia* complied with and reaffirmed the codes and guidelines promoted by Susanna and by the magazine. However, I also illustrate the lively debates that ensued over fashion and behavior with examples from the histories and letters Prince published from readers who challenged or rejected the magazine and community’s advice and fashion protocol. In Part Two, I will also examine the tension between a determined push for ‘heteronormativity’ and the subdued homo-eroticisms that pervade some writers’ narratives of passing.

For Part Three, I have searched *Transvestia*’s visual archive for the most prevalent renditions of femininity. The magazine’s photographic self-portraiture featured the following postwar icons of middle to high class white femininity: the suburban housewife, the girl next door, the lady of leisure, the well-bred lady, the bourgeois

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<sup>1</sup> I break convention and refer to Susanna Valenti as Susanna throughout this chapter and elsewhere. Using her last name of “Valenti” simply did not sound or seem right. Unlike Prince, Susanna was not a public figure. To her friends and readership, she was known as Susanna. I also use feminine pronouns to refer to Susanna. In her final columns in 1969, Susanna indicated that she was planning to live full-time as a woman, as Prince did a year prior. In an appendix, I discuss more about Susanna’s life, theories, and contributions.

matron, and the pin-up bombshell. These constructions of traditional models of white femininity raise interesting questions about the relationship between transvestism and fantasy, feminism, and women's changing roles in postwar America, and I will answer some of them in this section. In all, this chapter begins the work of excavating this visual archive's larger social, cultural, and historical meanings.<sup>2</sup>

### Part 1: Susanna Valenti—Fashion Watchdog

I guess I'm old fashioned enough to still dream of feminine women and masculine men—to think that the outer-girl we create is the indispensable container from which our heart emits all the feelings that—as men—we have not been able, nor been permitted to express.<sup>3</sup>

Susanna Valenti was a popular personality within a vibrant subculture of male crossdressers in the New York City area and among the national readership of *Transvestia* magazine. Between 1960 and 1970, she wrote an opinion column entitled “Susanna Says” for Prince's magazine. The fifty-three columns Susanna contributed featured fashion advice, behavioral guidelines, gossip tidbits, personal experience stories, and philosophical musings on the nature, causes, and culture of heterosexual transvestism. While she could be very opinionated at times, her column carried a carefree tone that refreshingly countered Prince's more pedantic, intellectual style. This is not to

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<sup>2</sup> Classic theories on photography include, Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); and Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989). For an excellent anthology of critical readings on photography see, Richard Bolton, Ed. *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). A substantial amount of work has been done on photography and race. See, Deborah Willis, Ed. *Picturing Us: African-American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000); Analyses of family photographs abound. One of the best is Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #61 (February 1970).

suggest that Susanna's column lacked an intellectual dimension. In fact, many of the columns challenged medical expertise and theorized about various aspects of crossdressing and thus packed an analytical punch equal to Prince's analyses of these subjects.

Along with Prince, Susanna was a prominent voice and critic amidst the contestation that erupted among *Transvestia*'s readership over proper and improper ways to dress and behave. In her columns, Susanna perpetuated the scrutinizing culture of criticism that became a trademark of the subculture that formed around *Transvestia*. In particular, "Susanna Says" offered an incisive examination of the second "femme-personality" that she and other adherents of dual personality expression believed was created as one practiced the art of crossdressing and improved in the skill of behaving femininely. After all, it was Susanna who coined the apt metaphor of the "girl within" to describe the idea of a transvestite man having a second self—a buried feminine personality that, with desire and practice, could be developed into a three dimensional embodiment or persona. Along with Prince, she strongly advocated keeping each personality separate and distinct from the other. "If we allow 'him' to express himself through 'her,'" Susanna contended, "then we are going to create a horrible caricature which is neither fish nor fowl."

Or should 'she' sneak in some of her traits when 'he' is around, I'm afraid his reputation won't be worth a plug nickel around the office. That is why, whether it is scientifically correct or not, for purely practical purposes, I find it most helpful to think and talk as if two different entities were occupying one single body.... It is very useful as a practical tool, as a guide, to prevent Susanna from being nothing but a 'man in skirts.'<sup>4</sup>

According to Susanna, not only did one's femme-self have to be distinct from the masculine self, it needed to be cultivated and improved continually. "Let us, for heaven's

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<sup>4</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #19 (February 1963).

sake, strive to forge a nice, clean cut, real person out of ‘the girl-within.’ Let’s give her a personality of her own. If possible, let’s give her even different tastes than those of ‘the guy within.’”<sup>5</sup> Authentic expression of womanhood was the central component of Susanna’s ideology. She claimed that “one of the nicest compliments a TV can get from a non-TV is not that she looks beautiful or pretty (the friend is probably lying) but that she looks real” [Her emphasis].<sup>6</sup> Susanna considered posture, gestures, walk, and voice inflection the four biggest challenges for men who attempted to emulate women. Through practice and professional lessons, Susanna tried to improve in these areas, and she implored her readership to strive for realness and authenticity, as well. “The real fun about being a TV,” she proclaimed, “is in the CONSTANT IMPROVING.”<sup>7</sup>

Initially, Susanna resisted Prince’s attempts to draw semantic lines around the desired readership. At the beginning of her tenure as fashion and gossip columnist, Susanna, for the most part, recognized the variety, fluidity, and complexity of styles that comprised the transvestite category. “TV is not a static state of mind,” she argued in her November 1960 column. “Like everything human, it moves, sometimes forward sometimes backward, but it does not stay the same. This applies to the intensity of the desire to dress, its frequency, and the forms it takes regarding preferences as to styles, make-up, lingerie, hairdo and even as to activities we like to engage in.” Not only did Susanna acknowledge transvestism’s multiplicity, she also evoked a non-judgmental attitude of its

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #36 (December 1965).

<sup>7</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #19 (February 1963). Susanna would offer her readers advice and many tips on how to look and be authentically feminine. For example: “I only see swishing as a tool with which we can learn to break long entrenched masculine movements, poses and habits. Before you embark in social life as a TV, learn to swish—exaggerate feminine mannerisms to break the masculine patterns. Later, you’ll be surprised how easily you’ll drop back to that happy medium that tells a lady from a tramp or a ‘drag queen’” (“Susanna Says” in #55 February 1969).



assortment when she followed these statements with the assertion that transvestism “grows in any of many directions and there are constant subtle changes in the inclinations of every TV I’ve met including myself.” Yet, the relaxed tone of her fashion advice would take a more critical turn two years later. Although she would never adopt the terms “Femmepersonator” or “FP” into her vocabulary, two events pushed Susanna into becoming an enthusiastic watchdog that guarded the parameters of the identity category in respect to aesthetics, dressing practices, style, and behavior.<sup>8</sup>

The first event occurred in 1961 when Susanna became indirectly mired in a postal obscenity investigation. That ordeal would force her to close ranks to a greater degree and issue demeaning remarks to those crossdressers whom she perceived as disreputable types. Susanna did not write in great detail of the events that led to her summons by postal officials. What she did tell her readership was that two of her former pen pals had been charged with mailing obscene material through the mail. In the course of the investigation, Susanna’s name “came up,” and she was called in for an interview with two postal inspectors. What Susanna described about the interview and the lesson she imparted to her readers illustrate the politics of respectability waged by many heterosexual transvestites, even those who were open-minded as she generally was:

I did my best to explain what we [heterosexual transvestites] are and how we feel and how utterly opposed we are to those practices which can only perpetuate the social antagonism towards TVism. I feel the need here to beg all TVs to immediately report to their postal inspectors any violation of our postal laws. We have to weed out the undesirable element to keep our sorority clean as I’m sure every sincere TV wants.... I have always avoided entering into correspondence with anyone who has begun to send out feelers into muddy paths. So be yourselves, be discreet, and keep those pretty skirts clean.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #6 (November 1960).

<sup>9</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #8 (March 1961).

Susanna came to share many of Prince's views: the desire for respectability and disassociation from homosexuals, transsexuals, and fetishists. Susanna wanted to help make heterosexual crossdressing a dignified practice and divorce it from its medical, cultural, and legal associations with deviant sexuality. She defended crossdressing against the charge that it was done merely for sexual gratification. She acknowledged that while a sexual component existed, transvestism entailed a way of life, an avenue for relaxation, and a way to escape from the pressures of social manhood more so than it represented a form of erotic expression. "You are in the midst of a fascinating adventure" Susanna contended, "and breathing life into a totally new individual, teaching her (or allowing her) to do new things. All the facets that make human beings are now at play—social, intellectual, physical, aesthetic. They are all finding new channels for expression."<sup>10</sup>

The second event that led Susanna to jump on Prince's taxonomic bandwagon was the famed October 1962 "convention" of around seventy transvestites, several wives, and a few doctors / sexologists at Susanna's resort property in Hunter, a town in the Catskills of upstate New York. Susanna and her wife, Marie, operated the 150 acre "Chevalier D'Eon Resort" during the summer season for a marginal profit. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, they hosted small numbers of transvestite friends on weekends during the off-season. The resort was a self-described "TV haven"—a place where transvestites and their wives could visit and be completely free to crossdress around the resort grounds. In her columns, Susanna extended an invitation to her readers to visit the resort. She suggested that if enough transvestites could get together at the same time, then they could hold classes on make-up, sewing, dancing, and poise. Many adventures were had by those who managed to find their way to the resort. The stories recounted by Susanna and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

her guests in *Transvestia* indicate that it provided a space for self-expression for many of those who visited. The resort inspired self-definition and created a sense of normalcy for its guests.

In 1962, Susanna hosted a large convention of transvestites on her resort grounds during a cold weekend in October. In their respective columns, Susanna and Prince wrote about the momentous affair and commented on the guests, several of which did not fit the respectable mold promoted by the magazine. One crossdresser, in particular, evoked the ire of both of them. According to Susanna, this guest did not bother shaving and wore a simple knee-length night gown. But what really shocked and infuriated her was when this lazy crossdresser lit up a cigar. The sight of so many motley renditions of femininity focused Susanna and Prince's attention on the fact that variety was more the norm of transvestism than previously realized or acknowledged. The convention weekend, then, was not only a defining moment in the history of heterosexual transvestism, it became the second event that explains Susanna's move towards policing the lines of respectability drawn around the magazine's model of "true transvestism" or "femme impersonation." The weekend's assorted group of participants compelled Susanna, along with Prince, to close ranks to an even greater degree. Following the retreat weekend, Susanna unleashed a series of hard-hitting columns centered on themes of self-improvement, including dressing tips and guidelines on appropriate conduct and behavior. Susanna would become increasingly annoyed by crossdressers who did not try to look and act the part of a proper woman. "What I can't understand," she complained, "is that we all know what we should try to achieve. We know how vital proper posture, gestures, walk, and voice inflection are." For Susanna, it was not enough just to wear women's clothes, make-up, and a wig.

It was the cultivation of “inner femininity” that distinguished a true transvestite from drag queens and clothing fetishists.<sup>11</sup>

But what about the cigar-smoking crossdresser at the convention and other transvestites who dressed completely but who did not subscribe to the girl-within philosophy and who did not aspire to enact “authentic” and “sincere” presentations of femininity? As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the magazine’s columnists, Sheila Niles, coined a new term in 1968 to describe those transvestites who dress completely but do not strive to improve their look or behave femininely. According to Niles, these individuals were really fetishists; however, instead of one or two articles of clothing, they ‘got their kicks’ from wearing an entire outfit, sometimes even with make-up and a wig. The term Niles created for these folks was “whole girl fetishist.” The whole girl fetishist classification amounted to semantically branding and symbolically distancing those transvestites who, for whatever reason, did not cultivate a feminine persona to match their outer appearance. By Susanna’s own estimates, the overwhelming majority of transvestites were, at best, whole girl fetishists. She argued that this disreputable majority may have gone beyond the hosiery and lingerie phase or the high

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<sup>11</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #19 (Feb. 1963). In the same issue, Prince also weighed in on the matter of proper dressing practices and behavioral comportment in her “Virgin Views” column: “One may like femmeattire and wear it well, but if he does not act the woman portrayed, that is really bring her to life to the best of his ability, he remains a man in woman’s clothes, which is to say a male cross dresser. The biggest jar I had at the gathering [the October convention] was the realization of how few made any attempt to change their voices—not to a simpering falsetto, but merely to a slightly higher but much softer way of speaking. It is not difficult to do and makes the femmeself so much more real.... In the beginning none of us is a real femmeperson, but as we live longer and accumulate a little history or femmexperience, the ‘girl within,’ as Susanna calls her, begins to emerge as a personality in her own right. While she has to use her brother’s physical body to move around in, there is no reason why any more of his behavior patterns and character traits than necessary should be carried over. The real strength and beauty of FemmePersonation lies in the ability of the individual to open the door to a new attitude toward life, to express another part of the totality of human experience, to feel a distinct difference between the femmeself and the everyday man-at-work self. This cannot very well be done if the femmeself is going to talk with his voice, walk with his gait, smoke his cigars, and argue in his ways about things interesting to him. This is a transvestite only, a cross-dressed male, not a new feminine personality.”

heel fixation of the typical fetishist, but they had really only extended their fetishistic desires to include the complete wardrobe with its accessories. Susanna described whole girl fetishists as crude individuals who did not try to speak more softly or modify their mannerisms and bodily movements in a more feminine way. Susanna remarked that she would spare this group her condemnation if they would remain behind locked doors. However, she believed that they did go out in public, and she offered the following harsh words in her column to those whole girl fetishists who made a public spectacle of themselves:

The WGF [whole girl fetishist] does not—repeat—does not help our common cause when he carries his WGF attitude into social circles integrated by non-TV's. The pipe smoking, swearing, and bread devouring WGF can create the same type of shock with his incongruous behavior as the shock we get when someone draws a moustache on a portrait of Sophia Loren.... And if the WGF cannot or simply does not feel like modifying his behavior to match his appearance, then my mostly friendly advice is stay behind your locked doors and enjoy your appearance to your heart's content.... But if you feel lonely and experience the need to meet others—at that very moment you must make up your mind that you are entering into a social commitment which demands from you a great deal more than just being made-up and wearing a dress.<sup>12</sup>

This idea of entering into a social commitment was a key articulation of a rapidly forming group consciousness among *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon's community of heterosexual transvestites, one that demanded accountability and respectability for the good of group security and public image.

Transvestites who practiced femmepersonation often policed the boundaries of their group and socially managed the stigma of crossdressing by keeping other members in check in subtle and not so subtle ways. Susanna used the gossip function of her column to admonish 'unruly' TVs who misbehaved in some manner that threatened the security or reputation of the entire group. For example, the following gossip tidbit Susanna divulged

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<sup>12</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #55 (February 1969).

in her column functioned to keep the transgressor in line and within the bounds of discretion and good taste:

New York TV's are talking about a girl who finally managed to get permission at home to indulge and how she is overdoing it, drives around dressed up all over the place, while the truth of the matter is that she does not pass half as well as she thinks she does. There's danger there, gal! You are courting disaster. The same can be said about other friends who are pushing their luck just a bit too far. Going around dressed is wonderful, but please more discretion!"<sup>13</sup>

The warning Susanna issued about crossdressing in public warrants a brief detour into a discussion of transvestites' public excursions and the importance they ascribed to successfully "passing."

#### Public Excursions and Passing Adventures

Many transvestites found self-expression through ritualized acts, routines, and daily patterns that they associated with the world of femininity. These performative acts and routines reinforced for them a sense of authenticity. While most transvestites remained in what they referred to as the "locked-room stage," meaning that they crossdressed and carried out their routines secretly in their homes or in motels, a sizeable number ventured out in public, even into traditionally feminine environs such as beauty salons. It was on these public excursions, especially, where a kind of Butlerian logic surrounding a crossdresser's performances of femininity—"I am a feminine being because I am doing femininity"—legitimated his public appearance in the guise of a woman and enabled his mobility across the femininely gendered spaces of a city or town. Interestingly, the thrill of 'trespassing' coexisted with a deep sense of 'this is where I belong.' Public outings usually came about in stages, beginning with a quick but risky and "thrilling" walk

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<sup>13</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965).

around the neighborhood block at night. But, as one crossdresser noted, “Confidence...leads to adventures,” and many transvestites progressed to other kinds of public outings, including driving around town, window shopping, riding the bus, and eating out.<sup>14</sup>

For example, a crossdresser named “Joyce” described how he gradually developed confidence from his public excursions. “I slowly graduated to window shopping,” he said, “and later on to going into restaurants to eat. Over the next four years, I kept increasing my activities as a woman, until I was spending my complete weekends dressed as a woman around the house and going out shopping and sight seeing, enjoying the total weekend as a woman. I was even starting to think femininely when I dressed.” For Joyce, the ultimate validating experience came when he visited a salon to get his hair done for the first time. “I realized that, at long last, I was a woman among women and on their own grounds.”<sup>15</sup> The experience Joyce described of entering and inhabiting a sacred feminine space is what I refer to as a passing story. Many of *Transvestia*’s other letter and history writers proudly related stories of passing in public as the other gender without detection. Similar to Joyce, “Sharon” successfully passed at a women’s beauty salon in New Orleans in the summer of 1964. Dressed in a plain white blouse and shorts, he had a stylist shampoo and set his hair. Sharon wrote:

While I was under the dryer, several girls came in the shop and none gave me more than a second glance. But when [the stylist] was combing out my hair a girl came in to make an appointment and stood watching her work on me. Finally the girl said, ‘I’d like you to fix my hair just like you’re doing hers.’ I was in seventh

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<sup>14</sup> *Transvestia* #53 (October 1968)

<sup>15</sup> “It Can Be Done” in *Transvestia* #55 (February 1969)

heaven! She not only accepted me as a girl despite my lack of a bust and no make-up, but she actually wanted her hair to look like mine.<sup>16</sup>

As is evident from Joyce and Sharon's descriptions, to pass as a 'real' woman in public excursions and in social interactions with non-transvestites bolstered a crossdresser's confidence in his appearance and ensured him that the work he had put into perfecting his feminine look and comportment had paid off. Furthermore, beyond the "thrill" of fooling straight society, passing also legitimized a sense that many crossdressers harbored of having a feminine gender orientation or identity. For these transvestites, to have these feelings socially validated was immensely satisfying.

Of course, crossdressers risked exposure no matter how skillfully they created a feminine appearance and no matter how carefully they navigated public spaces. The biggest risk and fear was getting arrested. Arrests usually occurred for breaking some antiquated law about masquerading as a woman. There was a saying in the transvestite subculture: "If you're read—you're dead." This expression may have reflected a speaker's paranoia more than it did his actual experiences. Most arrests in the pre-Stonewall era were of street queens. Less than a handful of *Transvestia*'s writers reported coercive, humiliating, or intrusive confrontations with law enforcement officials. In the case with heterosexual transvestites, it seems that most of their confrontations with law enforcement officials came from getting pulled over in their vehicles as opposed to being stopped on the sidewalk or in a store or caught in a police raid at a bar. It was considered risky to drive while crossdressed, but many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers did so anyway

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<sup>16</sup> "Femme Highlights" in *Transvestia* #30 (December 1964).



on their way to and from Phi Pi Epsilon chapter events or just for the thrill of driving while dressed as a woman.<sup>17</sup>

Most of those who described encounters with police reported positive experiences, narrow and skillful escapes from being detected, or indifference or tolerance on the part of law enforcement officials. For example, “Genevieve” crossdressed and ventured out in other cities about once a month. His routine: “I usually find some excuse to drive to another city overnight. There I check into a motel, transform into a woman and spend the evening having a thrilling time changing costumes, going out window shopping, etc.” Genevieve claimed to have been served in restaurants, mingled in crowds, and attended movies without being suspected. Below is Genevieve’s account of his preparations and his encounter with a police officer:

Before going out in public dressed, I take extreme care in ‘the conversion process’ to avoid being exposed as a man. My only encounter with the police was two years ago, and then not because they suspected the truth about my sex. They stopped my car and gave the excuse they thought I was a prostitute driving around in search of business. I promptly admitted I was a male and bluffed them with a story about being on my way home from a performance as a female impersonator. After checking to see if by chance I was a ‘wanted person’ by radio, they allowed me to go with a warning to go straight home.<sup>18</sup>

A number of others used the female impersonator excuse in their confrontations with police, perhaps the only time they would dare express kinship with that repudiated other.

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<sup>17</sup> The expression “If you’re read—you’re dead” was used by a crossdresser named Pegie Val Addair who had been arrested twice for crossdressing. He contributed a column about what to carry and not to carry when crossdressing in public, as well as other cautionary tips and warnings. See, “Femme Identification” in *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965). Pegie wrote about his harrowing and humiliating three day harassment by cops at a Midwestern police station in another crossdressing magazine published in New York City. See “Arrest without Trial” in *Turnabout* #5 (Spring 1965). In *Turnabout* #4 (1964), the editor published an informative article listing the “Do’s and Don’ts” if one were arrested. See, “Transvestism and the Law: How to Keep an Arrest from Becoming a Disaster.”

<sup>18</sup> Untitled history in *Transvestia* #6 (November 1960).

To be sure, some of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers did have bad experiences with law enforcement and suffered severe consequences. "Carol" [New York], for instance, was not as fortunate as Genevieve in his encounter with the police. He was arrested in Greenwich Village on Nov. 10, 1951. He was twenty years of age and accompanied by two friends on their way to a party. He did not explain why he was the only person in his group arrested but did provide the following chilling description of the ordeal:

It was while walking on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street that a policeman...stopped me and proceeded to arrest me. I was taken to the local stationhouse where I was booked, and then to another stationhouse where I was photographed and fingerprinted. After that I was taken to still another station where I was held for the night until morning court. I remember that when I was taken to the 3<sup>rd</sup> station, the Sergeant on duty at the desk sought to correct the accompanying detectives for bringing a girl to be held at that station, until he was informed of the facts. It proved to be the only humorous moment in the entire situation. I spent the entire night in a small and dark cell. The next morning, I was taken to court where I appeared before the judge still dressed as a young girl of 20. In my ignorance and fright I entered a plea of guilty and was to be held in lieu of \$200 bail until I came up for sentencing on November 19, 1951. Over a week later, I was then taken to another part of the building known as 'the tanks' where I had to undress and was given clean (but ragged) male attire and told to put my feminine clothing in a bag. After that I was taken to still another part of the building where I had to shower and remove the last vestiges of make-up, which were still on my face. After the shower, I was taken to a cell block reserved for homosexuals, even though I had tried to explain that I was not a homosexual. In retrospect, this was, perhaps, the lesser of two evils, as I am sure that if I had been put in with the run-of-the-mill prisoners, I would have eventually left the place in a rather bruised condition. At about 10 p.m., after I had been in custody about 24 hours, a guard opened the door of my cell to tell me that I was going home. My friend Ray had bailed me out. At court on the sentencing date I received a suspended sentence of 30 days. This episode cooled my desire to dress temporarily. I did not go to any more parties for the rest of that year.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, "Vikki" [Illinois] experienced a confrontation with the police that resulted in an arrest and, for him, an honorable discharge from the armed services. He and his wife were living off-base in a local city. During early mornings, he would sometimes crossdress and walk around the city streets. Here is his account of one fateful morning:

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<sup>19</sup> "History of Carol" in *Transvestia* #33 (June 1965).

There I was right in the middle of the business district, all alone at 4:30 a.m., strutting along the street in sweater, scarf, skirt, and four-inch spike heels. I had stopped to observe a window display when a local police car stopped for a traffic light. Immediately I froze. I couldn't think of what to do. Of all things, I put one hand to the side of my face and began walking on. This must certainly have been a no-no because the police began tailing me. After about a block they stopped and one got out and began approaching me. I thought, 'Oh, hell. I've had it now.' He was very polite when he said, 'Ma'am, is there anything wrong, do you feel sick?' I said, in a very shaky voice, 'No, sir, I'm not a ma'am.' The next couple of minutes seemed like ages but this soon came to a screeching halt when he said, 'If you're not a woman, would you please come with me to the station?' Naturally, I obliged. Once inside the station house all pertinent information was exchanged and my first sergeant at the base was notified. While waiting for him I talked to the officer about what would happen to me. They didn't know what the service would do but they said all that the police could do was charge me with disturbing the peace. It didn't take long to ascertain the military point of view toward transvestites within their number. In less than two weeks I was on my way back to the Midwest with full pay and an honorable discharge.<sup>20</sup>

An arrest usually caused a crossdresser to re-evaluate his transvestism and often in a manner that was detrimental to his crossdressing practices. Vickki, for example, suppressed his desires for twelve years after his arrest. Public excursions were risky but most transvestites believed they could pull them off successfully if they displayed confidence and behaved appropriately. "Being unsure of one's appearance or actions," explained "Jo Anne" in his life history, "is the easiest way I know of to be detected. As long as I conduct myself in such a way as not to attract any undue attention I will never, I hope, have any consequences to suffer."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The Bitter and the Sweet" in *Transvestia* #87 (1976).

<sup>21</sup> "Mardi Gras" in *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964). I asked one of my informants, Barbara, in an e-mail question about the importance of passing and authenticity in TV culture. I asked if "passing" carried any deeper, more psychological meanings. Or was it just a fun game and a thrilling act to fool society? Barbara responded: "I can't speak for the others but for me, at least after childhood, it was not a game. It was as close as I could come to BEING female, and that's how I wanted people to think of me. Which is to say I never thought of myself as 'fooling' people—I simply wanted them to accept me as a woman and treat me accordingly. Thus for me authenticity was always the goal, and still is. It's also something I look for in other TGs, whether they look glamorous or not. For me the question is usually do they look real?"

Returning back to the *Transvestia*'s most prominent spokesperson for authentic representation and respectable, "lady-like" deportment, Susanna Valenti was very much concerned with the image crossdressers projected to non-transvestites and to the public at large. "What makes a TV pleasant company for others AND ESPECIALLY FOR NON-TV'S is his honest exposure of that femininity he carries within his heart....and femininity is sweet, serene, quiet, lady-like. We cannot make a mockery of that femininity; we must not be a vicious cartoon—grotesque and monstrous." For Susanna, gaining acceptance and understanding from non-TVs was a delicate process that involved projecting a respectable and sincere expression of femininity. "We have to 'baby' them into accepting us and understanding what we have gone through. We want to show them the feminine side of our personality and convince them that this side is real, is true, and is a sincere form of expression." With her calls and pleas for respectable rendition and deportment, Susanna helped shape the contours of heterosexual transvestism, specifically the dual personality mode of expression that Prince had named femmepersonation.<sup>22</sup>

Having a recurring column in *Transvestia* certainly afforded Susanna a huge platform to issue her pleas for respectability, sincerity, discretion, and good taste. Although it is difficult to measure exactly the power "Susanna Says" may have exerted over readers' choices in fashion, style, and conduct, ample evidence from their letters and histories show that many of them avidly joined her in policing the boundaries of "true transvestism."

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<sup>22</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963)

## Part 2: Policing Codes of Dress and Conduct

1. Learn make-up. Not too much sophistication, though. 2. Make the most of a good figure or learn to camouflage. Study color, style, fit, texture—right for YOU. 3. A styled, well fitting, real hair wig is a must for public. “Fashion” wigs are usually very obvious. 4. Poise will add volumes to your self-confidence. The book-on-the-head routine works. 5. Become a “Method” actor (pardon, actress). Think female. Feel the part. After all, YOU SHOULD! 6. A lady doesn’t stay out late alone, and neither should a TV. We’re trying to emulate the BEST, not the WORST.<sup>23</sup>

The respectable codes of dress and conduct that became trademarks of *Transvestia*’s gender community were collectively constructed, as most all of *Transvestia*’s writers offered advice and issued proscriptions in their letters and histories. For example, “Myrtle” compared the clothing styles of transvestites with the drag queens he saw pictured in drag magazines such as *Female Imitators* and *Female Mimics* :

These magazines deal with professionals whose manner of dressing is essentially for the stage.... As a life-long TV, I have never dressed in such elaborate outfits, and I doubt if there is a genuine TV among them all.... I think it is foolish—though a common mistake with some TV beginners, to wear clothes that are too colorful or conspicuous. I content myself with sober colors and average style, and consequently pass in the crowd without ever attracting attention to myself. I admit I make an exception in the case of my “undies.” My panties, bra and slip must have all the frills, flounces, lace and bows possible....

With his emphasis on respectability and inconspicuousness, Myrtle articulated a style of self-presentation that placed him safely within the parameters of femmepersonation. He demonstrated a preference most femmepersonators had for conservative fashions. He drew a sharp line between his realistic look and the flashy, outlandish style carried out by drag queens and professional female impersonators. Myrtle repeated an assumption that was shared among many transvestites of his ‘caliber’ that, in order to pass as a woman in public, one had to refrain from wearing flamboyant clothing. They believed that donning flashy clothing and even wearing heavy make-up in public would surely expose a man

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Cathy (Pennsylvania) to Virginia Prince in *Transvestia* #33 (June 1965).

dressed as a lady. For most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers, passing entailed looking "real." Therefore, they generally emulated the looks of everyday women.<sup>24</sup>

On another subject, Myrtle's admission to 'sexing it up' with his underwear did not place him outside the norm of femmepersonation. Myrtle and others believed that wearing and enjoying sexy lingerie and other undergarments enhanced and authenticated their experience of femininity. They presumed that real girls wore and enjoyed soft and frilly "underthings," as well. Still, to ward off any possibility that readers might derive erotic meanings from his statements or associate him with flashy drag queens, Myrtle immediately qualified his confession by adding, "but I see that these [his sexy underwear] are covered by pretty but practical frocks, skirts, blouses, twin-sets, etc."<sup>25</sup>

One important issue that Myrtle and others acknowledged concerned the tension between authentic representation of womanhood versus fantasy or caricature. "Brenda" spoke of this difference with a reference to crossdressers who wear outrageous styles:

How many present day women wear such things? This, though it may be an element of TV, is of course, a fetish and not really associated with reality.... If you can't walk down the street of a moderate sized city at 2:30 in the afternoon in clothes that attract attention only for their good taste, then you're adding something to TVism which I don't feel belongs....I feel true TV apparel is for real, every day use. Sweaters, blouses, skirts, day and cocktail dresses, plain heels and even flats (ugh) should be in the wardrobe....<sup>26</sup>

As Brenda's letter highlighted, most individuals within this subculture who identified as true transvestites or femmepersonators were invested in a conventional style of

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<sup>24</sup> There were exceptions, of course. For example, my informant Katherine Cummings enjoyed dressing in sexy, revealing fashions.

<sup>25</sup> *Transvestia* # 46 (August 1967).

<sup>26</sup> *Transvestia* # 7 (January 1961). The "ugh" that Brenda used to express his dislike for wearing flats is interesting. Just as some women and most drag queens bore the discomfort of wearing high heels, corsets, and other items to look glamorous, Brenda and perhaps other transvestites made do with unglamorous items in order to meet their standard of looking "real."

femininity. To police the aesthetic boundaries of this group, to enhance the realness of their renditions of femininity, and to regulate behavioral deviance, *Transvestia*'s writers offered fashion and conduct advice that signaled their preference for these older styles and conventional models of femininity.

With respect to convention and fashion, nothing more infuriated Susanna (and many other crossdressers) than the increasing tendency of those in her social circle to wear slacks, pants, pedal-pushers, and knee-length shorts. Susanna acknowledged that genuine women wore these items, so it was not a matter of authenticity but rather a question of aesthetics. She believed that these clothes looked atrocious on transvestites. "I say, why copy GG's [genetic girls] in their attempts to imitate men...let's copy them at their best, not at their worst."<sup>27</sup> As is evident by this statement, Susanna's displeasure also betrayed her distaste for these masculine fashions being worn by anatomical women, as well. She contended that a transvestite wearing such clothes represented his unwillingness to let go of his masculinity and fully embrace the femininity he desired. This accusation elicited heated responses from her readers. For example, Wilda [Maryland] wrote in a letter: "Don't think for a minute that I only wear slacks to hang onto my masculine image. I really feel very feminine in them... yet I have some of the prettiest dresses you could want and love them all... Moreover, slacks and capris' are accepted items of feminine apparel and as such, I accept them, and I don't think they look as bad on us as you seem to think they do."<sup>28</sup> Yet, staying true to her preference for traditional feminine fashions and what we now can view as a very masculinist ideal of femininity, Susanna remained adamant, asking "Why should we choose as models the defective GG's? Isn't it better to

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<sup>27</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #42 (December 1966).

<sup>28</sup> *Transvestia* #46 (August 1967).

at least try to emulate the cream of the crop?”<sup>29</sup> She reminded readers that when they go to Phi Pi Epsilon socials and out in public dressed as women they are subjected to an audience, and in the case of transvestite social gatherings, a scrutinizing audience. This dynamic was similar to the scrutiny experienced by female impersonators when performing on stage; except, for crossdressers, the world outside gay bars and tourists clubs served as their stage. Therefore, Susanna continually argued, crossdressers should look and act their best in public settings.

To be sure, Susanna was not the only one within the pages of *Transvestia* to enact a politics of respectability through fashion advice and behavioral guidelines. “Laura” [Ohio] encouraged others to “consciously cultivate the feminine virtues that go so far toward your image!” He also instructed TVs to “be quiet, mannerly, gentle, [and] move gracefully...and above all, think womanly!” Laura explained why the cultivation of ‘inner femininity’ was of utmost importance:

Most FP’s just aren’t endowed with a feminine physique and in-dress are far from pretty. Yet every one of us can develop a really authentic feminine character to compensate for our lack of physical perfection. Make ‘her’ believable by being feminine when in dress....When ‘in dress,’ be all woman; when in trousers, be all man! Never, never mix the two!! If the two personalities are distinctively different and fitting for their respective roles, it is not too difficult for others to accept ‘her’ as a different person from her brother.”<sup>30</sup>

Susanna could not have said it any better. Given the importance placed on behavior, conduct, and fashion, the predominant tendency of most every letter and history writer was to admonish transvestites who stepped out of line in these areas. Many within the pages of *Transvestia* exercised an intense self-scrutiny over matters of dress and bodily

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<sup>29</sup> “Susanna Says” in *Transvestia* #44 (April 1967).

<sup>30</sup> “Who is This Girl Within?” *Femme Forum* #5 (July 1966).



comportment. Most readers who read the magazine's proscriptive advice and corrective guidelines encountered a scrutinizing gaze and measured themselves accordingly.

There were a handful of exceptions. For example, "R.F." [Utah] considered cosmetics burdensome and "time consuming" because correct application techniques required continual practice. Also, he found the dresses adored by most crossdressers "pretty" yet equally burdensome, as feminine clothing was "hard to take care of, too hot during the summer, and takes too long to put on and take off." "Left to my own inclinations," he added, "I favor variety. Once in a while I would go to full costume...but most of the time, comfort, convenience, and my feelings of the moment govern."<sup>31</sup> R.F.'s preference for comfort and convenience over style and careful planning distinguished him from most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers. Prince and Susanna would probably have labeled him a lazy crossdresser or a whole girl fetishist, along the same lines as the cigar-smoking TV at the 1962 October convention.

R.F. was a rare exception to the predominant tendency of *Transvestia*'s writers to admonish crossdressers who stepped out of line in respect to behavior, conduct, and dress. More common was the kind of advice that Helen [Georgia] offered regarding respectable dress: "Of the utmost importance, dress simply and in good taste according to one's age."<sup>32</sup> And Betty [California] represented the wishes of most of those who subscribed to the formal codes of dress and conduct when he advised readers to, "Above all be nice and act like a proper lady if you are fortunate enough to be able to go out in public. Remember any TV's actions reflect on all of us.... Let's not be known by a vulgar

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<sup>31</sup> *Transvestia* #23 (October 1963).

<sup>32</sup> *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).

name or phrase.”<sup>33</sup> With his reminder at the end, Betty revealed an important rationale behind those who encouraged transvestites to dress respectably and behave properly. The deployment and policing of behavioral codes and stylistic guidelines functioned to differentiate *Transvestia*’s writers from the sexual deviants that loomed large in the Cold War imaginary. But, as we shall see, the politics of respectability that was waged through a de-sexualized culture of dress and conduct was laced with ironies, tensions, and contradictions—of an erotic nature.

### Eroticisms

Well, I admit it; I like to pamper my ID. I want to give it all the room it needs to spiral toward the clouds or spin dervishly across the plains. When I am dressed as a woman this happens.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Prince, Susanna, and many readers’ efforts to divorce “true transvestism” from the erotic, sexuality crept into the pages of *Transvestia*, most usually through the recounting of early adolescent crossdressing experiences and through descriptions of clothing, especially undergarments and lingerie. Letter and history writers often provided their physical stats and bodily measurements and described their feminine wardrobes, dressing patterns, and habits in lush, vivid detail. Their detailed descriptions of their feminine clothing reflected the pride they felt for owning a ladies’ wardrobe and perhaps signaled the sensual pleasure they may have experienced describing it in their narratives. “Kathleen” [Rhode Island] proclaimed that “words cannot express the complete

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Better Late Than Never” in *Transvestia* #41 (October 1966).

satisfaction of seeing oneself dressed up in soft and frilly clothes.”<sup>35</sup> “Betty”

[Pennsylvania] described how he always slept “in a lovely nylon nightgown” and was “usually attired in a satin and latex girdle and nylon brassiere with long nylon hose.” He described his panties as “silk bloomerette type with lace trimmed ruffles at the bottom of each leg,” and over this he wore a camisole vest of silk and lace.<sup>36</sup> Certainly *Transvestia*’s writers were not entirely preoccupied with describing only their undergarments. In fact, dozens of letter and history writers who described their feminine wardrobes and dressing practices made no mention of lingerie or underwear. But for those crossdressers who saw fit to describe their slips, bras, girdles, panties, and garter belts, they constructed narratives infused with sexual overtones.<sup>37</sup>

While descriptions of lingerie and undergarments strongly connoted sexuality, most other expressions of eroticism present in the letters and histories were subdued.

*Transvestia*’s crossdressers seldom described the sexual excitement (and very rarely orgasm) induced by the wearing of women’s clothing. Those who wanted to explore the connections between crossdressing and the erotic relied on stock words and phrases that euphemistically signaled sexual arousal. For example, “Marie” [Indiana], in recounting his first crossdressing experience, described the feeling of wearing a dress, wig, and his wife’s panties and undergarments as “wonderfully feminine” and “a pleasant and luxurious feeling.” “The tautly gartered stockings, the slight pull of my bra, the new

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<sup>35</sup> *Transvestia* #3 (May 1960).

<sup>36</sup> *Transvestia* #2 (March 1960).

<sup>37</sup> In the ‘prospectus’ announcing the impending publication of *Turnabout* in 1963, the editor Siobham Fredericks emphasized that his magazine would not air life histories. He derided the annoying tendency of *Transvestia*’s history writers to catalog their wardrobes and describe their measurements. It was a cheap shot since not every history writer did this, and if they did, the descriptions were usually confined to a paragraph or two. Still, Fredericks’ comments point to how prevalent and marked this practice was within the pages of *Transvestia*.

feeling of height in my high heels, and the lightness of my dress were giving me a very feminine feeling.”<sup>38</sup> In his letter, “Darlene” [California] described the sexual excitement and tactile delights caused by that “first feeling of soft undergarments” as a “sensational glow.”<sup>39</sup> “Phyllis” [California] employed the most common euphemistic term—“thrill”—to describe the sensual components of crossdressing. “I have dressed for many years now,” he wrote, “and never fail to get the same thrill from it as I did when I first became a FemmePersonator. I have never had the good fortune to go out in public while dressed in feminine attire. I would love to feel the terrific thrill that such a venture would undoubtedly give me.”<sup>40</sup>

Most of the representations of erotic pleasure and sexual release in their narratives occurred during the recounting of the writer’s first crossdressing experience. Prince seemed to allow sexual expression in letters and histories that recounted these early experiences. She conceded that for a large number of heterosexual transvestites, including herself, initial dressing *did* induce intense erotic pleasure, but that as the years passed, sexual rewards became increasingly less a motivation for crossdressing, particularly if one developed a second gender orientation or persona.

The eroticism and sexuality expressed in the narratives of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers sometimes bordered on the homoerotic. Darlene, the same crossdresser who described the feeling of crossdressing as a “sensational glow,” encountered an interesting conundrum: how should a heterosexual transvestite who successfully passes in public handle the inevitable sexual advances of clueless and even knowing ‘regular’ men. “I have had

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<sup>38</sup> *Transvestia* #22 (August 1963).

<sup>39</sup> *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964).

<sup>40</sup> *Transvestia* #28 (August 1964).

many experiences of dressing up in public,” Darlene said, “and they have been very rewarding. I consider myself a success when two sailors tried to make my acquaintance. But, as I said before, I am happily married and besides have no desire for anything of that sort.”<sup>41</sup> Darlene strongly gestured to his heterosexuality to ward off any dangerous association with homosexuality, a common tactic employed by several other letter and history writers when recounting their passing escapades.

The dilemma, however, was not always an unwelcome one. Interestingly, the ultimate test of one’s ability to pass for a handful of transvestites was garnering the attention, flirtations, and outright sexual solicitations from non-transvestite, heterosexual males. As “Marilyn” [Iowa] explained:

Naturally, any femmepasser is subject to attempted pick-ups by men ‘on the make.’ I have allowed myself to get picked up on two different occasions, just to see what would happen. Those two pick-ups have been among the highlights of my femmexperiences thus far. I found that I really enjoyed having men flatter me and buy me drinks. In the first instance I was picked up by two men in a plush hotel bar. One of the men whispered a suggestion that we retire to my hotel room. I declined on the ground that ‘my husband was up in the room asleep.’ Inwardly, my femmeself was thrilled by his complete acceptance of me as a woman.<sup>42</sup>

Social validation was important to Marilyn, and nothing validated one’s authenticity more than fooling a man “on the make.” Marilyn handled the tension between dressing as a woman and the possibility of having the sexual desires of a (heterosexual) female as the inevitable result of authentic feminine representation. This was also true for “Terry.” In his early forties, Terry [Connecticut] was a classic closeted transvestite, as his wife and four children did not know of his practices. Terry took business trips to New York City, where he would dress in a motel and then go out in public as a woman. He enjoyed these

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<sup>41</sup> *Transvestia* #26 (April 1965).

<sup>42</sup> “A New Start—Another Marilyn” in *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964).

excursions and always appreciated the few occasions when some young man or gentleman attempted to “get acquainted by conversation or cocktails.”<sup>43</sup>

Terry and other crossdressers reasoned that these flirtatious advances that they welcomed were not homosexual encounters but rather authenticating experiences that validated their public executions of femininity. Transvestites who found themselves in these situations purported that they always stopped short of sexual involvement. Most self-identified heterosexual transvestites considered the attention and flirtations from non-transvestite men as unavoidable consequences of successfully passing as women in public. Therefore, what one transvestite wrote, justifying the erotic components of crossdressing, may equally be applied to its underlying homoeroticism: “I don’t disclaim a passion for pretty dresses, the thrill of a soft slip against my skin or a compliment on how pretty I look, but then these are things a **real** woman enjoys” [My emphasis].<sup>44</sup>

Sex, gender, and sexuality are analytically distinct yet overlapping and interwoven phenomena in real life. *Transvestia*’s crossdressers conceptualized these messy linkages in different ways. If the absence of a substantive and frank discourse on eroticism is any indication, most of *Transvestia*’s writers sought to avoid the thorny issue of sexuality or obscure its relationship to anatomy, gender identity, and gender presentation. A few writers, though, tackled the complexity of the sex/gender/sexuality triad and did so in very interesting ways. Take, for example, “Georgette” who ruminated:

You may ask: ‘If you felt that you are a girl, how come you don’t like men as lovers? And if you admit that you do, that makes you a homosexual.’ But does it? Yes, I do like to hug and kiss other true transvestites, and examine their pretty clothes, but this is so to speak, on the understanding that they are girls, not men. However, my real darlings are the dear, dear girls themselves. I can’t answer all

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<sup>43</sup> “My Life as Terry” in *Transvestia* #11 (October 1961).

<sup>44</sup> *Transvestia* #16 (August 1962).

the questions, and that last one seems to be the sixty-four thousand dollar question. And here is another: if I love a girl am I a lesbian? Did I hear anyone suggest that [transvestism] was a simple thing?<sup>45</sup>

Georgette's musings are unique because no other letter or history writer associated transvestism with lesbian desire. This was a curious blind spot, especially on the part of transvestites who harbored a sense of crossgender identification. Given their attempts to unhinge gender (i.e. masculinity) from anatomical sex (i.e. maleness), one wonders how they could possibly render lesbian desire and identity inconsequential or inconceivable in their constructions of self. Or, in other words, how could those with a sense of crossgender identification possibly claim feminine identities but at the same time disregard or fail to imagine an association with lesbian sexual orientation and desire?

One answer has to do with their dependence on heterosexuality to normalize their practices and identifications. Most heterosexual crossdressers simply turned a blind eye to the possibility (and stigma) of lesbian sexual desire, as well as male homosexuality. In most instances, they conveniently allowed their male sexual anatomy to trump their feminine gender orientation and/or presentation. Their logic held that as anatomical males they could not possibly be lesbians because lesbians were anatomical females. (But crossdressers could, of course, freely emulate femininity in spite of their maleness.) Their propensity for heteronormative self and group understanding explains why that in their narratives they refer to wives as "roommates" and "dear friends." Even though they refer to their feminine personae in the third person and utter expressions such as "Barbara's dresses" or "Sally's adventures," they never use the expression "Barbara's wife." Instead, they would say "Barbara's roommate." In this respect, they linguistically erased any context of lesbianism.

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<sup>45</sup> "I Am a Transvestite" by Georgette W. in *Transvestia* #30 (December 1964).

Furthermore, *Transvestia*'s writers disavowed any possibility of a male homosexual context by conceptualizing sexual desire for men as *naturally* springing forth from female-bodied individuals. Obviously, the increasing cultural and social visibility of male homosexuality, the proliferating public discourses about same-sex desire, and the rise of gay liberation created a crisis moment for many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers insofar as they could no longer take their and others' heterosexuality as a given. Georgette, above, was rare because he, at least, posed the question of lesbian desire. Most others twisted the sex/gender/sexuality triad in their favor to avoid the stigma of female and male homosexuality. With these heteronormative rationalizations, then, they divorced the specter of homosexuality from their gender presentations and understandings of self.

A transvestite fashioned identity—a “femme-self”—by acquiring and wearing women's clothing. For those who adhered to most or all of the tenets of femmepersonation, the trappings associated with femininity purportedly served as a means to a more significant end—the expression of a feminine gendered self or “personality” that existed in duality with the masculine self or personality. These textual articulations of femme-identity and constructions of self were visually represented in photographs that Prince published of *Transvestia*'s readers. I now move from this discussion regarding the guidelines around appropriate and inappropriate ways to dress and behave to an analysis of the enactments of femininity featured in *Transvestia*'s photographic self-portraiture. I conclude with a critical interrogation of the models of femininity that circulated within this visual archive, as well as the text.



### Part 3: Renditions of Femininity in the Photographic Self-portraiture

*Transvestia*'s crossdressers constructed identity through the act of dressing like a woman and behaving and feeling feminine. But what models of femininity did the readership emulate in their self-presentations? The dozens of photographs that Prince published of readers in 100 issues of *Transvestia* serve as visual representations of the identity-work carried out by the readers, the raced and classed models of femininity they emulated, and the idealizations of postwar domesticity they valorized. Moreover, the production and consumption of this visual archive of photographs helped constitute *Transvestia*'s gender community in much the same way as did reading and writing letters and histories, a textual / social dynamic that I explored in Chapter One. As historian of race and visual culture Shawn Michelle Smith argues, "...visual culture is not a mere reflection of an imagined community, but one of the sites in which narratives of belonging are produced and propelled."<sup>46</sup>

*Transvestia*'s photographic self-portraiture is historically significant. There were not many pre-Stonewall public or semi-public 'sites' that provided a space for visual representations of 'subaltern' sexual and gender identities to 'freely' circulate. The fact that this 'space' was made by a group of 'deviants' themselves makes it all the more

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<sup>46</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photographing the 'American Negro': Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900" in *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999). For visual culture theory, see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986) and *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994). For works on sexuality, gender, and visual culture, see N. Black and L. Rinder, et al. *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995); P. Horne and R. Lewis, *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and L. Bloom, Ed. *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999). For a study of the visual culture of early Cold War America, see K.A. Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994).

significant and fascinating. I qualify “freely” because it is important to remember that Prince decided which photographs she received would be published in the magazine. It is reasonable to presume that she received photographs that she would not dare publish given her desire to make heterosexual transvestism a respectable practice and challenge cultural discourses portraying crossdressers as sexual deviants. If her added concern with how the cover girl of each issue positively represented the group as a whole is any indication, then she probably freely and frequently censored nonrespectable images. “Many people other than TVs see the front of this magazine,” Prince explained, “and their first impression has much to do with their attitude of acceptance toward us. This is particularly true of wives. This is why I don’t put sexy shots, lingerie shots, ‘skirts-up-to-here’ shots and obvious ‘man-in-woman’s’ clothes pictures in the magazine. I don’t want to give the opposition any more chance than necessary to make snide remarks and take pot shots at us.”<sup>47</sup> Prince issued that statement in 1966. In the first year of *Transvestia*’s publication, however, before the hard push towards creating a respectable medium, she actually published a handful of eroticized photographs, including one displaying a crossdresser bent over the knee of his mistress in preparation for a spanking. With only a small handful of exceptions, most of the photos Prince published reflected an emphasis that she, Susanna Valenti, and others placed on tasteful, respectable, non-eroticized self-presentation and forms of self-display, as those pictured most often emulated traditional femininities. To illustrate these points, I have selected a series of representative photographs from *Transvestia*’s visual archive and placed them in an appendix section. The reader may now want to look at them for a few moments before proceeding.

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<sup>47</sup> *Transvestia* #40 (August 1966).

Most of the photographs in *Transvestia*'s visual archive were amateur self-portraits, although some appear to have been professionally done. In most of the photographs in this selection and in the entire collection, individuals position themselves alone in respectable, ultra-feminine poses inside domestic spaces, such as the living room and the kitchen. Many perform tasks traditionally gendered feminine, such as baking, vacuuming, ironing, and serving tea. It is doubtful that those pictured were genuinely engaged in these tasks. There are some photographs that feature men posing in swimsuits in the manner of pin-up bombshells and some posing in stage costumes, maid uniforms, and lingerie. But these renditions of eroticized femininities represented a small fraction of the far greater number of photographs depicting crossdressers dressed in complete and tasteful feminine wardrobes and enacting such emblematic cultural roles as the well-bred lady, the dutiful suburban housewife, the girl-next-door, and the club-woman type. Indeed, some photos are accompanied by text that explicitly names the role being played, for example "Eileen the fashion model." The photos therefore capture carefully staged scenes and posed looks. Very seldom does the archive feature snapshots depicting spontaneous or off guarded moments. A handful of photographs captured transvestites in public spaces, such as the market, hair salon, and street sidewalk and in front of tourist attractions. However, most photos within the collection depict private, domestic spaces. Letters and life histories indicate that photographs were most often taken by wives, other transvestites, and by themselves using cameras with self-timers.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, some of the photographs in the collection illustrated the playfulness many transvestites incorporated into their crossdressing practices. One comes away from these photos with the impression that many transvestites were playfully mimicking

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<sup>48</sup> The Polaroid camera was a much welcomed technology for crossdressers.

postwar femininities. I have selected a handful of photos in which the crossdresser includes humorous and campy captions beneath his photo, some of which suggests that those depicted were conscious of the fact that they were enacting or performing a cultural role. As Laura Kipnis observes of contemporary transvestite self portraiture featured in magazines categorized as pornography, the forms of transvestite self-display are not unlike the conceptual self-portraits of photographer Cindy Sherman who transforms herself into a variety of female types. “Both,” argues Kipnis, “put categories of identity into question by using the genre of the self-portrait to document an invented ‘self’.”<sup>49</sup> Curiously, the ‘looks’ in many of these photographs in *Transvestia* resembled those in advertisements from women’s magazines. The looks borrowed from popular culture raise some important questions. Were these enactments a thing of fantasy and fetish or a reflection of interior modes of being? Or both?

Certainly, photography was crucial to the identity formation of a crossdresser and to the construction of *Transvestia*’s gender imaginary. Like the mirrors that crossdressers gazed in during their dress-ups, these self-photographs they took allowed them to see their feminine creations in an external context. The photographic framing of self not only enabled a degree of externalization, it also engendered a sense of internal coherence, fostered a greater sense of realness, facilitated self-awareness, and not to mention a sense of collective consciousness. The collective consciousness of *Transvestia*’s gender community manifested itself in many group photos of FPE members at social functions, some of which I have included in the accompanying portfolio of photographs.

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<sup>49</sup> Laura Kipnis, “Clothes Make the Man,” in *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Duke University Press, 1996).

As it was articulated and visualized in the pages of *Transvestia*, the identity-work of periodic crossdressers speaks to complex questions at the intersection of (trans)gender politics, the politics of fantasy, feminism, and power. Is ‘femininity’ an essence that only anatomical females can acquire? Were the femininities performed by crossdressers just as ‘authentic’ as those performed by anatomical women? Or were these enactments insulting, sexist, and degrading to women? Undoubtedly, for some, if not most of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers, seeing their pictures in the magazine and knowing that they would be seen by others produced an erotic thrill or satisfied a narcissistic impulse. Textual evidence that I have already discussed certainly suggests this erotic aspect and the notion of fantasy that informed their practices. But the issue of male embodiment of the feminine is complex and deserves a more thorough analysis.

Many of *Transvestia*’s letter and history writers expressed a desire to look and act like and be accepted as “real women.” Although most never considered transsexuality, many expressed a strong sense of crossgender identification and would today most likely identify as transgender, an identity category that did not exist then. Based on their articulations of interior modes of self that they sincerely believed to be gendered feminine, I proceed with the assumption that most of these individuals, when creating a feminine appearance for the camera, wanted the final product to reflect their self-definition—their interiority—and perhaps showcase their skill at creating what they presumed to be an authentic representation of womanhood. Their feminine personae, then, represented who they wanted to be, if only temporarily and periodically.

Nevertheless, in their embodiments and performances of various iconic views of postwar white femininity, *Transvestia*’s writers undoubtedly emulated and enacted

gender stereotypes. In many cases, sincere crossgender identifications featured in the text resided uneasily with photographs depicting masculinist appropriations of femininity and embodiments of womanhood. As letters and histories indicate, many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers did hold fantastic misconceptions of the struggles, powerlessness, and second class citizenship women experienced during this historical era, a period when feminists were documenting the "hidden injuries of sex."<sup>50</sup> It is not outlandish to contend that the emulation and fetishization of conventional and stereotypical models of femininity during a decade of rapid social change in respect to women's economic and social advancement spoke to many crossdressers' nostalgia for traditional gender roles and *perhaps* even their hostility towards the feminist assault on patriarchy and on 'Traditional Womanhood'. In the next section, I further explore these tensions, conundrums, and complexities surrounding transvestite identity-construction as they were carried out in photography and in text.

### The Historical Meanings of Transvestism: Beyond a Feminist Framing

The historical development of transvestism and its varieties of expression in America raises an important question for the underground society of crossdressers that serve as my historical actors. Why did *Transvestia*'s crossdressers, by in large, enact 'traditional' femininities? And to what extent did transvestites reproduce patriarchy and to what extent did they remake masculinity and femininity to create a unique gender and sexual culture? Writing a history of this culture of transvestism posed a number of theoretical problems, some of which I am still trying to solve. The one that has perplexed me the most is how

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<sup>50</sup> See Ruth Rosen's chapter, "The Hidden Injuries of Sex" in *The World Split Open*.

to interpret their enactments of conventional femininities. Were heterosexual transvestites from this era and subculture guilty of an egregious transgression along similar historical lines as white men who practiced black face minstrelsy or who masqueraded as Native Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? Were those blatantly racist enactments of a simultaneously demonized and envied racialized “Other” in any way, shape, or form related to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century masculine embodiments of the feminine that *Transvestia*’s white ‘heterosexual’ crossdressers performed?

In thinking about this problem, I have been helped by Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis’ insights on pre-Stonewall butch-fem culture. Using oral-history narratives as their primary source, Kennedy and Davis, in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, describe the solidarity, consciousness, and culture of resistance developed by working-class lesbians in bars and house parties in Buffalo, New York, during the mid-twentieth century. They argue that the struggle waged by these lesbians to claim public space and forge intimate relationships in a very oppressive environment constituted a prepolitical stage of resistance and contributed to shaping twentieth-century gay and lesbian consciousness and politics.

In direct confrontation with lesbian feminism’s negative framing of butch-fem identities, Kennedy and Davis contend that butch-fem roles were the primary form of rebellion against heterosexual dominance in this lesbian community and an effective way for its members to affirm their autonomy and express their romantic and sexual interest in other women. As such, butch-fem culture entailed a re-making of patriarchy and not, as many lesbian and cultural feminists have maintained, simply a reproduction or imitation of heterosexual, sexist society. As Kennedy and Davis write, “Butches defied convention

by usurping male privilege in appearance and sexuality, and with their fems, outraged society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control.... Although they derived in great part from heterosexual models, the roles also transformed those models and created an authentic lesbian lifestyle. Through roles, lesbians began to carve out a public world of their own and developed unique forms for women's sexual love of women."<sup>51</sup>

In positing a connection between my work with heterosexual transvestites and Kennedy and Davis's oral history of working-class lesbians, I am not suggesting that crossdressers experienced a similar degree of oppression or that their community practices constituted similar prepolitical forms of resistance. As middle to professional class, white, male-bodied heterosexuals, *Transvestia*'s crossdressers in no way experienced the stigma and oppression faced by the working-class lesbians of Buffalo. For the most part, they inhabited safe spaces of privilege, even if they never quite felt at home in the cultural and social roles associated with "Traditional Masculinity." Also the covertness of their practices protected them from public condemnation. Yet, in these regards, they were really no different from covert homosexuals and lesbians of this period.

Another difference was that the working-class bar lesbians of *Boots of Leather* inhabited a particular locale whereas *Transvestia*'s crossdressers inhabited a cultural imaginary facilitated by a magazine and a culture of correspondence. Many of these crossdressers later joined a widespread national membership organization, a handful of chapters of which carried out political activities. Therefore, an underground readership and an organizational network represented different kinds of social formations than the

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<sup>51</sup> Kennedy and Davis, 6.



community that Buffalo's working-class lesbians created. Except for perhaps the delicate matter of booking hotel rooms for social gatherings, *Transvestia's* gender community was not a case of a group of historical agents claiming, defending, and securing public space, for instance, like George Chauncey's gays in New York City.

It is Kennedy and Davis' revisionist interpretation and historical grounding of butch-fem roles and culture that I find applicable to my historical agents. The question that animated Kennedy and Davis' examination of butch-fem roles was "What does it mean to eroticize gender difference in the absence of institutional male power?" I am inspired to answer a related question of what does it mean to eroticize gender difference in the *presence* of institutional male power, when those who possess such power engage in genuinely deviant acts or inhabit non-normative identities. (This realm of human expression and self-making is different than "Playing Indian" and "Blacking-up. White men who engaged in these activities never believed themselves to be 'real' Native Americans and black Americans.)

In terms of transgressing gender norms and transforming and rearticulating models of gender, transvestites are not much different than the lesbians who belonged to butch-fem culture and whose identities and roles Kennedy and Davis reinterpreted. Female-bodied butch lesbians projected the masculine image of their time period. Similarly, male-bodied transvestites projected the feminine image of their era. *Transvestia's* crossdressers, particularly, exhibited gendered looks, behaviors, and mannerisms that, on the surface, very much appeared to reproduce stereotypical and conventional femininities. In the postwar era in the United States, with gender norms being challenged by organized groups of women, the explanation that these transvestites' outmoded styles reflected their

hostility to these specific challenges and to broader social changes has some merit. While conservative pundits and reactionary critics of the time bemoaned women's advancement and called for a restoration of a (mythologized) traditional gender order, one may argue that in a similar fashion *Transvestia*'s crossdressers enacted a fantasy of female domesticity and domestic containment. However, such an interpretation of transvestite gender bending (just as it is with butch/fem gender presentations reproducing heterosexual patriarchy) is overdetermined and ignores the historical context and conditions of the practice or enactment. It is important to remember that transvestites were dressing and behaving as women within the cultural context of fear of feminization and male emasculation. These were powerful discourses that impacted the lived experiences of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers. In fact, as I have already discussed, the rationale of "dual personality expression" that this group created to dignify and de-sexualize their practices was driven by its members' gender anxieties and a tangible fear of being perceived as sexually deviant, i.e. homosexual.

This is not to say, though, that women's changing roles and the rise of second wave feminism in postwar America had little effect on this subcultural community. These cultural and social transformations shaped the contours of this group's thought and culture. And for some, these events created a crisis moment. Nevertheless, I believe that many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers transformed conventional gender models. Kennedy and Davis write that "In order to listen to and represent [their] narrators' voices, [they] had to clear space for them on the feminist landscape."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, I have had to present

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<sup>52</sup> Kennedy and Davis, 11.

*Transvestia*'s crossdressers against a feminist discourse that denounces their gender presentations as sexist.<sup>53</sup>

To go beyond a strictly feminist framing of transvestism, one must reimagine the practice of crossdressing, especially as it occurred within a social group dynamic like that of *Transvestia*'s gender community. In this case, the result of the crossdressing episode was not one of reifying and reproducing conventional gender (i.e. femininity) no matter how respectably and stereotypically *Transvestia*'s crossdressers looked and behaved; rather the outcome was one of bold gender transgression in a cultural environment of extreme fear of gender and sexual difference, as well as, the development of a distinct culture of transvestism that existed outside of and in opposition to (but not untouched by) patriarchal society.

In a patriarchal culture that devalued femininity and demonized the feminized male, many transvestites embraced feminine expression and constructed crossgender identities that were clear and liberating alternatives to dominant forms of masculinity that circulated in postwar America. Did these crossdressers actively and self-consciously rebel against the masculine mystique and the relentless striving and competition that characterized "marketplace masculinity"? For some, maybe, but crossdressing, by and large, represented an avenue for temporary escape from the pressures of masculinity. *Transvestia*'s crossdressers acknowledged the repressive nature of middle-class manhood but did not reject outright the male sex role. After all, in a strange twist of irony, they relied on the gender divide and seized upon the discourse of 'masculinity as a trap' in order to justify their need to crossdress.

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<sup>53</sup> For an example of this kind of feminist reading of crossdressing, see Annie Woodhouse, *Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender, and Transvestism* (Rutgers University Press, 1989).

No doubt, crossdressing represented a rather extreme method of self-expression just to escape the pressures associated with masculinity. Were these crossdressers over-rationalizing? Maybe not. Historically, mass consumption and leisure have been pejoratively gendered feminine. In many ways, transvestism did enable and permit these middle-class men to enter the world of fun and frivolity that they associated with femininity. However, a man during this time period of the 1960s did not necessarily have to crossdress to do this. As several scholars have written, the postwar era saw the rise of consumer-based models of masculinity and witnessed a white male revolt against the breadwinner ethic of manhood. Beatniks and hippies rejected repressive models of masculinity and developed alternative forms of expression. And it was in the famed conservative era of the 1950s when the *Playboy* ethic emerged to challenge male breadwinning, celebrate bachelorhood, and endorse hedonistic consumption.<sup>54</sup>

Much like the magazine *Playboy*, *Transvestia* afforded its readers a space to engage in a sort of safe hedonism. *Transvestia*'s crossdressers, who were generally much older than the youthful generation of playboys of the 1950s and 60s, forged a similar, yet, of course, very different path to heteronormative self-expression and ostentatious consumption. As is typically true of middle-class 'rebellions,' the expressions of femininity in *Transvestia* were safe enactments, as they were conducted in private and contained more elements of abstracted fantasy than reality. Yet, even as I make this assertion, I would be remiss not to qualify this statement with the fact that those who went out in public, joined FPE, and possessed a genuine sense of crossgender identification did so within a social and cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Anchor Press / Doubleday, Garden City, NY: 1983); Bill Ogerby, *Playboys of Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-style in Modern America* (Berg Publishers, 2001).

context of fear of gender and sexual transgression. Thus, many of these male-bodied enactments of femininity narrativized and visualized in *Transvestia* were not safe.

Further, crossdressing, as practiced by the heterosexual transvestites of this subculture, supports the now bedrock academic theory that gender (femininity) is a historical and cultural product—not an innate and natural byproduct of biological sex (femaleness). This insight was not lost on many of *Transvestia*'s writers, including Prince and Susanna Valenti. In fact, their belief that gender is a social, cultural, and historical construction gave them a passport to cross over what they radically conceptualized as an arbitrary line separating masculinity from femininity. As another columnist, Sheila Niles, remarked in his review of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, "At least it confirms what we all have suspected, that 'genuine' girls are almost as phony as TVs!!" Niles' tongue-and-cheek statement suggests that he understood that the materials one could use to construct a feminine persona were not the sole province of females. However, while these nods toward what would come to be known as social constructionism are fascinating, most transvestites, in fact, failed to interrogate the issue of power—of what keeps this seemingly arbitrary line separating the genders appear fixed, timeless, and impenetrable. Most never fundamentally questioned the power dynamics that emboldened normative gender dichotomies, that naturalized the binary categories of sex, and that structured the gendered logic and 'truths' that justified the second class citizenship of women.

That the vast majority of those photographed were not consciously attempting to reconfigure normative masculinities or femininities does not mean, however, that their enactments were insincere. Their feminine creations represented who they wanted to be, if only temporarily and periodically. Furthermore, many of these crossdressers genuinely

felt that their renditions of femininity reflected interior modes of being—put simply, their gender identities. In this regard, most of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers, when creating feminine appearances for the camera or when trying to describe their innermost feelings on paper, wanted the final products to reflect their self-definitions and perhaps, in the case of photography, showcase their skills at authentic representation. Taking a staged photograph or portrait was a significant step to self-recognition and to solidifying identity—akin to proclaiming “this is who I am.” Moreover, sending one’s photograph to Prince for publication represented a socially validating act and communicative gesture. It further legitimated a coherent sense of self (or femme-self) and also signified an empowered awareness of social identity and group consciousness. Therefore, by calling attention to the embodiments of the feminine and the predominant models of femininity that *Transvestia*’s crossdressers emulated, I am not trying to discredit their identity-work nor deny their ‘right’ to borrow freely from the gendered culture around them when constructing their “femme-selves.”<sup>55</sup>

In the final analysis, the explanation as to why *Transvestia*’s crossdressers enacted traditional femininities may be as simple as that these were the renditions they saw in magazine advertisements and other forms of visual culture, as well as the ones they witnessed being enacted by anatomical women in everyday life. When feminine styles changed in the 1960s and 1970s, many stubbornly held on to older and thus outdated

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<sup>55</sup>With my analysis of transvestites’ enactments of femininity, I also do not want to replicate the “anti-transsexual line” made by many (cultural) feminists since the 1970s. For example, in *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1979), Janice Raymond argued that transsexuals colonize women’s bodies. Recognizing that transgender is a legitimate social identity and that many of *Transvestia*’s crossdresses would today identify as transgender, I want to treat my historical actors as regular people and not stray too far in the direction of viewing their practices as having some greater symbolic or theoretical significance, whether good or bad. For a critique against medical, cultural, and academic discourses that pathologize, demonize, and devalue trans subjectivities see, Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

models and ideals, and, indeed, felt threatened by women's changing roles. Some, though, were not alarmed at all and followed the latest fashions and trends. They emulated modern, contemporary, and even feminist femininities (yet still within classed and racial frameworks).

As for those who projected passive images or articulated unrealistic perceptions of femininity, I need not call them out; they were actually reprimanded by their more progressive minded 'sisters.' Two of *Transvestia*'s writers, in particular, earnestly reckoned with their desires to crossdress. Each offered an interpretation of transvestism that *perhaps* provides a closer approximation of what crossdressing entailed within *Transvestia*'s gender community than what was commonly mythologized and visualized by those determined to de-sexualize the practice and normalize the identity. The first writer Jean wrote:

Why, I kept asking myself over and over again, am I attracted to transvestism? One conclusion I came to was that when I dressed as a woman I experienced 'definition.' The female of the species is characterized as being submissive, and if this is a correct assumption, her clothing, I believe, is a contributing factor. The pressure of high heels against the foot, the gentle restraint of nylons by a girdle and bra, the restrictiveness of, especially, a tight slip and skirt; a woman does submit to the dictates of her clothes. Yet through all of this—indeed! Because of it—she knows she is a woman every single moment she is so attired. The very pressures and restraints brought to bear on her by her clothing serves to define her as a female. At no time does her high heeled foot expand and spread as far as it can go, as does the man's foot in his shoe. Is a man's calf or thigh, abdomen, waist or chest limited (or defined) by his trousers or shirt? Not within the normal framework of his dress. But a woman is a woman is a woman. Her clothes never let her forget it for an instant. In a dozen ways at once her clothes forbid her to trespass beyond the limits of femininity.... I say that this 'definition,' this 'awareness of self,' if you please, can bring great joy and peace of mind to a person. I do not feel that I ever found such 'definition' dressed as a man. I do feel 'defined' when dressed as a woman.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "Better Late Than Never" by Jean (5-A-8) in *Transvestia* #41 (October 1966).

Theoretically rich, this passage is packed with erotic and eroticized meanings. In Jean's formulation, feminine clothing is not just symbolic of the "girl within" and a vehicle to inner virtue. Rather, the constrictive qualities of feminine clothing and heels are masochistic devices that engender self-awareness and definition. The sexual politics of Jean's identity narrative is disturbing on one level. Two years before radical feminists denounced these "instruments of torture" as symbols of women's oppression, Jean was configuring them into liberatory symbols for himself, a transvestite man who did not feel whole in masculine clothing. One could be skeptical of his declaration of freedom through constriction and attribute it to yet another case of white male identity crisis, with the remedy being an appropriation of the culture of an exoticized 'Other.' bell hooks refers to this in another context as "eating the other." After all, Jean was a biological male whose prerogative it was to cross over and partake of the freedom and definition he attributed to constrictive feminine clothing.<sup>57</sup>

The second passage comes from "Julie," a transvestite who admonishes his contemporaries' depictions, experiences, and embodiments of "womanhood" with the following words:

As long as you are still infatuated or enamored with the idea of being a woman, you aren't thinking like one. [The media] aren't portraying the woman as a person, and you aren't thinking of a woman as one.... Women don't get all dolled up to do housework; they aren't constantly feeling 'the swish of their skirts against the back of their legs,' they aren't constantly made-up in going-out makeup and styled hair. They're just going around being people. I'm not saying that they never oh and ah over dresses or spend hours in the beauty parlor, or pay attention to how they look, but it isn't an obsession and it shouldn't be one for the

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<sup>57</sup> On another level, Jean may have been articulating an S&M identity. S&M is now regarded by some as a legitimate sexual identity, one that does not play by the rules of heteronormative sex, gender, and sexuality, and even gay sexualities. Jean attributed freedom to constrictive feminine clothing. He recognized that definition entails, indeed necessitates, limits and boundaries. Jean's "awareness of self" did not derive from abstract or spiritual qualities but rather from recognition of the body's boundaries, limits, and borders. It was a celebration of corporeality.



FP who wants to develop a truly feminine personality. The only way to know women, unless you are one, is to study them sewing, working, unhappy, silly, tired, depressed, everyday.... Then and only then can you act and be the woman that your chronological age calls for.<sup>58</sup>

Julie recognized many of the differences between ‘real’ women (GG’s in TV parlance) and the feminine personas that many transvestites constructed from their fantasies and fetishes and then passed along as authentic expressions. To be sure, he did not think that approximating true femininity was an exercise in futility. Rather his complaint was that most transvestites’ approximations, perceptions, and presentations of femininity were far from authentic, as they basically emulated stereotypes and performed idealized and abstracted depictions of ‘womanhood.’ Julie reformulated the idea of authentic representation, linking it with a notion of a non-abstracted, mundane ‘realness’ that went further than what most of *Transvestia*’s writers had previously formulated insofar as Julie’s notion of authenticity included the domain of labor and treated women as flesh and blood human beings who experience a gamut of emotions and possess an array of characteristics and qualities other than those stereotypically gendered feminine. Whereas most of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers had sought to capture the everyday looks of women in their presentations of femininity, Julie contended that transvestites in the feminine guise were not as “real” as they thought themselves to be because they were overly conscious of their performance and because they enacted a male, objectivist vision of femininity. He was one of only a few who openly acknowledged and interrogated the element of male fantasy involved in many crossdressers’ articulations and presentations of gender.

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<sup>58</sup> *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

This fantasy aspect, Julie believed, undermined many transvestites' claims to authenticity. However, he undercut the main thrust of his argument for realness when he later advised crossdressers to study "fat" and "ugly" women to "see what they are doing wrong." A simple statement, perhaps misspoken, but it suggests that Julie's notion of authenticity—of emulating or 'being' a 'real' woman—resided on a male-manufactured standard of beauty. His statement also reveals that his model of the feminine derived from female bodies that express femininities judged to be ideal or "true," to use crossdressers' terminology. By implication, only beautiful and thin women were worthy of emulation. Nevertheless, Julie's remarks imparted a significant notion: how a crossdresser understood his presentation of self depended on how he defined and conceptualized the boundaries between fantasy and authenticity in respect to prevalent models of femininity.<sup>59</sup>

Jean and Julie's reflections suggest three notions that, if true, were typically obscured by other writers with respect to the motivations and intentions many of *Transvestia's* crossdressers may have had for crossdressing as well as the larger social meanings they might have derived from the practice. 1. Self-definition through crossdressing was an erotic and, for some, a masochistic practice. 2. The models of femininity they enacted were often masculinist, abstracted articulations and objectifying depictions that reflected normative gender differences and reinforced feminine gender stereotypes. 3. Many within this subculture of crossdressers fetishized and valorized the cultural and behavioral trappings of traditional femininities and delighted in the repressive aspects of femininity.

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<sup>59</sup> For example, a crossdresser named Georgette insightfully noted: "Our capacity for self-deception is acknowledged and limitless; but it is only the reverse side of our imagination; we are forever trapped in a fantasy we seek to make reality, and whatever level of FP development we reach we still operate in a framework of fantasy. Our fantasy is both pathetic and heroic: it is the human dignity of refusing to surrender to the impossible, of plucking a painful victory out of a context of disaster" (#30 Dec. 1964).

These three potential notions were obscured in *Transvestia*'s text and photographs. Jean and Julie's reflections suggest that no matter how relentlessly Prince, Susanna, and most FP letter and history writers demoted the force of sexuality and obscured the erotic components of crossdressing, the cultural accouterments used to self-define in even the femmepersonator mode were inextricably fused with erotic and anti-feminist meanings.

In summation, it was the social meanings that *Transvestia*'s crossdressers constructed around their group's identity, as well as, the rationale they created to understand their desires and dignify their practices, that render transvestite self-making in text and in photography historically significant. The respectable and de-sexualized codes of dress and conduct that circulated within *Transvestia*'s narratives and photographs mostly reflected the girl-within / dual personality philosophy that Prince, Susanna, and others created. This philosophy was a historical product of the Cold War era's gender regime. As this regime unraveled in many parts of the United States during the latter half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the rationale for wanting to merely express traits and attributes arbitrarily assigned to the other gender would fall apart, as men could then more freely express a softer side without fear of stigmatization and public sanction. Why, then, would a man have to crossdress in order to express his feminine side? In theory, transvestism, as most of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers understood and practiced it, should have disappeared when gender roles relaxed in the 1970s.

However, this historical rupture instead exposed tensions and contradictions in the dual personality rationale that underscored a more fundamental reason for why they crossdressed: erotic rewards. To be sure, eroticism did not necessarily have to be manifested through sexual release or visually represented in sexualized photographs.

Eroticism could signal the charge or thrill one experienced from the most mundane aspects of crossdressing. But the fear of eroticism in all its myriad of forms, impulses, and expressions led most within this subculture to obscure and to outright erase its force within their lives, practices, and gender presentations.

In the final analysis, the dual personality rationale, the respectable dress codes, and the behavioral guidelines that *Transvestia*'s crossdressers devised to normalize and dignify their identities and practices tell us something paradoxical about their negotiations of gender in real life, in text, and in photography. Although the Cold War era's strict gender dichotomies were the source of their fears and guilt and the instigators of their shame, these same binaries provided the logic for creating a counter-rationale to manage the stigma and the tools necessary to construct a unique philosophy of dual gender identity. Therefore, within the prison of normative postwar gender, many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers fashioned a key to escape, if only for a short time. Finally, the feminine clothing and accoutrements they adopted may have symbolized the traditional gender roles that many white men of their social rank perceived to be fading in the 1960s and 1970s. If this is true, then, the cultural trappings crossdressers used to self-define represented a by-gone era, ironically, of when a man was a man and a woman was a woman.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “WE SHARE A SACRED SECRET”

“Betty Ann” [Wisconsin] had been married for eighteen years at the time of his writing to *Transvestia*. He and his wife had three sons, the youngest aged four. Betty Ann married without disclosing his crossdressing practices to his wife. Throughout the early years of his marriage, he guarded his secret carefully. At first, he had tried to satisfy his desires to crossdress vicariously by purchasing clothes for his new bride. However, this practice soon lost its appeal. “It wasn’t long,” he remembered, “before I bought my first pair of panties for myself so I could wear them under my regular clothes when I was working.” After the children were born in 1951 and 1955, his wife took a night job. After his wife left for work and as soon as the children went to bed, he would do house hold chores, for a while, in his regular clothing, but, after an undisclosed period of time, he began crossdressing while conducting these domestic tasks. “I felt that as long as I was doing so called women’s work,” he explained, “I might just as well look like one.” Betty Ann managed to conceal his crossdressing from his wife for about seven years. However, he got caught one night when his wife, inevitably, came home early from work. He described her reaction as one of anger and devastation. After the initial period of shock and hurt, the couple discussed the matter. Betty Ann described a series of negotiations with his wife that ensued after their initial discussions about his “problem.” She gave him

permission to crossdress on the conditions that she did not have to see him doing it and that no one else found out about it. Still, even after what appeared to be a major breakthrough, a cloud of uncertainty, as he described it, hung over their marriage. “Where was this going,” his wife would ask. Betty Ann went through several purges over a span of time that culminated in a mild nervous breakdown that put him in the hospital. He and his wife eventually consulted a psychiatrist who he said was somewhat helpful. At the time of his writing, Betty Ann was cautiously hopeful of a better future, even though his wife constantly feared that the children or their neighbors would find out their secret.<sup>1</sup>

Betty Ann’s captivating story of domesticity and transvestism provides an interesting twist to other historians’ accounts of love, marriage, and family life in the postwar era. An unprecedented surge in marriage occurred during the period from about 1947 to the early-1960s, an era that scholars have referred to as the “long fifties.” This golden age of marriage was characterized by a cultural consensus that everyone should marry and the ideological triumph of a love-based, male breadwinner model of family life. Therefore, given the social pressures, cultural mandates, and state incentives to marry and rear children in postwar America, it is not surprising that the majority of heterosexual crossdressers in my study married and raised families.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Betty Ann Was Created Not Born” in *Transvestia* #51 (June 1968).

<sup>2</sup> My view of white, middle-class ideals of marriage, gender, and family life during the “long fifties” (1947—1963) has been greatly shaped by the following scholarly works: Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. (Viking Adult, 2005); Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. (Anchor Books, 1983); Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); and J. Meyerowitz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (1994).

In their histories in *Transvestia*, married crossdressers described the joys and hardships of marriage and family life. A fiancée or husband faced the difficult decision whether or not to disclose his crossdressing practices to his (future) spouse. “Taking all things into consideration,” wrote one wife of a transvestite in a letter to the editor, “I feel strongly that it is only kind and fair for a TV to tell the girl of his choice about himself before marriage, and to tell fully what his desire means to him and what it will continue to mean through the years ahead.”<sup>3</sup> Most transvestites, however, did not tell their fiancées before the wedding ceremony. They could not find the words to even begin to explain their desire for the softness of silk, satin, and other fabrics and their love of wearing panties, stockings, slips, high heels, dresses, and other feminine articles of clothing. They feared immediate rejection on the part of their girlfriends and fiancées. Some crossdressers simply did not want to ruin their chances at happiness or relinquish a host of other emotional and spiritual benefits that couples living during the long fifties perceived they would gain after exchanging sacred vows. “The idea that marriage should provide both partners with sexual gratification, personal intimacy, and self-fulfillment,” observes one historian, “was taken to new heights in that decade. Marriage was the place not only where people expected to find the deepest meaning in their lives but also where they would have the most fun.”<sup>4</sup> Another reason why transvestite men either hesitated or failed to disclose before marriage was that they did not want to undermine what they perceived to be a social obligation and moral duty to marry, raise children, and assume the role of breadwinner. In the postwar era, a public discourse on “masculine maturity”

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Agnes in *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *From Obedience to Love* (233).

circulated widely, with marriage being promoted as the only culturally acceptable route to adulthood and independence.<sup>5</sup>

Given the social and cultural reasons mentioned above, if the unwillingness of these transvestite men to disclose a central aspect of their lives still seems selfish, it is also important to consider that many had not yet grasped transvestism's hold on their lives and identities. In fact, a number of writers reported that they had naively believed that marriage would cure their transvestism, reasoning that a 'real' woman would unseat what at the time was only a partially formed 'fantasy girl' that they had created in their minds and only crudely outfitted and brought to life in furtive periodic episodes during adolescence and early adulthood. How wrong they were, as their proximity to feminine clothing after marriage only exacerbated their yearnings to crossdress and sharpened the contours of what many would later articulate as their "girl within" or "femme-self."

Those who did not disclose before marriage faced anxiety-ridden decisions regarding whether or not to tell their wives, and, if so, when and how best to do it. Many of *Transvestia's* writers described their efforts to hide their secrets, which often entailed leading a double life that further resulted in feelings of guilt and, for several writers, trips to the psychiatrist. "Transvestism," Joy Lynn wrote, "has been a long, lonesome road to walk, wrought with self-doubt, secrecy, frustration, tension and the lack of understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow "masculine maturity" from Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men*. Stephanie Coontz reminds us that "The ideal family—or what Talcott Parsons called 'the normal' family—consisted of a man who specialized in the practical, individualistic activities needed for subsistence and a woman who took care of the emotional needs of her husband and children" (242). It is worth quoting Nancy Cott on the way the state shapes the gender order through the vehicle of marriage: "The whole system of attribution and meaning that we call gender relies on and to a great extent derives from the structuring provided by marriage. Turning men and women into husbands and wives, marriage has designated the ways both sexes act in the world and the reciprocal relation between them. It has done so probably more emphatically than any other single institution or social force. The unmarried as well as the married bear the ideological, ethical, and practical impress of the marital institution, which is difficult or impossible to escape" (3).



The polarized emotional experience of dressing ranged from sheer ecstasy and pleasure...to deep, guilt-ridden feelings within an unidentifiable creature who burned hidden caches of ‘girl stuff’ several times.”<sup>6</sup> Other writers offered valuable accounts of the ‘coming out’ process with their wives. Naturally, the histories reflected the point-of-view of husbands; however, wives’ and girlfriends’ perspectives were featured in published letters to the editor that these women had sent to the magazine. Also, several wives wrote short notes, and a few contributed longer narratives, both of which followed their husbands’ histories. “There have been times,” confessed a wife in one of these notes, “when I have felt sorry for myself at being in this situation, and irritated by the necessity for curtained windows, locked doors and secrecy.”<sup>7</sup> *Transvestia*’s histories and the letters and notes from wives reveal a number of scenarios that played out over the course of a transvestite and his wife’s marriage. First, we will hear from the perspective of transvestite husbands, then from several of the wives of crossdressers.

“Barbara” wrote a representative history of love, marriage, and family life in postwar America. After serving in World War II, he made a serious effort to stop crossdressing. He abstained for over two years, but he eventually started dressing again. To his surprise, he actually started liking what he saw in the mirror. He began going out in public. However, his practices were disrupted when he met a girl whom he fell in love with. Like many other heterosexual transvestites, he thought he could quit, but “while dressing had proved no substitute for sex, neither, [he] found to [his] discouragement, was sex a substitute for dressing.” He decided to disclose beforehand since he knew that he was unable to provide any assurances that he could ever stop crossdressing. In his narrative,

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<sup>6</sup> “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” in *Transvestia* #75 (1972).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Agnes in *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965).

Barbara wrote that his fiancé was dismissive, perhaps not fully grasping the sincerity of his confession. Soon after they married, he began to secretly cross-dress to satisfy his desires. Barbara led an elaborate double life, which included reading transvestite literature, “most of which was only available in stores [he] wouldn’t have been caught dead in otherwise.” As was the case with many other husbands who led double lives, Barbara’s secret activities induced guilty feelings. He eventually confessed his deceptions to his wife. “I didn’t know it at the time,” he wrote, “but that confession set the seal of doom on our relationship. Before long I realized that her image of me as a husband had been shattered, and she was no longer able to accept me in that role, even sexually.” His wife’s negative reaction caused him to destroy his feminine wardrobe and abstain from dressing for a year. But after much soul-searching, he started back without his wife’s knowledge, built his wardrobe from scratch, and promised himself never to destroy it again. “I began taking my own pictures for the first time,” he wrote, “and I selected a name for myself, all of which gave me an increased sense of feminine identity.” One day, however, his wife “pulled a secret inspection” and found the feminine clothing he had hidden, including the photographs he had taken of himself. He described her reaction as follows:

She didn’t say anything about them at first (I wasn’t even sure she’d found them), but simply began to cry as hard as she could. Something else was obviously up, and when I pressed her for it, she broke off her wailing long enough to sob, ‘You’re better looking than I am!’ I didn’t agree, but I would be lying if I claimed that that didn’t thrill me. For years whenever we discussed my dressing, she would always point out how senseless it all was, since I must look absolutely ludicrous. Still, I guess it turned out to be the most expensive compliment I’ve ever received; within a month she had left me for good.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “The Way It Was” in *Transvestia* #54 (December 1968).

Barbara retrospectively found humor in his wife's reaction. Other history writers, though, were not as jovial when reflecting on their troubled marriages and divorces. The consequences of a failed marriage were harsh, particularly for women, but also for men of the Cold War era. In reference to the mid-twentieth century, one historian notes that "The availability of divorce could make marrying and staying married seem purely volitional—yet divorce represented a failure, 'un-American' enough, so to speak, that a male politician might have to sacrifice high aspiration if he was divorced."<sup>9</sup>

The specter of divorce haunted the history of "Marylynn" [Wyoming], who described an exceedingly rocky relationship with his former wife. When he decided to marry, he "locked 'Marylynn' in a trunk forever." One day, though, he came home from work to discover that his wife had broken into his trunk. Shocked and angry from her discovery, she had also burned all his feminine finery in the incinerator. "To this day," he wrote of his wife's actions, "she still feels that I am a queer. She destroyed part of me when she destroyed my clothes—and I was never able to completely forgive her for that." He wrote that after the discovery, their happiness withered and the quality of their marriage declined. His wife eventually suffered a mental breakdown, spending the next few years in and out of the state hospital. He wrote that during one hospital admission interview, his wife blurted out, "My husband is a female impersonator—a Transvestite—a Queer. He doesn't like sex, he's a homosexual—he needs help more than I do." Marylynn admitted his transvestism to the doctor but denied any homosexual inclinations. "I told him hospitalization wouldn't help me—that I liked being a TV." Marylynn wrote that for a long while he was determined to save his marriage and wanted his wife to accept him for who he was. After years of intransigence on his wife's part, though, he finally gave up

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy Cott, 182.

and proceeded with the divorce. “It is a long, hard, expensive way to go about it, but I want to be free and time is slipping away from me. I’m going on 50 years old, and Marylynn would like to grow old gracefully—fighting old age every damned inch of the way.” Of all the accounts of marriage from *Transvestia*’s writers, Marylynn’s story gets the award for most troubled. Given the seriousness of what happened, I want to reemphasize that these histories are told from the husband’s perspective. Because we do not get to hear Marylynn’s wife’s perspective, we should be careful in making any judgments about her.<sup>10</sup>

Intolerance, bitterness, and divorce did not characterize every experience. Many of *Transvestia*’s writers described their wives’ gradual acceptance. “Joy Lynne” [Colorado] shared his life struggle of dealing with his guilt-ridden desires. For seven years, beginning in high school and lasting through college, he refrained from crossdressing. However, soon after marrying, the “sleeping giant” awoke once more. He managed to keep his dressing activities secret from his wife for a while, but she eventually found out. “My wife,” he said, “felt that she was an inadequate sex partner [and that] the wearing of feminine clothes substituted for her and that I was losing my masculinity. ‘I married a man, not a woman’ was thrown at me several times in periods of anger.” Beginning in 1968, his wife started to become more accepting thanks to her reading several issues of *Transvestia*. At the time of his writing, Joy Lynne and his wife were “happier than ever.”<sup>11</sup> Joy Lynne’s marital experiences represented those of other transvestites whose

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<sup>10</sup> “It All Began” in *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969).

<sup>11</sup> “You’ve Come a Long Way Baby” in *Transvestia* #75 (1972). However, Joy Lynn admitted that “buying feminine clothes for myself has also brought feelings of selfish guilt. I often feel the money should be used for the family’s needs.”

wives gradually grew tolerant and, for some, fully accepting of their husband's transvestism after an initial period of anger, hurt, or disgust.

Meeting other couples with husbands who crossdressed seemed to help wives tolerate or accept their husbands' practices and feminine personas. "April" [California] wrote that he and his wife had dinner with Virginia Prince and her wife in December of 1961. April said that this meeting greatly helped his wife to better understand his transvestism. In his narrative, he reported that since that dinner, his wife had finally "met April." He, in turn, reciprocated his wife's gestures of acceptance by becoming more helpful around the house and more "openly appreciative of his wife's feminine qualities."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, "Bobbie" [Illinois] wrote in his history that his wife became more tolerant and accepting, largely thanks to her encounters with *Transvestia*, a conversation with Virginia Prince, and meeting other couples in the Beta chapter of Phi Pi Epsilon. For Bobbie, it seemed like a miracle. He had not told his wife before they married. One day she found "THE suitcase" and was devastated. He, in turn, burned his feminine clothing and consulted a psychiatrist. The doctor was not much help, but Bobbie did discover *Transvestia* through these "couch visits." He wrote that after repeated attempts he could not bury the urges and gradually rebuilt his wardrobe during his business travels. Even after his wife came to accept his transvestism, she had no desire, according to Bobbie, to see him dressed in women's outfits, but she had seen photos of him dressed as his feminine persona. She also attended Bobbie's Beta chapter meetings. "Now my wife has a new feeling of respectability toward my chapter endeavors. I think formerly she regarded it with the same distaste as a communist cell meeting, but now she is happy to see that the other husbands are 'he men' and the wives are no different from her church sewing circle or

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<sup>12</sup> "The Advent of April" in *Transvestia* #17 (October 1962).

women's club." Despite his wife's growing acceptance, he said that he has made a few compromises with his wife. He only crossdresses at monthly Beta meetings and whenever the opportunity presents itself during business travels.<sup>13</sup>

While most wives' approval had to be carefully coaxed over a long period of time, a handful of other wives were described by their husbands as being extremely understanding of their crossdressing practices almost from the beginning and even helpful with respect to offering make-up advice, fashion tips, and instructions on how to behave femininely. According to "Joanna" [Washington], his wife taught him domestic tasks and cooking skills. "One of the things that [my wife] really likes," Joanna wrote, "is when I put my apron on with all its frills and ruffles and proceed to do the housework." "Annette" [Idaho; the introduction's opening case study] disclosed his transvestism to his wife two months after their wedding, and she proved to be quite accommodating. She even chose his "femme-name." The wife selecting her husband's feminine name was rare but not unheard of in other histories. In a note that followed Annette's history, his wife described her husband's feminine persona. "She is a beautiful girl and relaxes gracefully in her clothes. I want to help her in every way that I can to make her lovely and lady-like without appearing gaudy."<sup>14</sup> Another writer, "Joanne" [Pennsylvania], had been married for twenty-three years before he told his wife. The opportunity to disclose occurred when his wife bought *The Joy of Sex*. He took a risk by admitting that the only suggestion in the book that appealed to him was making love to her while dressed in her clothes. To his delight, she was not opposed to this idea. "That night," he recalled, "she dressed me in

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<sup>13</sup>"Bobbie in TV-Land" in *Transvestia* #20 (April 1963). According to Bobbie, his extensive business travels allowed him to visit over forty other transvestites in the Midwest.

<sup>14</sup> *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

some of her best lingerie, including a bra, panties, slip, nightie and stockings. Then we made love like we hadn't done since our honeymoon." The next morning, he explained everything to her, and to his surprise she proved to be completely accepting and understanding. Later on, she surprised him with feminine gifts, including a wig and high heels.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes wives even accompanied their husbands on public excursions. "Betty Lynn" happily reported that his femme-self "is not only accepted and enjoyed by [his wife] but is insisted upon. [As girlfriends, they] go for numerous drives, go to drive-in movies, and occasionally go to drive-in restaurants."

Betty Lynn's history also highlighted a rather common theme regarding the ways transvestism can beget a happy and healthy marriage. "Crossdressing is enjoyable," explained Betty Lynn, "and it helps me take an interest in my wife in an area where most men don't give a hang. Thus, my [wife] feels free to be interested in activities of general interest to men.... TVism has brought husband and wife closer than strict role playing ever could have." Transvestism inverted the ideology and practice of gender complementarity yet yielded the same results of marital closeness and togetherness. Betty Lynn's history was followed by a note from his wife Fran, entitled "I Assisted at the Birth," which was a play on the title of her husband's history, "The Birth of Betty." Fran stated that one of her pleasures included taking pictures of her husband as Betty Lynn. "I have become a competent photographer since I asked Betty to start dressing. I thoroughly enjoy thinking of new pictures to take (we are currently working on nightie shots)." Fran ended with a word to other wives of transvestites who were not as accepting of their husbands' proclivities: "...you don't know what you're missing. I can't understand why

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<sup>15</sup> "Delayed Revelation" in *Transvestia* #97 (1978).

anyone wouldn't want another dimension to their love.”<sup>16</sup> Fran expressed a sentiment echoed by other crossdressers and their wives who proudly viewed their marriages as exemplary models of companionate marriage. Popularized in the 1920s, the idea of a “companionate family” or “companionate marriage” encouraged more equality between husband and wife and promoted an end to patriarchy. Experts in the postwar years renewed the 1920s campaign for togetherness and partnership that had been disrupted by depression and war. The emphasis on a companionate relationship between husband and wife counters popular mythology that often characterizes postwar culture as promoting the revival and intensification of Victorian separate spheres ideology. “Despite the stress on separate and distinct and traditional gender roles during the 1950s,” asserts James Gilbert, “the more democratic ideal of sharing decisions about child rearing and consumption, as well as mutual satisfaction in sexual life, was also prevalent.”<sup>17</sup>

This companionate portrait of the postwar nuclear family was reflected in several of *Transvestia*'s histories. For example, “Marie” described perhaps the ultimate portrait of companionate marriage, with a transvestic twist nonetheless:

My dresses, skirts, blouses, coats, etc., hang in a large closet beside my wife's clothing, and my lingerie fills two large drawers of our dressers. We share our hats and purses as this gives us both a larger selection to choose from for any occasion. I enjoy wearing my wig while Viv [his wife] combs and puts it up on rollers, then I assist her with the house work while it is drying. She then works it into a becoming style while I watch Marie in the mirror become a lovelier woman. In the development of Marie, it was my wife who helped with walking, mannerisms, cosmetics, and jewelry. At the beginning she pointed out the

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<sup>16</sup> “The Birth of Betty” in *Transvestia* #59 (October 1969).

<sup>17</sup> James Gilbert. *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the Fifties* (226). Stephanie Coontz maintains: “Writers in the 1950s generally believed that the old-style husband and father was disappearing and that this was a good thing. The new-styled husband... was now ‘partner in the family firm, part time man, part-time mother and part-time maid.’ Family experts and marital advice columnists advocated a ‘fifty-fifty design for living,’ emphasizing that a husband should ‘help out’ with child rearing....” (238). Coontz adds, though, that this arrangement was not intended to be equal involvement.



tendency to over-exaggerate feminine mannerisms, wear too much and too heavy a make-up which gives a false look, and the wearing of too much jewelry.<sup>18</sup>

Marie was one of a few writers who claimed to have come out to his wife by simply presenting himself to her in complete dress. After Marie's surprise appearance and subsequent explanation, his wife agreed that he could wear some of her old clothes once in a while but only without their eight year old son's knowledge.

Having a completely accepting and accommodating wife was not the norm. As was evident in many of the cases above, including the stipulation provided by Marie's wife forbidding him to crossdress in front of their son, a transvestite's marriage most often involved a series of negotiations and compromises with his wife concerning the time, frequency, and place to crossdress. For example, "Betty" [Maryland] described a bitter conflict that raged for several years over the course of his marriage. Both he and his wife had thought his transvestism was only a fetish and would eventually go away. It did not. Nevertheless, Betty learned to compromise with his wife, and gradually she came to accept his desires to crossdress within certain limits, of which Betty described:

I cannot say that what was good for our marriage is good for all TV marriages but our answer has been 'Moderation.' Betty and her brother have two entirely separate identities. On the night that Betty is to visit, she comes from her room completely attired in her chosen clothes. To my spouse, it is just a visit from a friend. The two girls may just stay at home or may go visiting together to the homes of other TV's. In the past we have gone to the movies together and even shopping. These visits may only be once a week and sometimes even less, depending on the urgency of the desire. Betty does not come at the slightest whim of her brother, for he has learned to control her to a certain point.<sup>19</sup>

Another example of negotiation and compromise came from "Maureen" [Colorado], forty-eight years of age, who wrote about how he has used Biblical teachings to

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<sup>18</sup> "Since You Asked" in *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964).

<sup>19</sup> "My Double Life" in *Transvestia* #37 (February 1966).

understand his crossgender identity and to guide his crossdressing practices. Being a good husband and father was enormously important to him. This history featured a more detailed description (from the husband's perspective) of a wife's experiences living with a crossdresser than other histories did. Also, Maureen described the adjustments that he made as his kids grew older. He wrote that since getting married he has tried to negotiate with his wife and that he has demonstrated great patience with respect to her uneasiness over his crossdressing practices. He has consistently compromised with her over issues relating to when and where he can crossdress. For instance, she allows him to dress in a motel once a month. On these monthly occasions, after he dresses in the motel, he goes out in public and then attends a Phi Pi Epsilon meeting.<sup>20</sup> While they might significantly curtail or alter a husband's crossdressing practices, activities, and patterns, the arts of compromise and negotiation were nevertheless practiced by crossdressers who wanted to balance (what they often perceived as) an extracurricular hobby with what they viewed as their moral obligations to successfully adjust to the roles of devoted, breadwinning husband and strong father. The degree in which they successfully struck this balance can be better determined by a closer examination of the perspectives of their wives.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Struggle, Prayer, Patience" in *Transvestia* #83 (1974). Maureen possessed some unique interests. He enjoyed dressing as a nurse and hanging out in area hospitals. He also enjoyed maternity role playing. One of the photographs he submitted showed him in a maternity dress with the appearance of being about eight months pregnant. Yet, he claimed that crossdressing had never been a sexual outlet for him. Instead, he considered himself to be a part-time woman.

<sup>21</sup> For a contemporary perspective from a wife of a crossdresser, see the memoir by Helen Boyd, *My Husband Betty: Love, Sex, and Life with a Crossdresser* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003) and the follow-up memoir, *She's Not the Man I Married: My Life with a Transgender Husband* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007). The first advice / support book to be written by a wife of a crossdresser was Peggy Rudd, *My Husband Wears My Clothes: Crossdressing from the Perspective of a Wife* (PM Publishing, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1999). Annie Woodhouse includes a chapter on the attitudes and struggles of a handful of English wives of crossdressers she interviewed in the 1980s. See, *Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender, and Transvestism* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989).

### “You’re not perfect”: Wives’ Perspectives

Wives of transvestites had a small but significant voice within the pages of *Transvestia*.<sup>22</sup> Virginia Prince published thirty-two letters to the editor from wives and two letters from girlfriends. Ten wives wrote notes of support that Prince reprinted following each of their husbands’ histories. And Prince published one article from the spouse of one of *Transvestia*’s regular columnists, Shelia Niles. In “Thoughts of a TV Wife,” Avis claimed to have met dozens of other couples. “The wives,” she observed, “range from those who refuse to have anything to do with transvestism, through the majority of us who are tolerant but not enthusiastic, to a few who wholeheartedly support and encourage their husbands.”<sup>23</sup> Most of the letters that Prince published came from spouses, like Avis, who more or less supported their husbands. Most of these supportive letters featured the following tropes: validating the masculinity and heterosexuality of one’s husband; vouching for his status as a good husband and provider; and claiming marital happiness and togetherness due to open acceptance. Only a few letters featured wives who voiced strong criticisms. I will discuss these critical letters later. Although few in number, the fact that Prince published any criticisms suggests that she was not *actively* trying to suppress unfavorable opinions. A skeptic would suggest that she published only a few to appear democratic; however, based on my reading of the archive, I have concluded that unsupportive wives of *Transvestia*’s subscribers simply did not bother to write. Yet to be fair, it also appears that Prince did not actively seek to represent their voices to the extent that she did the voices of supportive wives, whose views and

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to suggest that wives did not have a pervasive ‘presence’ throughout the magazine. They did.

<sup>23</sup> “Thoughts of a TV Wife” by Avis in *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965). Avis was the wife of columnist Sheila Niles.

opinions she actively solicited in order to support her dominant script and to create a positive image of heterosexual transvestism.

On another level, the preponderance of supportive wives is not all that surprising. Women who married crossdressers, whether knowingly or not, faced the same ideological messages and social imperatives as women in conventional marriages. For both during the postwar era, the single acceptable goal was finding fulfillment in the family as wives and mothers. At the same time, many cultural elites and experts outlined clear and strict gender definitions, exaggerated traditional femininity, supported gender segregation, and promoted women's dependence on men. (The family wage / male as breadwinner system certainly ensured their economic dependence.) These ideologies, masquerading as timeless truths and bolstered by strong structural supports, state incentives, and popular culture, including film, television, and women's magazines were, by and large, accepted by most women in the postwar era. What Wini Breines describes of white middle-class women goes a long way in explaining why wives of transvestites more or less supported their husbands and why they tried to make their marriages work despite whatever unpleasant feelings accrued from the constant knowledge that their husbands enjoy wearing women's clothing:

...Mothers and young single women anticipating marriage valued above all the home, the ability of children to bind a couple together, the sacrifice and fulfillment of parenthood, companionship rather than pleasure or love as the basis of marriage. They were committed to being wives and, even more, to being parents. While many were unhappy, most believed that they had sacrificed little or that what they had sacrificed was minor compared to what they had gained. Many women were dissatisfied and hurt but zealous in their need to see their marriages as successful. Despite their ambivalences, they believed it was their job to keep their husbands happy. They were accommodating [and] the appearance of a happy marriage was more important than happiness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable* (58).

The letters and notes from the wives of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers featured fascinating descriptions of postwar marital relationships and domestic life. "Mrs. Kathy," who had been married for six years to a transvestite, said that she was initially confused and dismayed after her husband confessed his transvestism but later experienced a change of heart. "I realized how much he needed someone who would understand and sympathize with his desires and accept him as he was. I simply made up my mind that I would be that someone."<sup>25</sup> After initial shock and anger, many wives took it upon themselves to be their husbands' support and to keep their marriages together. These wives operated under the ideologies of family togetherness, spousal support no matter what the circumstances, and domestic containment. "Your husband has this desire to cross-dress and you must be there to help him as you would if any other problem occurred in your marriage life," advised one wife to another.<sup>26</sup> A wife named Wilma "realized how my husband has felt about feminine clothing and how he really enjoys wearing them, so how could I deny him that bit of pleasure and relaxation when he works hard and is such a good provider for both my daughter and I [sic]?"<sup>27</sup> Wilma and other wives weighed the pros and cons of the situation and decided that things could be worse. "Let them have their dresses for a hobby," exclaimed one wife. "It could be another

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Mrs. "Kathy" in *Transvestia* #68 (1971). Her husband is Kathy ( New York 32-Z-3 FPE).

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Shirley to Georgette in *Transvestia* #35. Shirley may be the wife of Fran, FPE's Executive Secretary. A less visible part of the domestic story coming out of *Transvestia* but one that may have been more prominent "off scene" was how wives offered support to one another through correspondence. This would be a difficult story to discern for lack of evidence, but, fortunately, Prince reprinted a few letters that two wives who had come to accept their husbands' transvestism had sent to other wives who were struggling.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from wife of Wilma (New York 32-T-6) in *Transvestia* #49 (February 1968).

woman or many other bad habits.”<sup>28</sup> This wife and several others learned to enjoy their husbands’ unusual hobby. “I get so much pleasure out of seeing my husband do what he likes,” wrote Wilma, “and yet know he is very much a man in our love life and sex. I am very close to my husband in both respects, as his wife and as his TV sister.”<sup>29</sup> As Wilma demonstrated, a wife usually defended her husband’s heterosexual manhood and was quick to shield him from any sordid speculations, especially from the charge of homosexuality. “My husband is all man, in every way,” proclaimed Mrs. D.H., “and the idea of an affair with another man is very repulsive to him.”<sup>30</sup> “So he likes to wear dresses!” exclaimed another wife. “To me, this does not make him any less of a man. All of the other TVs that we have met are good husbands and fathers, who love their wives and families. They are not any sort of deviate.”<sup>31</sup>

Supportive wives enumerated the benefits of having a crossdresser as a husband. “I think TVs make more considerate husbands,” wrote Mrs. D.H. “Mine helps me with the housework and never has been guilty of telling me how easy life is for women.”<sup>32</sup> When the wife of “Carol” found out about her husband’s crossdressing eleven years ago, she was initially distraught but decided to try to understand it because she wanted to preserve the marriage for the sake of their infant son. According to her, it was a “long hard road.” She and her husband even separated for four years but eventually reconciled, and she was able to reflect in her letter on some of the positives of having a crossdresser as a husband.

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Mrs. D.H. (Colorado) in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

<sup>29</sup> Letter from wife of Wilma (New York 32-T-6) in *Transvestia* #49 (February 1968).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Mrs. D.H. (Colorado) in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Shirley to Georgette in *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965).

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Mrs. D.H. (Colorado) in *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

“One advantage to his being a TV,” she wrote, “is the fact that he feels things very deeply and, I think, is more understanding of me, being a girl himself at times.” In her note, she encouraged other wives to try to understand their husbands and accept the fact that they are transvestites.<sup>33</sup> Twenty-eight year old Shirley, who had been married for five years, highlighted similar benefits: “My husband knows what a new dress or some small item can do for my feminine morale. They actually understand better than most other husbands. They are more sensitive and compassionate.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, a wife named Mary Ann felt “a little flattered” by her husband’s hobby. “I believe that because of his dressing urges I receive a certain amount of benefits. I have found a very loving and gentle husband who is very helpful around the house, be it cooking or house cleaning, [and] who is very knowledgeable in fashion and a very good friend as well as a husband.”<sup>35</sup> Another wife, Linda, claimed that it had not been unusual for her to accept her husband: “It came to me along with everything else Joe had when I fell in love with him five years ago. Each of us married for better or worse, don’t they [wives of crossdressers] have the sense to know they have the better? Never did a woman have a better husband than a TV.” Linda enclosed a picture of “Joe (Judi), my masterpiece.” As one who dispensed advice, styled her husband’s wigs, and purchased feminine attire for him, Linda was the kind of legendary “A+” wife most every heterosexual crossdresser wished for. “I know I have done much to help create her [Judi] and I am proud,” boasted Linda.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wife’s note follows Carol’s (35-L-12 FPE) history in *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964).

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Shirley to Georgette in *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965).

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Mary Ann to another wife in *Transvestia* #94 (1978).

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Linda, wife of Judi in *Transvestia* #56 (April 1969).

Another wife who brought new definition to the term “companionate marriage” provided a fascinating look into her and the husband’s public outings and the domestic chores they shared:

We began going out as two girls. It was for car rides and drive-in movies at first. When we started going out I must admit I was nervous. But after a few times I started relaxing and just accepted ‘Kathie’ as my sister.... Later on we started taking short walks together as girls. We even went shopping together as sisters in a couple of the local department stores.... Since we both work, Saturday used to be the worst day of the week for me because that was the day I did my cleaning and washing. Now all that has changed. We both get into old housedresses and do the work together.<sup>37</sup>

While many wives made the best of a bad and potentially embarrassing situation, several wives, like Shirley, Mary Ann, Linda, and Mrs. Kathy, above, genuinely seemed to embrace their husbands’ transvestism. These wives expressed a number of ideas voiced by other wives, including the interrelated beliefs that transvestite men make caring husbands and that transvestism draws couples closer together. They saw in their husbands a number of positive qualities, such as sensitivity and compassion, and each viewed her husband as a “good friend” and as being “helpful around the house.” They believed that these qualities complimented and enhanced those attributes associated with being a good husband, father, and provider.

Most wives who wrote to Prince and submitted notes along with their husband’s history were prone to be tolerant. It was unlikely for an intolerant wife to even bother writing, although some who were less than enthusiastic about their husbands’ crossdressing did so, as the examples below will show. The paucity of critical voices does not mean that we cannot discern the perspectives of wives who for whatever reason had difficulty accepting their husbands’ transvestism. We can ascertain their viewpoints

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from Mrs. “Kathy” in *Transvestia* #68 (1971). Her husband is Kathy ( New York 32-Z-3 FPE).



through the complaints that understanding wives registered in published notes and letters and through the descriptions that supportive wives provided of prior years of hurt, anguish, and intolerance. Particularly valuable were letters from wives who described their feelings and experiences over a period of time. For example, Viv was initially baffled after learning of her husband's transvestism. "I even felt," she wrote, "it was because of a lack of femininity on my part." Unlike middle-class white women of the Victorian era who mostly viewed sex as a matter of reproduction and were expected to be reluctant partakers in the sexual act, postwar women were expected to be sexually desirable, eager, and available to their husbands.<sup>38</sup> This may explain why Viv worried about a perceived "lack of femininity" on her part. She eventually decided that she could accept her husband's transvestism if it remained a "private affair" and if it did not "consume all his spare time." "Our problem," she wrote, "has never been his dressing but with my accepting him as Marie when he is in feminine dress. Fears of losing my own femininity by accepting his and that he might become a transsexual have been the reason for this."

A few other wives also voiced Viv's fear that their husbands might choose to live full-time as women or obtain a sex change operation. Most, though, seemed oblivious to these two possibilities. They tended to characterize their husbands' proclivities as unusual hobbies, or odd behavioral quirks, or the funny regalia of yet another ritualistic, homosocial men's group. "He looks, when he dresses, like a pretty girl," remarked one wife, "and after all it is only a temporary change of looks, not much different from a Shriner or a Moose or whatever who dresses up in strange costumes complete with secret

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<sup>38</sup> Elaine Tyler May (102).

handshakes.”<sup>39</sup> Meeting several other transvestites and their wives and seeing how “they are people just like ourselves” eased Viv and others’ minds tremendously. Viv wrote that she has now reached the point in her relationship with her husband where she actually enjoys the company of her husband’s feminine persona and his occasional help with dinner, dishes, and the housework. However, she wrote that she is still apprehensive about going out in public with “Marie.” Viv advised *Transvestia*’s readers to be patient with their wives after asking them for acceptance. “Most young girls are brought up with the idea her husband will be masculine in every aspect of the word,” she explained. “After years with this idea it cannot be changed over night.” Despite the hardships and the adjustments on her part, Viv proclaimed that “life can be beautiful for a transvestite and his wife!”<sup>40</sup> Judging by their statements, other wives agreed. “While I would not wish an FP husband on any woman,” said another wife, “I say sincerely, and I mean this, that my husband’s TVism has brought us a lot closer together than the average couple.”<sup>41</sup>

While few in number compared to the more than three hundred published histories and letters from crossdressers, these letters and notes from the wives greatly enhance our understanding of the domestic lives of transvestite couples. A wife’s note that followed her husband’s history usually added complexity to the husband’s account of marital relations. This was the case with a crossdresser named “Sally” [Texas] and his wife. “She has assisted me remarkably in my transformation with advice on makeup and clothes,” Sally said of his wife. “She has [even] become expert at posing my awkward body into

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from MaryAnn to another wife in *Transvestia* #94 (1978).

<sup>40</sup> Viv’s note follows Marie’s (14-K-2) history in *Transvestia* #29 (October 1964).

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Mrs. “Kathy” in *Transvestia* #68 (1971).

more graceful positions for photographs.” Judging from Sally’s account, his marriage was total bliss. A note from Sally’s wife, though, served as an important caveat in a number of respects:

When I first discovered my husband’s transvestism, I was shocked, disappointed, and appalled. I had never heard of a transvestite, and I’m sure most women haven’t due to their sheltered backgrounds painted with rosy pictures of marriage and the American way of life. I had, however, some knowledge of homosexuals through jokes heard in college and visits to my local beauty salon, and I associated him with this group. This was the hardest thing for me to overcome.... I remember that my first teary comment after finding him in women’s clothes was ‘You’re not perfect,’ because until this encounter he had had no faults. He was successful, handsome, and socially very popular. I had had a crush on him long before we dated. I used to think that this TV would be the only thing I’d change about him. I know now that my husband is as much a man and more than any other I have ever known. I still harbor the fear, however, that if anyone else found out about my husband’s hobby, they too might make the same erroneous conclusion. This could ruin him professionally and socially; therefore, we are most cautious. I appreciate this. If it were otherwise, my attitude might be different. As it is, we share a sacred secret.<sup>42</sup>

Although the wife of Sally supported her husband and defended his manliness, she described a lingering anxiety that chipped away the veneer of carefree happiness that her husband had painted of their marriage. What also comes through in her letter, especially with her final remark, was the closeness between wives and husbands that transvestism often inspired. As we have seen, many of *Transvestia*’s writers and the wives who wrote letters and notes made curious claims that transvestism brought them closer together to their spouses. This “togetherness,” as Sally’s wife suggests, could just as easily have been inspired by fear and anxiety. Like the sacred vows they took to love, honor, and cherish no matter what the odds or circumstances, she and her husband Sally shared a secret, a potentially destructive one, that bound them together. Simply put, their marriage was a portrait of domestic containment.

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<sup>42</sup> This note followed Sally’s (Texas 43-S-5) history in *Transvestia* #39 (June 1966).

The theme of containment appeared in the letters and notes of other wives who recounted their troubled and anxiety-ridden experiences trying to come to terms with their husbands' predilections. A compelling letter of this kind came from a spouse who identified herself as "the wife of Stella." Although the wife of Stella had grown to tolerate and somewhat accept her husband's crossdressing, she recalled the time when her husband first disclosed to her and vividly described the tumultuous emotions that erupted within her. Perhaps what most comes out of her remembrance is a sense of the absolute isolation that many of these wives must have felt following a shocking disclosure or discovery. She wrote:

Last year my husband sat me down and explained to me that he was a transvestite (even the very sound of the word scared me) but not a homosexual. He couldn't explain why, because he knew very little about the subject. But he said that this is the way he is and can't help it. I really didn't understand and was terribly mixed up. There was nobody I could turn to, no one I could talk to about this.... I honestly thought I was married to some sort of queer... There was really nothing I could do except try to make him feel guilty about this and then maybe he would stop. I let him dress occasionally but would have very little to do with him. I let him know I was against it. When he would leave for work I would cry for hours, not knowing what I could do. Was I married to a man or a woman? Was there really such a person as a transvestite who was not a homosexual, or was he just putting up a front to fool me. My mind was in a constant state of turmoil.

The wife of Stella, much like Sally's wife above, captured the fear, confusion, pain, and again—the isolation—that must have wreaked havoc on a number of other wives who in a privatized nuclear family structure had few people, if any, to turn to for comfort and counsel.

Yet, significantly, the wife of Stella did not stand by passively. Instead, she behaved in ways and took actions that "let him know I was against it." For example:

At one point I felt that he had hurt me so badly that I wanted to get back at him, so one morning a friend of his came over to the house. My husband was still sleeping in his gown and make-up. I thought now he will get his just due. I let the

company in and woke my husband to tell him that \_\_\_\_ was there to see him. He woke up frantic; here he was in full make-up and had to walk past the living room to get to the bathroom and wash-up. [But] I forgot that in one of my dresser drawers I had some cold cream and he cleaned up quite well before coming out.<sup>43</sup>

The story told by the wife of Stella indicates that wives of crossdressers did not act passively or always play the subservient role of enabler. Rather, they could be quite cunning and resourceful in enacting revenge and in shaping their husbands' desires and practices. Susanna Valenti's observations at a holiday party attended by transvestites and several wives revealed clues to the dynamics of TV / wife interaction at mixed social gatherings and the power wives could exert on their husbands' behavior.

Some of the husbands acted definitely sheepish, almost apologetic in front of the GG's [genetic girls]. Those who came without their wives were definitely more at ease. Obviously there is still a lot of guilt left inside. With the wife present they seem to be hobbled, they even walk with a touch of the sea-faring captain. Their voices seem to grow even deeper than normal. It is interesting to note that when alone, I mean without the wife present, the voice goes up a notch and there's more of 'the lady' showing.<sup>44</sup>

Evidence from another underground transvestite magazine indicates that wives did have an active voice. In "Don't Call Me Roommate! A TV Wife's Bill of Rights," one wife lists fifteen demands and describes the minor irritations and major conflicts that can "bear the seeds of destruction into a TV's marriage." She implores "TV husbands" to: "Never let me forget you are my husband.... Don't compete with me.... Don't speak to me of hormones.... Don't always expect me to help you dress.... Don't wear my clothes

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Wife of Stella in *Transvestia* #79 (1973).

<sup>44</sup> "Susanna Says" in *Transvestia* #25 (February 1964).

without my permission.... Stick to the budget.... Listen to my advice.... Stop making excuses for being a TV”, among other demands.<sup>45</sup>

Within the pages of *Transvestia*, one wife, Avis, who we met above, composed a long think-piece, entitled “Thoughts of a TV Wife,” In this hard-hitting essay, Avis asserted that only a few wives actually liked their husbands’ crossdressing activities. “We married you because you were a nice person and a man—in short a husband,” she contended. “Had we wanted a ‘sister’ or a ‘roommate’ we would have found a girl.” Avis also detailed several of the “little things” that bothered her about transvestism; among them was counting the shoes in her husband’s closet and finding out he has more. Another aspect of transvestism that bothered her was a general tendency on the part of crossdressers to downplay their desire and “ultimate goal” to dress fully and regularly go out. “Moderation is mentioned,” she observed, “but there are very few guidelines on how to achieve it, nor in the face of the fantasies written by various TVs is it made to seem very desirable.” No published account from a wife in *Transvestia* had ever been as audacious in exposing the compulsive and narcissistic tendencies behind the image of benign respectability that Prince and most of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers strove to portray of heterosexual transvestism. Perhaps most stinging to the readership was Avis’ frank observation that “few TVs have the physical build which makes them very acceptable as women, so their chances of really passing are slim. Many have gone out, but just because

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<sup>45</sup> This wife’s “...Bill of Rights” was published in *Turnabout* #4 (1964). Interestingly, the website of Tri-Ess (a direct descendent of Phi Pi Epsilon) includes a contemporary “Wives’ and Crossdressers’ Bill of Rights.” See, [http://www.tri-ess.org/Wives\\_CDs\\_BofR.html](http://www.tri-ess.org/Wives_CDs_BofR.html).

they were not picked up does not mean that no one read them. Lots of people don't care.”  
[Ouch!]<sup>46</sup>

Avis understood that her husband and others like him were in a precarious social position and that they depended on their wives' good graces and discretion. This kind of knowledge emboldened Avis and perhaps other wives. It gave them a chip to bargain with, even if, judging by their accounts, they almost always sought a compromise. “We acknowledge your need to dress on occasion,” she conceded, “but you must remember that we really want a man, not another woman, and we do care what our friends and neighbors think. We can help you become more attractive girls and you can learn to know yourself.” For Avis and numerous other wives, tolerance and acceptance were not unconditional; they came with rules, stipulations, and, in almost all cases, a tacitly understood agreement—a social contract—that stated that wives have the ‘right’ to be wedded to a ‘real’ husband, with all the culturally ascribed attributes characterizing the role of husband (and father) during this time. Consequently, Avis sought to manage her husband's compulsion and many other wives probably did, as well.<sup>47</sup>

For many wives, management of their husbands' transvestism was a continual process and project. When the husband proved unwilling to change or succumb to a wife's demands, things could get ugly. One frustrated wife wrote anonymously:

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<sup>46</sup> I have found no evidence to indicate whether or not *Transvestia*'s wives supported or joined the women's rights movement or women's liberation. (To be sure, Avis wrote her critique a year before NOW formed in 1966.) It would be interesting to know to what degree, if any, second wave feminism influenced the attitudes of these wives with respect to their husband's depictions and perceptions of femininity. This question awaits further research on my part. My understanding of the modern women's rights and liberation movements has primarily come from Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989) and Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> “Thoughts of a TV Wife” by Avis in *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965). Avis was the wife of columnist Sheila Niles.

I am the wife of an FP and have known and lived with his secret for ten years. I have read...many issues of *Transvestia*. I have tried to understand and to be of some assistance to my husband but my marriage is going down the drain. Everything I have read about FPs has stressed that the wife and family must give him understanding and acceptance. But nothing has been said about the FP trying to understand his wife and family. I have met several FPs and they all have one thing in common—they are self-centered, egotistical, and very immature.... Our sex life is almost at a standstill because no one can turn him on like his femme-self can. I cannot make love to him while he is dressed as it seems too much like a lesbian relationship and this makes me physically ill.<sup>48</sup>

If this anonymous wife's account is true, and there is little reason to believe it is not, then here was a husband who was not fulfilling his end of the domestic bargain. His compulsive need to crossdress hindered his ability to be a devoted family man and to fulfill his wife's sexual needs. Remarks from a wife named Nancy suggests that these hindrances were more common than not. "Pity the poor wife who exists mostly in the fantasy world of her TV husband.... A TV wife may have to cut way down on her own wardrobe to meet the insatiable needs of her husband."<sup>49</sup> Several husbands, though, were careful not to impede on their family's finances. "The subject of the amount of money spent on TV is a serious one," acknowledged "Louise." "This is a hobby and money spent on it should come out of that available for recreation. Family necessities and certainly the wife's clothing come first."<sup>50</sup>

The anonymous wife's letter above was one of only two negative letters from wives that Prince published. "Anonymous" had sent her letter directly to Prince. The other letter, however, was not intended for publication in *Transvestia*. This letter was sent by an angry wife to one of *Transvestia*'s subscribers. Prince explained in an editorial note

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<sup>48</sup> Letter from anonymous wife in *Transvestia* #78 (1973).

<sup>49</sup> "Femme Forum" #8 (January 1967).

<sup>50</sup> "Femme Forum" #9 (March 1967).



preceding the reprinted letter that a subscriber had established correspondence with another subscriber through one of the magazine's contact advertisements. The wife of the intended recipient had intercepted the letter and sent back a vicious letter. After receiving the furious wife's letter, the subscriber forwarded it to Prince. Prince published it in the magazine in order to serve as a warning to other crossdressers not to write this particular member. This letter, the most scathing ever published in the magazine, read:

You are sick and are in very bad need of professional help. As you don't know, I am a nurse and we put people like you in an insane asylum or on the psycho ward in the hospital. I know my husband must have answered that ad by the reference to your letter but no letter from you or your B+ wife could convince me what you're doing is normal. You'd better seek help from a Professional Doctor or find an old fashioned altar and pray to God for his saving power to save you from a Devil's Hell. That would be the best fulfillment you or your 'sisters' could ever get. I hope and pray if you ever 'dress' again there will be a Policeman close by to nab you and 'undress' you in front of so many people it will make you feel as low as an animal.... No, your wife had better not write to me for what you do is your business and I am an F or Z wife and I won't ever believe anything could convince me to believe what you're doing is right. If my husband desires this kind of life he has my blessing with a divorce. I wouldn't want to expose our daughter to anything so disgusting.<sup>51</sup>

Although it is impossible to determine how representative were the harsh views expressed in this letter, it is reasonable to assume that this wife voiced the attitudes and beliefs of a fair number of other wives, not to mention the general public. In her diatribe, this wife touched on each of the three 'domains'—medical, religious, and juridical discourses—that brand, regulate, and demonize non-normative sexual and gender behavior, expression, and identity. It was this sort of vehemence on the part of the public and the configuration of transvestism as a condition of sickness, sin, and illegality that Prince sought to challenge by publishing *Transvestia* and establishing Phi Pi Epsilon. In fact, Prince may have published the letter above to remind her readers of the forces of

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<sup>51</sup> This wife's letter was dated May 24, 1971, in *Transvestia* #70 (1971).

ignorance and intolerance raging outside the pages of *Transvestia*. In addition to fostering sociality and connection, *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon largely functioned to help readers and members construct an identity narrative—a social script—to counter the shame and stigma of crossdressing and to help them navigate the domestic realm, manage their crossdressing practices, and balance competing ‘recreational’ and family demands.

For many of *Transvestia*’s writers, one of these demands included being a good father. Transvestism and fatherhood created interesting challenges and problems. Everything was compounded by the social and cultural importance placed on fatherhood. “Husbands, especially fathers,” writes Elaine Tyler May of this era, “wore the badge of ‘family man’ as a sign of virility and patriotism.”<sup>52</sup> The domestic ideology of companionate marriage had widespread cultural support. Michael Kimmel notes that “Psychologists, child-development experts, sociologists, and educators all chimed in a growing chorus of anxiety about the gender development of boys. Men had to be dedicated fathers to offset overdominant motherhood and to help their sons resist the temptations of gender nonconformity.”<sup>53</sup> This, of course, was all the more ironic, given a transvestite father’s proclivities. Even transvestites’ non-TV male counterparts were encouraged to become domesticated dads. Despite some critiques of cultural feminization, the promotion of domestic fatherhood, or what Margaret Marsh calls “masculine domesticity,” did allow some family men who were also crossdressers a little wiggle room to conceptualize their practices as merely following cultural directives.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Elaine Tyler May (98).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 244.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity.” *American Quarterly* Vol. 40. No. 2 (June, 1988), 165—186. Marsh argues that this new model of fatherhood urged men to help around the house and

Telling children, while not the most common form of disclosure written about in *Transvestia*, was definitely the most controversial. Most couples kept the father's practices secret from their kids. "Judy" [Wisconsin] and his wife, however, were rare exceptions. Judy wrote that he and his wife were not guarding their two year old son from his "TV activities." "We know that he will have questions as he grows older, but we feel confident that his questions can be answered satisfactorily."<sup>55</sup> Only a handful of other writers wrote about disclosing to their kids. "Barbara Lee" [Illinois] and his wife agonized over whether or not to tell their four children. He described the experience as follows:

At an earlier meeting with my son's doctors they [the doctors] had suggested that we tell him about me and TV. They also felt that we should tell our other three children. It was their feeling that the children knowing would help relieve some of the tension that they felt existed in the home. Well, we told the children and it did help things in the house. I no longer had to hide when I wanted to dress. I have to say here that with my two daughters it didn't seem to bother them but the boys were different. They didn't take to it at first. Now some two years later things have improved a great deal. The children know now that regardless of what I may have on I am still their dad. I still have as much if not more of their respect than I had before we told them about my TV life.... In fact, if anything, it has made us closer as a family.<sup>56</sup>

Barbara Lee's history was followed by notes of support from his wife and one of his daughters. Although his wife did not generally recommend telling the children, she agreed that, in their case, telling the children was a good idea, as disclosure removed the tension and emotional strain in their home. She voiced her husband's claim—one that a few other wives also expressed—that full disclosure brought their families closer

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learn the important tasks of child-rearing, especially for sons. Masculinity, then, could be enacted in the home.

<sup>55</sup> "Just Me" in *Transvestia* #47 (October 1967).

<sup>56</sup> "Over the Years" in *Transvestia* #46 (August 1967).

together. The oldest daughter in the family also wrote a short note. Her note was one of only three letters written by children (two daughters and one son) that were published in the magazine. The rarity of the note makes it worth quoting in part:

To me my father is the greatest even though he is a TV. My father and I are very close and my feelings toward him have not changed at all since I first found out that he was a TV.... My two brothers sometimes have trouble understanding but because they love him just the same, they feel the same way I do.<sup>57</sup>

Some married couples decided to expose their children to their father's transvestism at birth or from a very early age. "Gisele" [Illinois] provided the most detailed explanation as to why he and his wife decided to raise their two year old baby daughter to become accustomed to her father being dressed either in male or female attire. He wrote:

Our feeling is that children accept as normal those things that their parents likewise accept.... The one cardinal rule we do have is that Daddy is always Daddy no matter how he is dressed. (This does hurt Gisele's ego at times—to be dressed to kill, ready to go out, and have a daughter run up and say 'Hi Daddy'). We definitely don't believe in the 'visiting aunt theory.' We want her to trust us and don't think it wise to create a fictional being whose authenticity and credibility would lessen with the increasing awareness of the child as she grew older. Better to let her get used to Daddy dressed as a man or as a lady, while simultaneously impressing on her the idea that what her mother and father do at home is private and not something to discuss with others outside of the home....<sup>58</sup>

Gisele's last remark about the home as a private space evokes, again, a linkage with the theory of postwar domestic containment. In this case, the privatized nuclear family structure practically ensured that daddy's terrible secret would be kept sealed. But anxiety lingered, always.

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<sup>57</sup> *Transvestia* #46 (August 1967). Another TV named Julie (13-M-7) had a fourteen year old step-daughter who wrote a letter: "There are no secrets about TV between us. I realize he took a great risk in confiding in me and I respect and admire him a great deal for it."

<sup>58</sup> "Memories—Bitter and Sweet" in *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965).

Was transvestism, like homosexuality, a potentially potent disruption of the stability of heterosexual marriage and family life? As this chapter on transvestism, marriage, and postwar domesticity has shown, *Transvestia*'s writers offered a dramatic portrait of familial life. It is not difficult to understand why marriage, domesticity, and fatherhood figured so heavily in their narratives. Historians have noted that postwar Americans rushed into marriage and embraced nuclear family life, partly, to fortify the boundaries within which they lived. "They wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country," writes Elaine May. "And so they adhered to the overarching principle that would guide them in their personal and political lives: containment."<sup>59</sup> May was speaking of white middle-class couples. But the principle of containment—the image of the nuclear family as a fortress—equally applies to transvestite couples who married in the late 1940s and 1950s and who wrote their stories at the end of the long fifties and throughout the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s. And perhaps more so. As a psychological fortress, marriage protected many of them from the compulsive aspects of crossdressing that could lead to a life of social ostracism. A wife, a breadwinning job, and a couple of kids also provided them with cover and shielded them from the taint of sexual deviancy. Given these reasons, it is really not surprising that transvestite men sought marriage and valorized, indeed, retreated into nuclear family living.

Yet the secure and safe comforts of domesticity could not contain some transvestites. A number of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers risked blowing their cover for the "thrill" that

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<sup>59</sup> May, 13. She also reminds us that "Even if the result did not fully live up to their expectations, these husbands and wives never seriously considered bailing out. It is important to consider the limited options and alternatives that these men and women faced. It was not a perfect life, but it was secure and predictable. Forging an independent life outside marriage carried enormous risks of emotional and economic bankruptcy, along with social ostracism. As these couples sealed the psychological boundaries around the family, they also sealed their fates within it" (36).

dressing as women and leaving the security and privacy of their homes conferred. For some of these adventurers, public excursions socially validated a crossgender identity and for others they offered fun and escape. The next chapter historicizes the emergence of organized transvestism in the 1960s, focusing on the hundreds of crossdressers who ventured outside their ‘private fortresses’ to join a unique semi-public social organization that Prince created for transvestites.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### COMING OUT OF THEIR (WIVES') CLOSETS

In the decades following WWII membership organizations and social movements formed that centered on sexual and gender identities. The homophile movement, the women's rights movement, women's liberation, lesbian-feminism, and gay liberation fundamentally altered social relationships in the United States. The Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, the National Organization for Women, the Redstockings, the Radicalesbians, feminist-consciousness raising groups, the Gay Liberation Front, the Lavender Menace, and other groups formed strategies and developed tactics to challenge patriarchal and heteronormative laws, representations, discourses, and customs that relegated women and sexual minorities to second class citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Histories of the homophile movement and gay liberation include: Jonathan Ned Katz. *Gay American History: Lesbians & Gay Men in the U.S.A.* Rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1992); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983); Martin Duberman, *Stonewall*. (New York: Dutton, 1993); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945- 1972*(Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000); Martin Meeker. *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s—1970s* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Avalon, 2006). For histories of the post-1945 American Women's Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Movement, see Sarah M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. (New York: Knopf, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of "The Feminine Mystique": The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); and Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).

In the shadows of these sexual and gender revolutions toiled smaller numbers of “transgender” networks, groups, and organizations. Histories of transgender activism and community-building are just now being or have only recently been written by Vern Bullough, Joanne Meyerowitz, Susan Stryker, David Valentine, and a few other scholars of the GLBTQ experience.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I contribute to this project of historical excavation with a detailed account of the formation and evolution of one of the earliest “trans” membership organizations in the United States—Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE). Founded in 1962 by Virginia Prince to offer mutual support and self-help to male-to-female crossdressers, FPE attracted hundreds of members and established around twenty-five local chapters or “sororities” across the United States and also in England, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries. In the United States, as a national structure, FPE was loosely organized, and its chapters were kept going by only a handful of dedicated leaders and activist members. These local leaders organized chapter meetings and social activities whereby members could crossdress freely, discuss problems, and develop self-knowledge and group consciousness. In this respect and others, the organizational culture, strategies, and goals of FPE resembled those of the homophile groups that formed several years earlier. However, I have found no hard evidence to indicate whether Prince consciously used them as models for establishing FPE.

Like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, the membership of FPE was relatively small and it catered to white, middle-class notions of respectability in a

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<sup>1</sup> Vern Bullough, *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Annick Prieur, *Mama's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998); Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003); Susan Stryker, ed. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Paisley Currah, ed. *Transgender Rights*. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006); and David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: A Politics of Gender/Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007).



conservative political climate. In response to widespread public condemnation, the leaders and active members of FPE searched for sympathetic allies among doctors, mental health professionals, lawyers, and other public authorities. By creating a dialogue with these professional communities, FPE leadership hoped to turn public opinion in the direction of tolerance for and, at best, acceptance of crossdressing. The membership of FPE, though, was not entirely beholden to professionals, experts, and authorities. Some chapters waged educational campaigns and created brochures, pamphlets, and newsletters to counter stigmatizing medical, legal, and religious discourses that configured transvestism (which the public lumped with sexual deviancy) as a condition of sickness, criminality, and immorality. Therefore, by establishing their own support groups, by forming strategic relationships with sympathetic professionals, and by distributing propagandist materials, the leaders and active members of FPE fought for control and management of the ‘story’ of transvestism.<sup>2</sup>

As will be shown, FPE evolved through three structural and leadership phases in 1965, 1972, and 1976. In 1976, FPE consolidated with Carol Beecroft’s smaller organization, Mamselle, a group that also catered to crossdressers identifying as heterosexual. This merger created Tri-Sigma, which changed its name to Tri-Ess in 1980. With national headquarters in Texas, Tri-Ess still exists today as the largest membership organization in the United States for heterosexual male-to-female crossdressers and their wives and families. In this chapter, I describe the organizational culture, social activities, and education campaigns of the active membership of FPE before its merger with Mamselle. I also situate members’ organizing efforts within the historical context of the sixties’

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the work of John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics Sexual Communities*, and Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, for most of my knowledge of the homophile movement.

culture of protest and social organizing, specifically the homophile and gay liberation movements, drawing parallels and noting important differences. Lastly, I argue for FPE's legacy and importance to the history of transgender activism.

Gender variant individuals gradually became politicized as formal social networks and organizations emerged in the early 1960s (for crossdressers) and the late 1960s and early 1970s (for transsexuals). The reform and political work of the formative stages and organizational phases eventually spawned a transgender social movement in the 1990s that sought civil, legal, and social rights for transgendered individuals. I will gauge the role that FPE played in this movement during its nascent stages, long before “transgender” became the umbrella term for a host of gender minorities and the basis for a rights-based political identity. I therefore draw attention to an era in the history of transgender when social identity was just beginning to be imagined and articulated by crossdressers and others who would fill and help shape the transgender category.

How do you render historically significant an organization of pseudonyms—a social club clouded in secrecy with members whose shame and guilt and/or their fear of public exposure kept most of them from visibly protesting and from ‘taking it to the streets’? An organizational history of FPE presents a number of historiographical challenges in regards to forming an assessment of its importance to and place within the literature on the culture of 1960s and 1970s protest and social organizing. These challenges can largely be overcome thanks to the organization's official newsletter, the “Femme Forum,” which was published every other month from late 1964 through 1972. This newsletter contained pronouncements from its editor and the executive secretary of FPE, “Fran Connors.” It also provided condensed reports of the news and goings-on of local

chapters. I could not find the original regional and chapter reports that were sent by the various regional counselors and chapter presidents to Conners and to “Sheila Niles,” the person who wrote the social section of the newsletter. Still, these brief news reports in the “Femme Forum” provide significant information regarding the social practices, activities, and organizational culture of FPE chapters. They suggest that FPE was more than a social “sorority.” Rather, many members of FPE joined out of a desire to help isolated crossdressers, to educate professionals and family members, and to help change the public’s negative attitude toward crossdressing. While not as large and as activist-oriented as the membership of other sexual and gender identity organizations and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, FPE still attracted significant numbers and nurtured dedicated members. “If we add up all of the members of FPE, past and present,” wrote Fran Conners in July of 1972, “the total is about 1,800.”<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I do not measure FPE members’ resistance to or compliance with gender norms or debate what actions and activities can legitimately be considered political. I only want to provide as much detail regarding what the leaders and active members envisioned and what they actually accomplished. In line with this, I have made a conscious effort to forego a post-Stonewall political framing of what counts as effective political action in order to more adequately read FPE within the social and historical conditions that necessitated its founding and shaped its evolution. Prince’s goals, actions, and strategies were shaped by the Cold War era’s widespread and total condemnation of sexual deviancy, particularly homosexuality. Viewing crossdressing as a sign and

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<sup>3</sup> Annual Report in “Femme Forum” (July 1972). According to John D’Emilio, the chapters of the homophile groups were “distressingly small in size and except for California and New York, never exceeded a score of active participants” (115). He lists the 1960 membership of the Mattachine Society at 230 and the Daughters of Bilitis at 110.

symptom of homosexuality, the pre-Stonewall public and even many medical professionals, subsumed transvestism within the category of sexual deviancy. One of Prince's primary goals in founding FPE was to break this linkage—to differentiate transvestites from homosexuals. (The model of a sorority helped desexualize transvestism with the notion that the members are sisters, not lovers.) To be sure, Prince's strategy to normalize transvestism was met with skepticism and disapproval from many of her would-be constituents who questioned the desirability of politicizing and publicizing their private practices and secret identities. But others joined her crusade for free gender expression, and it is to their efforts to organize, to create new knowledge, and to revise the dominant narrative of transvestism that I now turn.

#### The Emergence of Organized Transvestism<sup>4</sup>

Haven't you all read newspaper reports of police in various cities raiding some home or club and finding a bunch of 'guys as dolls'? What prevents our groups being looked upon the same way? Nothing at all...except Phi Pi Epsilon... when we get organized to the point where we have something to point to with some pride.<sup>5</sup>

With hundreds of readers across the United States, the magazine *Transvestia* created a textual community of crossdressers who read the publication and submitted their own stories. Reading facilitated self-recognition and inspired group consciousness. Prince believed the next step was to organize the magazine's nationwide audience into a cohesive social group. No other person in the United States had ever attempted to organize transvestites on a national level. In the February 1962 issue of *Transvestia*, Prince announced the formation of Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE), a national sorority for

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<sup>4</sup> The term "organized transvestism" comes from Vern Bullough (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Prince, "Our National Sorority" in *Transvestia* #15 (June 1962).

heterosexual transvestites, and in subsequent issues that same year she described its purpose and outlined an organizational plan and social vision.

As a national organization, FPE would support the development of local chapters across the United States and in other parts of the world, thereby providing members opportunities to socialize with other members in their area. Prince created FPE for crossdressers who “have begun to perceive something beyond the novelty and ‘thrill’ of putting on lingerie and a dress” secretly in their homes or in motels.<sup>6</sup> Prince believed that formal social interaction within the secure confines of a chapter meeting or function, in addition to being fun, would help foster self-acceptance and peace of mind among those who attended. Socially interacting and crossdressing in the presence of others also sped “feminine progress” and facilitated greater awareness of a member’s “femme-self” which, in turn, enhanced his feelings of authentic self-presentation. “The sorority is here,” proclaimed Prince “for those whose development has taken them to the point of FemmePersonation, which differs from simple transvestism in much the same way as being a champion Olympic swimmer differs from the person who simply puts on a bathing suit and gets in the pool.”<sup>7</sup>

In tandem with sociality and self-improvement, Prince envisioned FPE as having an educational mission to change the public perception of male-to-female crossdressing. Much like Mattachine and the Daughter of Bilitis discussion groups and feminist consciousness-raising groups, FPE chapter meetings became spaces for the production and exchange of empowering knowledge. Members gathered to share their experiences and problems and to discuss practical ways to educate wives, loved ones, friends, doctors,

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<sup>6</sup> *Transvestia* #15 (June 1962).

<sup>7</sup> *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).

and public officials. Prince often compared the philosophy of FPE to Alcoholics Anonymous. “AA helps its members to deal with their problems,” she wrote. “FPE does the same, except that handling alcoholism requires leaving alcohol alone, while handling crossdressing requires learning to accept it freely, comfortably and publicly to the extent of group commitment.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, crossdressing was viewed as potentially addictive and personally harmful behavior. But if carefully managed with group accountability, it could be a source of happiness and personal fulfillment. Functioning as a social club and support group, FPE normalized and disciplined transvestism, thereby reconceptualizing it as a form of behavior that fulfills inner personality needs and harms no one. It was not, Prince and other members of FPE asserted, a sickness or a sign of moral depravity as commonly presumed. Further, the organization instilled the knowledge that while a member may be physically isolated, he is by no means alone. An FPE member learned that crossdressing is a form of behavior shared by numerous other heterosexual men. In these ways, the philosophy behind FPE countered dominant discourses that framed transvestism as a mental disorder and a sexual pathology.

To further justify her organization’s founding, Prince devised a compelling rationale for its existence. She envisioned FPE as serving a larger social purpose, one that not only tangibly benefited “lonely girls in locked rooms,” but also would be recognized by the public at large as socially legitimate and beneficial. “I certainly have no desire to organize a group of guys whose only desire [is] to dress up and parade around as women,” Prince proclaimed. “Society would never understand nor condone. I want a group that has a socially and psychologically reasonable basis for existence, a helpful, practical program of development and a broad humanly valuable goal to strive for.” To

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<sup>8</sup> “Femme Forum” #35 (May 1972).

lend social legitimacy to an organization for crossdressers, Prince believed that she had to formulate an idea to sell to “society” or else FPE would be looked upon as “an oddball group of men who wore dresses.” Prince concluded that the public might support a group that organized against the tyranny of sex roles and gender norms. She argued that “society” would benefit if individuals could freely express both their masculine and feminine attributes without fear of social stigmatization. Prince explained:

Both males and females, having abilities whose expression is not generally permitted to members of a given sex, are forced to abandon and not utilize them.... We do not as yet have equal respect for men who enter what have traditionally been women’s fields. We have yet to see a husband staying at home with the children and running the home while the wife goes to the office. Yet there are certainly many marital combinations in which this would be the more sensible and productive arrangement. So this makes the matter of expressing one’s total personality a matter of social value, not a weird habit to be conducted behind locked doors and in isolation.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, this idea of free personality or gender expression was narrowly defined in individualistic terms at the detriment of true gender and sexual equity between men and women. The inability to express one’s “total personality” was perceived as a male dilemma, as Prince and many other members of FPE presumed that women were successfully entering traditionally masculine cultural and social arenas. And in a stunning example of hypocrisy, more than a few members considered this an encroachment.

Despite these limitations, FPE presented its members and the public with a novel and idealistic platform in the waning years of the “long Fifties.” Always a lover of semantics, Prince played around with one of the terms she had invented to replace *transvestite*: *FemmePersonator*. She noted that the initials “FP” were also the abbreviation for “full personality” and argued that their group was in a unique position to advocate for the “full personality expression” of every man and woman. F.P.E. thus became the acronym of

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<sup>9</sup> *Transvestia* #15 (June 1962).

the organization, and Prince employed the Greek letters of the alphabet to devise the name of the sorority: F (Phi) P (Pi) E (Epsilon). Phi Pi Epsilon or FPE would be the name of the national organization that would foster self-understanding and peace of mind in heterosexual crossdressers and bring enlightenment to a public ignorant of the arbitrary gender norms that hamper true individuality and human wholeness. With a name and a compelling rationale, the question then became how to organize.

#### Organizational Structure: The Regional Counselor System

The key words of this organization are: Knowledge, Growth, Service.  
Do you have any urge to be of what help you can to others who may not have progressed as far in understanding as you have?<sup>10</sup>

Prince envisioned the appointment of leaders and the formation of local chapters across the United States. The national office issued a charter for organizing a local chapter when a city, town, or area accumulated enough members, usually four or more, to form a club and when these members agreed to meet regularly. The Los Angeles group known as the Hose and Heels Club, whose members had been meeting since 1960, became the first chapter organized under FPE. The chapter assumed the name Alpha.<sup>11</sup> Prince appointed several trusted friends from this group and a few others outside California to help organize other chapters and devise rules, policies, and guidelines. From 1962 to 1965, FPE comprised four formal chapters (Alpha in Los Angeles, Beta in

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<sup>10</sup> Virginia Prince, *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Prince formed this local group. For the first meeting in 1960, she asked those who planned to attend to bring a pair of hose and high heels. As a way to break the ice, to soothe everyone's anxiety and fear, and immediately to start building trust, Prince insisted that the attendees put their hose and heels on after they arrived at the meeting.



Chicago, Delta in Cleveland, and Theta in Madison, Wisconsin) and dozens of affiliated, dues-paying members from all over the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Operations were extremely centralized in the early years. Prince used her offices at her home and at the chemical plant she worked at as national headquarters. She solely collected yearly national dues (ten dollars) and handled membership applications. Eventually, what many members perceived as an autocratic leadership style led several of them to dissent and accuse Prince of personally profiting from FPE dues. Prince countered these charges numerous times in *Transvestia*, citing security as necessitating a less democratic organization. However, eventually Prince decided to remove any doubts or suspicions of her leadership role by creating the national office of “executive secretary” to handle dues money, to help her process membership applications, and to oversee the general operations of the organization. She appointed “Fran Conners” to this office in the late fall of 1965. Energetic and diligent, Conners was president of the Theta Chapter in Madison, Wisconsin, and editor of the chapter’s newsletter, “Theta Report.” Conners had been instrumental in organizing Theta and was largely responsible for its success. At the time of her appointment, Theta was one of only a few active FPE chapters in the United States, with ten local members who met monthly at chapter meetings and around thirty “associate members” from other states who were usually not able to come to the chapter meetings but subscribed to “Theta Report.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It is unclear exactly who and to what degree others helped her with policies and organizational structure. I have found no evidence to support Prince’s claim of the collaborative nature of the early years of organizing FPE, except her own descriptions of these early years within the pages of *Transvestia*.

<sup>13</sup> The name changed to “Theta Thoughts” in its last year of publication, 1965.

As executive secretary, Conners also took on the editorship and distribution of FPE's new organizational newsletter, "Femme Forum," which was published bi-monthly, opposite *Transvestia*, and sent only to dues paying members of FPE. "Femme Forum" served as the official mouthpiece of the "national office."<sup>14</sup> Prince also appointed a New Jersey crossdresser named "Sheila Niles" to the national post of field coordinator. Niles' business travels around the United States made him a suitable candidate for visiting functioning chapters and helping develop other chapters in promising areas. With the help of Prince and Niles, Conners implemented ambitious structural changes to FPE that would decentralize the organization, spread responsibility among the membership, and provide more effective and immediate leadership to its members.<sup>15</sup>

The three leaders created what they called the "Regional Counselor System," in which the entire world was divided into fifteen large regions with each region having one appointed counselor and a deputy. Listed below are the region's names, along with the geographical areas represented within each region:<sup>16</sup>

Nu: Eastern New York, New Jersey, New England, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia.

Pi: Virginia, D.C., Maryland, Delaware, and Eastern Pennsylvania

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<sup>14</sup> I use the term "national office" loosely as there was not a physical national headquarters where the three main leaders—Prince, Conners, and Niles—ran the organization. Prince received mail through a post office box, and she worked out of her home office and her work office. The membership voted to increase the annual dues to 11.00 dollars for everyone beginning in 1966. This price included a subscription to "Femme Forum."

<sup>15</sup> According to records, Sheila Niles met with Fran Conners at the latter's home in June of 1965 to set up the structure of the regional counselor network and to begin drafting a new security manual. I do not know if the security manual survived. It is not in the archives I have visited.

<sup>16</sup> *Counselor* and *Councilor* were confused. The latter was often used interchangeably with the former throughout the organizational literature. I have chosen to use *counselor*, as it better describes the role played by the person assuming that title.

Zeta: Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina

Delta: Ohio, western Pennsylvania, Kentucky, western New York, West Virginia, lower Ontario

Beta: Indiana, Michigan, Chicago, and upper Ontario

Theta: Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois (outside of Chicago)

Eta: Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, Louisiana

Iota: Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Mexico

Lambda: Washington, Oregon, Idaho, British Columbia, Alberta

Alpha: California, Arizona, Nevada, Hawaii

Kappa: Colorado, Utah, Nebraska, Wyoming, North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Manitoba

Mu: Europe, including England and Ireland

Rho: Africa

Tau: Latin America and the Caribbean

Omega: The Far East, including Australia

The fifteen regions that Connors, Niles, and Prince divided the world into privileged the United States, English-speaking countries, and Western nations. However, the overwhelming majority of members did live in those areas of the world. The leadership thought big but unrealistically about the viability of an international organization. Only a handful of non-English speaking individuals joined the organization or subscribed to *Transvestia*. The chapters that did form outside the United States were reported on in the *Femme Forum*. For instance, news about Mu region became split into news about England's Beaumont Society, which formed in 1968, and news about FPE-Northern Europe, which included the very active and populous Scandinavian chapters. The

Beaumont Society and the Scandinavian chapters eventually became what were termed “international affiliates” of FPE rather than FPE regions as such. They operated independently of FPE, as Conners explained:

Affiliate status was designed for various groups outside of the U.S. who have at least three dues paying members in FPE who are in good standing. Because of currency exchange problems, language and distance problems, these groups need to set up their own rules for membership and security. In other words, we can’t expect a group outside the U.S. to conform with all of our rules and pay their dues to us when we can do very little for them in their own land.<sup>17</sup>

The national leadership in the United States appointed a regional counselor and deputy for each region. The new regional counselor system put FPE back on square one in respect to counting and managing its membership. The counselors were given the responsibility of contacting the members in their area and encouraging them to (re)-register with FPE through the executive secretary. Conners reported that, as of September 1965, there were nearly 300 members on the FPE roster; however, only 93 registration slips had been received from the membership. By November 1965, 150 members had registered.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in 1967, regions with at least ten members in good standing (meaning that they had paid their membership dues) were allowed to elect their counselors. Elected counselors would then appoint deputies of their choice.<sup>19</sup> The primary duty of a regional

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<sup>17</sup> “Femme Forum” #17 (November 1968).

<sup>18</sup> While these numbers were small and the membership of FPE was never as large as the Mattachine Society that was founded nine years earlier, FPE’s membership may have been larger than the Daughters of Bilitis that formed five years earlier in late 1955. Martin Meeker provides membership data on the DOB showing that in 1960 only four branches existed—San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, and Rhode Island—and membership hovered around 100.

<sup>19</sup> A ballot was attached to the March 1967 issue of “Femme Forum,” the first of its kind issued to the membership. Eight of the fifteen regions were eligible to vote for their counselors that year, which indicates that the membership was *at least* eighty in early 1967. The seven regions with less than ten members had their counselors and deputies appointed by Prince and Fran Conners.

counselor was to oversee all FPE members within his region, which included those fortunate enough to be connected with an organized chapter and scattered members in remote parts of the region. A deputy's job involved working closely with the counselor and acting on his behalf when he could not fulfill his duties. Counselors and deputies provided more effective and immediate leadership to members, primarily by handling membership issues and complaints. A counselor also looked for dependable members within his region to help get local chapters started. But the most important responsibility of a counselor was to meet with each new applicant in his region to make sure the prospective member fit the right mold and did not pose a security risk. Prince, Conners, and Niles viewed the regional counselor system as the last line of defense in keeping unsavory characters—"non-FP types"—out of the organization. Since there was a chance that "phonies" had entered the organization before implementation of this screening system, the national office insisted that every member, irregardless of status, meet with his regional counselor. It is unclear if previous members complied, but from the end of 1965 on, every new applicant—referred to as a "provisional member"—was required to meet with his regional counselor before being granted the status of "full member."<sup>20</sup>

Problems arose with the actual operation of the regional counselor system. Members sometimes complained of indifferent counselors. A bigger problem was the vast distances that often separated provisional members from their counselors, which made an actual face-to-face meeting a near impossibility. However, rules were often bent, if not broken.

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<sup>20</sup> FPE was not secretive in the manner of the original Mattachine Foundation (1951—1953) and no evidence suggests that it had any communist influence, but FPE did share its non-democratic, centralized structure. The regional / counselor organizational structure of FPE resembled the re-organized Mattachine Society under the leadership of Hal Call and Don Lucas. Beginning in 1953, the Society created area councils. Within these area councils, chapters were established and leadership nurtured.

Some applicants were admitted regardless of whether they had met with their counselors. These large regions, some of which comprised entire continents, were not an effective way to organize and manage the scattered membership. Even in the United States, the organized chapters, not the large regions, were the heart of the transvestite club movement. Members identified more with a local chapter than they did with the region. In recognition of this localizing trend and the aforementioned management problems of the screening system, the national office, in 1968, modified the regional / counselor system in the United States. They scrapped the Greek names of regions and broke up these large regions into smaller vicinities according to postal area codes. “This way,” explained Connors, “we can expand or change more easily and also divide the regions into smaller areas. We can now form a new region as members turn up in a specific area.” The national officers also replaced the name of “counselor” with the more apt identifier, “interviewer.” Whereas the former regions each had only one designated counselor to screen prospective members, the new postal vicinities were allowed to have more than one interviewer in order to making screening more efficient and convenient.<sup>21</sup>

### Steps to Membership

Persons in our group are in all stages of development—some are FPs already, others still TVs, and there is a difference. PHI PI EPSILON will not be exclusive, but it will be selective—choosing those who are ready for it and helping the rest to grow up to it.<sup>22</sup>

Prince and the national officers never conceived of FPE as an open door organization. The membership process was designed to enroll the right kind of people. Like the

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<sup>21</sup> “Femme Forum” #15 (May 1968).

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Prince, *Transvestia* #13 (February 1962).

Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, FPE was a white, middle-class organization, very much invested in notions of respectability. The national office devised steps to membership with the goal of admitting only heterosexual crossdressers who desired to practice the kind of periodic, non-sexualized, aesthetic transvestism that Prince described as “femmepersonation.” The application that Prince designed asked questions about the applicant’s sexual orientation, marital status, employment status, and crossdressing history. Prince sent this application upon written request. Before an aspiring femmepersonator (FP) could receive an application, he had to first purchase at least five issues of *Transvestia*. Prince maintained that this policy was not a money-making scheme but rather an additional measure of security. She reasoned that by requiring these purchases, she would know two things about the applicant: he was more than likely serious about joining since he had spent a modest amount of money on the magazines, and by virtue of having read the issues, he will have acquainted himself with the philosophy of femmepersonation and been introduced to the kind of applicant desired. To be sure, the TV / FP distinction held class and racial connotations, and the photographs and life histories in *Transvestia* testify to the middle-class aspects and the whiteness injected into the self-practice and mode of identity known as femmepersonation.

After purchasing and reading five issues of *Transvestia*, an aspiring member then wrote to Prince for a membership application. After checking her Chevalier records to make sure the applicant had purchased the mandatory number of issues, she sent him an application. Upon receiving the form, the applicant completed it and signed a pledge, promising to be a good citizen of FPE and to keep all information regarding other

members a secret no matter what the circumstances or personal risk. For group security and accountability, Prince required each applicant to sign his legal name and write his home address on the application; however, this was the only mandatory occasion where a member had to divulge this personal information. Upon receipt of an application, Prince accepted, rejected, or postponed it, pending further information. After the appointment of Fran Connors as executive secretary in 1965, Prince forwarded approved applications to him for his acceptance or rejection. The organizational literature does not indicate what procedure was taken if a dispute arose regarding the acceptability of an applicant.<sup>23</sup>

After the application process, a feminine pseudonym (a “femme-name”) and *mailing* address of the applicant’s choosing were the only two criteria necessary for establishing an identity within FPE. The national office did not require prospective members to send their legal names or home addresses to regional counselors. Prince encouraged all members to guard personal information about themselves and others. Prince and Connors were the only people who knew the legal names and home addresses of those who applied for membership. Connors locked all original applications, which revealed applicants’ personal information, in a safety deposit box for security. It appears that most members, especially closeted ones, used post office boxes under their femme-names to receive newsletters from FPE and literature from Chevalier Publications, including *Transvestia*. The national office urged members to maintain a post office box under *any* arrangement and name that they chose, within postal regulations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It appears to me that Prince always had final say.

<sup>24</sup> Here was Prince’s advice: “For those who cannot conveniently receive mail at home the post office box is the answer. But here is something to remember: It is illegal to take out a box in a fictitious name. It is not, however, illegal to receive mail in a fictitious name. Therefore, take the box in your own name and just tell the window clerk that Mr. or Mrs., or Miss so and so will also be receiving mail in the box. Then you can use any name you want—masculine or feminine” *Transvestia* #36 (December 1965).



Eventually, FPE leadership abolished the titles of counselor and deputy. In place of these titles, they created the position of interviewer, which carried practically the same responsibilities, except that while there was one counselor per region, a number of interviewers could be assigned in any vicinity. (The change to interviewers coincided with the more flexible system of dividing regions according to area codes.) Before the advent of the regional / counselor system and the appointment of Conners as executive secretary in 1965, Prince solely made decisions regarding membership applications. She granted membership based on the answers given on the membership application. This procedure, of course, created the possibility of infiltration by ‘undesirables,’ as one could easily misrepresent themselves on the application. The national leadership created the regional /counselor system to amend this potential security breach by adding the additional step of requiring an applicant to meet with the regional counselor or deputy (later interviewer) in his region before being allowed to meet other members or to join a local chapter. A face-to-face meeting allowed knowledgeable and experienced members of FPE to interview “provisional members” and screen out those applicants they deemed security risks or unsavory characters. According to Sheila Niles, what the counselor / interviewer delivers “is someone she is convinced is not a security risk: i.e. not a fugitive from justice, a homosexual seeking recruits, an over-zealous police officer..., a free-lance reporter seeking a ‘candid’ story, an active addict on narcotics or alcohol, a psychotic, nor a transsexual.”<sup>25</sup> Executive secretary Fran Conners said that counselors / interviewers must determine “if the provisional member has been honest about being a true TV and

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<sup>25</sup> “Femme Forum” #29 (March 1971).

aspiring FP. The interviewer must also make the final decision as to whether the new member will be a good ‘citizen’ of FPE.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, after 1965, applicants whose applications had been approved by Prince and Conners and who had paid the initiation fees and national dues were made *provisional* members with all the benefits of membership, except being allowed to join a chapter or vote in elections. Fran sent provisional members the mailing address of their regional counselor (and later, interviewer), and it was a provisional member’s responsibility to contact his counselor or the area interviewer and arrange a meeting. For provisional members whose circumstances (e.g. geographical isolation) prevented an actual meeting, the rules stated, rather vaguely, that such provisional members must find another means to satisfy their regional counselor or interviewer regarding their “character and fitness for membership.” Counselors and interviewers often handled these unique cases through letter correspondence and telephone calls.

After the meeting, the counselor / interviewer reported any serious doubts about a provisional member’s suitability to meet others to the national office, specifically to Prince. If, on the other hand, he judged the candidate favorably, he then presented to the provisional member the FPE membership card and informed Conners of approval. Conners, in turn, added the new member to the national membership roster. If full membership was granted by an interviewer or counselor, the new member was automatically eligible to join a local chapter or participate in any chapter activity or meeting. The newly approved full member could also use *Transvestia*’s “Contact” to initiate correspondence with local and distant members. If dues were required for local chapter membership, the joining member had to pay them accordingly.

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<sup>26</sup> “Femme Forum” #30 (May 1971).

### “King Kong in Drag”: National and Local Disputes

Local chapters possessed a generous range of autonomy regarding governing and controlling their own affairs, but the national office did impose some rules and procedures on the local level. Chapter leaders were not allowed to establish any other requirements or conditions for membership in FPE and participation in local chapter activities. A dispute occurred regarding some chapters that had implemented additional rules for chapter membership. In the national newsletter, Connors addressed the issue, reviewed the official steps to membership, and warned that other conditions for membership “will not be tolerated by the national office,” adding that “after a member has gone through all of the steps...she has a right to participate in local activities and should not be subjected to whims or the fancy of anyone else along the way.”<sup>27</sup>

Connors’ admonishment of these chapters who had implemented additional steps to membership is one example of several instances when local procedures or customs conflicted with the official policy handed down by the national office. I have not found any evidence that a chapter originally chartered under FPE ever broke with or was expelled by the national office over a policy difference, yet the organizational literature reveals a few contentious debates and disputes among the membership regarding security at chapter meetings. The issue of chapters implementing additional criteria for membership was a prime example. Fran Connors acknowledged that each chapter had a right to maintain its own security but not at the expense of a fully approved member having to meet what the national office deemed unnecessary steps. Local chapters had the right to terminate or suspend *local chapter* membership of any member of FPE who

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<sup>27</sup> “Femme Forum” #30 (May 1971).

broke security rules or who “became a security risk in the opinion of the majority of chapter members.” However, the chapter was required to report its action to the national officers for investigation. According to Conners, “action as to FPE membership will then be taken after fair appraisal has been reached.”<sup>28</sup> The organizational literature, however, indicates that local chapters were plagued more by drop-outs—the revolving door syndrome—rather than suspended members. Many crossdressers, much like their homophile counterparts in *Mattachine* and *Daughters of Bilitis*, used the magazine *Transvestia* and the organization as a source of information and entrée into the larger subculture. They bolted once they got what they needed or developed peace of mind.

Breaking a clearly defined security rule was unambiguous grounds for dismissal from a chapter, but *becoming* a security risk “in the opinion of the majority of chapter members” left room for interpretation. For example, field coordinator Sheila Niles suggested that the right of a new member to participate in local chapter activities could be significantly curbed if that member suffers from “a case of mirror-hypnosis that she goes out in broad daylight looking like King Kong in drag.” The national office encouraged chapters to help each member improve in feminine appearance and comportment. In fact, every member signed a pledge on the original membership application promising to help others learn to realistically pass as women. But what about the member who could not improve, or did not try, or who stubbornly refused help and advice? Scattered evidence in the “Femme Forum” suggests that many members saw “Miss Kong” as a security risk and as grounds for expulsion. Sheila Niles weighed in:

...the chapter has a responsibility to help those whose social graces are below par. No doubt most of those to whom such help is offered will be grateful for it, as I was when a very raw recruit some years ago. But, what if [a member]

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

contends that she is 100 percent perfect, and intends to arrive dressed in spite of what anyone says? Virginia [Prince] has gone on record that anyone worthy of full membership is also eligible to belong to a chapter, while I have also gone on record that the chapter must retain some power of decision for such special cases. But Virginia has also indicated that while the group has an obligation to accept and help the new member, that same group retains the right to discipline or expel anyone who fails to abide by the customs, requests, and by-laws of the chapter.<sup>29</sup>

No evidence indicates that a member was ever expelled from a local chapter or from the national organization for looking and acting uncouth. Still, the very fact that members, including a national officer, were having this discussion in the organization's newsletter reveals how strongly members emphasized 'authentic' appearance and comportment.

Most FPs truly believed that when they gathered, they did so *as women*.

Regarding these matters linking security with social behavior and visual appearance, many members assumed a crossdresser who drew negative attention to be a security risk. This is why one local chapter instituted a rule specifying that all guests must have the permission of the hostess in whose apartment they met to arrive or leave "dressed." How other chapters handled the situation is not known. One member named Anne of the Beta chapter in Detroit wrote to Sheila Niles about the tension between individuals' rights versus group security. "Going out on our own, alone," he wrote, "might well be considered a right.... Going out in the vicinity of a meeting, where others are implicated by association, must be regarded as a privilege, granted by the group that shares the risk." Anne also discussed the responsibility of individual members who become exposed while dressed. He wrote:

The member that is not successful need not be reminded that in such circumstances (finding herself exposed) her primary responsibilities become:  
1. To divert attention from any other members in her immediate vicinity 2. To

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<sup>29</sup> "Femme Forum" #29 (March 1971)

behave in such a fashion that she does not further discredit our kind 3. To protect confidential information on the Foundation, the chapter, its activities, and its individual members.

As a solution to this problem of group security, Anne proposed that each chapter set up a board to review members who wanted to come and go from meetings crossdressed.

“Applicants,” he wrote, “would be judged on appearance, taste, movement, mannerisms, voice, reactions to surprise, and general maturity, responsibility and self confidence.” The review board would have the power to deny requests or grant certain privileges. Anne imagined that “A girl who passed all of the reviews would be authorized...to exercise certain degrees of privilege. There might be a category that would permit a girl to leave a meeting, and another might authorize completely free access to the party or meeting sites.”<sup>30</sup>

The “Femme Forum” does not indicate whether or not any chapters adopted Anne’s proposal. Anne’s concerns do suggest that security weighed heavily on members’ minds and that some individual autonomy and rights had to be sacrificed for the well-being of the entire group. As one member correctly acknowledged in the “Femme Forum” in respect to this debate, “There is NO safety in numbers; in our case, quite the opposite is true.”<sup>31</sup> Many members feared the social, economic, and familial repercussions that might occur as a result of exposure. And even well into the early 1970s, members feared police raids. “The fact that we have never had a meeting raided,” Sheila Niles acknowledged,

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<sup>30</sup> Sheila Niles quoted portions of Anne’s letter in the social / chapter news section of the “Femme Forum” #29 (March 1971).

<sup>31</sup> “Femme Forum” #29 (March 1971).

“probably indicates that the general public is rather less interested in us than we always thought they were—it certainly is no tribute to our ‘precautions.’”<sup>32</sup>

Other tensions between national policy and local customs simmered. According to national policy, official chapter meetings had to be open to all FPE members who lived within the region. For this reason, the national office strongly advised holding official meetings in public places where everyone who is qualified could attend. The national office believed that holding these meetings at private homes was not the best place because “it places the hostess in a compromising position to select who she wants in her home.” However, even a cursory glance at the chapter news in each issue of the “Femme Forum” shows that chapters ignored this particular guideline, as most of their official meetings were held in members’ private apartments and houses.<sup>33</sup>

Another dispute between local members and the national office erupted over who could be present at official chapter meetings. As a rule, non-members or disqualified members could never attend an official chapter meeting. Conners explained that “if someone present does not have a current membership card and an application on file with FPE, she or he is not a member. The only exceptions to this rule are wives of current members or professional guests approved for attendance by a majority of the chapter members”<sup>34</sup> This policy stemmed from the fact that many of these non-members attending FPE functions had been invited by current members, who had met them (the non-members) outside the ranks of FPE and *Transvestia*.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. I have uncovered no evidence of a police raid or any known covert infiltration of a FPE chapter. However, members’ fears probably stemmed from their awareness of the police’s harassment of homosexuals and homophile groups in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>33</sup> “Femme Forum” #30 (May 1971).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

This issue related to another area of concern expressed by the national office regarding the tendency of many members to find friends and potential members by using correspondence clubs other than the one officially sanctioned for FPE use. One of the benefits of FPE membership included the right to initiate correspondence with other members by using “Contact,” a forwarding service run by Prince as part of Chevalier Publications. Apparently, some FPE members utilized the numerous other correspondence mediums available for those who had unconventional tastes, interests, and desires. This practice infuriated the national officers, especially Sheila Niles, who viewed the activity as a major security risk. No less than four times did Niles issue strict warnings about the various dangers of these unscreened contact services and clubs:

I am advised by a competent source that law enforcement people are taking a look into certain ‘contact club’ magazines, having hit a jackpot or two in the form of sado-masochistic prostitution rings through one. [Members] Should avoid La Plume, Club Wow, Communique, etc. lest they be swept into a dragnet for an entirely different group....<sup>35</sup>

Another of our Transisters got picked up as a result of corresponding with a bad type through ‘La Plume’. So please leave recruiting up to Virginia who is equipped for it.”<sup>36</sup>

“Stay away from any type of correspondence club. They turn up nothing worthwhile and only cause lots of trouble.”<sup>37</sup>

“It has been said before, but I guess not loud enough—since one chapter newsletter advocated finding ‘other TVs’ through Cathy Slavik’s Empathy Club—that those who fish in sewers deserve what they catch. Slavik has absolutely no standards as to who or what you will find yourself ‘empathizing’ with; it might be a relatively decent homosexual, or conceivably another FPE member who likes to live dangerously. On the other hand, it could be any of

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<sup>35</sup> “Femme Forum” #4 (March 1966).

<sup>36</sup> “Femme Forum” #8 (January 1967).

<sup>37</sup> “Femme Forum” #18 (January 1969).



several varieties of prostitute, a blackmailer, a ‘free-lance reporter’, or an over-zealous cop out to reform the world.”<sup>38</sup>

Fran Connors echoed Niles’ sentiments. He wrote to the readership of “Femme Forum” that the national officers were aware of the existence of other underground mechanisms for corresponding with “probable TVs” but that these other avenues were not the way FPE sought to acquire its members. Connors claimed that most of the security problems the organization had in the past came from those who he perceived to be outside the parameters—“who were never FP’s in the first place.” “If you feel that the correspondence clubs or other non-FPE means are the way you want to travel, that is your business,” Connors stated,” but we must then ask you to leave FPE and leave our members alone.... We will stand ready to police our organization to the best of our ability to maintain common sense and the well-being of our members.”<sup>39</sup>

Policing the organization may have ostensibly been done for the purpose of protecting members from blackmailers, “overzealous cops,” and other “security risks.” Yet, screening potential members also served to bar “non-FP types” and also had something to do with social class and notions of middle-class respectability. As some critics and detractors noted, FPE’s strict policies of exclusivity thwarted the organization’s potential for growth in membership. Yet, the national officers had decided that a potentially large and diverse membership was a necessary trade-off for a greater sense of security that came from a careful and systematic screening of prospective members. The fears of wives were also taken into consideration. The belief that wives would only tolerate moderate, non-sexualized ‘dressing’ practices and strict heterosexuality was why the

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<sup>38</sup> “Femme Forum” #28 (January 1971)

<sup>39</sup> “Femme Forum” #29 (March 1971). John D’Emilio shows evidence of postal inspections and mail surveillance of gay correspondence clubs (pp. 212—214). Also see, Martin Meeker, 58.

screening process directly sought to eliminate homosexuals, transsexuals, and fetishists from the national membership roster. Although entirely probable, no evidence has been found to indicate if race played a part in membership decisions. Race may have indirectly factored into the screening process by way of automatically excluding street queens, drag queens, and transsexuals. Many transgenders of color inhabited these ranks in the late 1960s and 1970s. Social class certainly factored into the mechanics of the screening system, as many individuals in these groups were either poor or working class.<sup>40</sup>

Thanks to captioned photographs published in *Transvestia* and Prince's tendency to print "FPE" after a photographed readers' subscription code to indicate membership in the organization, we can know that at least two black crossdressers did join FPE. In a 1972 issue (#72), Laura was pictured in a four photograph spread, with her subscription code (5-B-30 FPE) printed in the caption. A photograph of another black crossdresser, Michelle, with the caption "13-J-4 FPE," was published in the picture album issue of 1971. These codes indicate that Laura was from California and Michelle from Indiana. Yet, their membership in FPE did not necessarily mean that they joined or were welcomed into a local chapter. Again, the photographs that were published in *Transvestia* underscore the whiteness of heterosexual transvestism. Of all the dozens of group photos of local FPE chapters, not a single person of color is among those assembled.

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<sup>40</sup> John D'Emilio criticizes the leadership of homophile organizations (the Mattachine Society and the DOB) for their reluctance and unwillingness to mobilize a potentially larger constituency. Notions of respectability kept the small number of homophile activists from reaching out to the bar-going gays and lesbians. See Joanne Meyerowitz (2002), chapter 5, for information about urban street queens and transsexuals.

### A Period of Disarray: FPE 1972 - 1976

In 1972, Fran Conners resigned as executive secretary of FPE and as the editor of the national newsletter, "Femme Forum." While Prince took credit for starting the organization, she recognized Conners as the leader most responsible for its steady growth. Conners officially announced his retirement in the January 1972 issue of "Femme Forum." He cited increasing work and family commitments as responsible for his resignation. Conners' departure from the head leadership role ushered in a transition period for FPE and marked a new organizational phase. Prince appointed "Donna," a former Alpha president (Los Angeles) and FPE member of three years, as the new executive secretary and editor of the newsletter. Conners' resignation also brought Prince back into a more prominent role during the transition period. Although Prince exercised authority over the affairs of FPE, it was really Conners who ran the operations and built the organization in the years after his appointment as executive secretary. Prince regretted Conners' departure but also viewed it as an opportunity to re-energize FPE with new leadership and some organizational and procedural changes. "This is not the end," Prince stated to the membership. "It's merely a new beginning like when we get a new national administration. It's a time for renewed interest and participation and help." This spirit of change did not extend to the philosophy of selective membership. Prince remained adamant about the organization's exclusivity:

FPE was organized to serve one kind of person only....heterosexual, single and family people with jobs, reputations and responsibilities...and to do it in a context of concern for that person's personal, marital and reputational well-being, and so it shall remain as long as I have anything to do with it.....This group needs sociability and the sense of belonging but it needs it in a context of security and peace of mind.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Femme Forum" #33 (January 1972)

In this respect, the transition in national leadership created a moment of reflection and rethinking but, ultimately, a reinforcement of previous policies and principles. Also, in this statement, Prince for the first time spelled out clearly what had previously been tacit knowledge that FPE catered to and enlisted middle to professional class men.

In order to “avoid the recurring accusation of being a dictator,” Prince asked members to write and express their views concerning how FPE should be operated. In the May 1972 issue of “Femme Forum,” Prince reprinted ten statements from letters that affirmed her stances on exclusivity and one excerpt from a letter that criticized this policy. The RHO chapter in the Baltimore / D.C. area wrote: “We unanimously agree that the present standards should not be relaxed and the requirements for FPE membership should remain intact in their present form. These requirements undoubtedly limit our membership as compared to a policy of open admission, without question; however, we feel that the measure of security gained by the present screening process is more important than a large membership.” Another member expressed his concerns about the potential outcome of an open door policy. He believed that “to have a heterogeneous group would weaken the unity of our organization because of the diversity of interests.” Another member argued that “FPE should unquestionably stay as it is with no major changes.” This writer’s reasoning was largely motivated by a fear of guilt by association if other types were permitted entrance. “No persons other than TVs and their wives!!” he exclaimed. “It has taken me too long to carefully and gently educate my wife into accepting my TV tendencies to have her mind messed up by ‘others’ of different preferences.” Prince published the feedback of one member who directly named those others with different persuasions. “A liberal membership policy,” he asserted, “would bring in TVs who have

hang-ups from punishment or bondage, through extreme exhibitionism to gay TVs.” He went on to argue that these types might disrupt the aims and purposes of the FPE chapters. “One thing I enjoy about the local chapter,” he wrote, “is the tone of the meetings. They are free of any off-color activity [and] no sneaky attempts to divert the club’s activities into offbeat practices.” This member favored the respectable front that FPE and local chapters cultivated.

Several members drew on ideologies of the nuclear family and fears of domestic contamination to justify their votes for exclusivity. One member espoused the need to ensure the safety of wives and children. “I do not want to get into any other organizations that cater to way-out persuasions,” he maintained, “and will not bring anyone into our chapter that is not a true FP. The wives and children I have met are too wonderful to subject them to any others outside of FPE.” Another member agreed and included his wife’s viewpoint to rationalize his desire for an exclusive club. “I am definitely in favor of keeping FPE as it has been in the past,” he wrote. “I enjoy meeting and being with others who are like myself, just an FP. I know that neither myself nor my wife are interested in meeting Homos, TSs [transsexuals] or Fetishists, and in the event they would be granted membership, we would be compelled to resign our own membership.” Finally, one other member voiced to “keep our group for heterosexual persons.” “Likewise the wives attitude and response,” he continued, “is of utmost value to anyone who has any consideration for them or for the maintenance of the home.” The members above illustrate the investment most members of FPE made in postwar ideals of family and notions of propriety and respectability.

Prince considered these letters affirming her original policies as votes of confidence and proclaimed, “FPE was not in the past, is not now, and...will not in the future be an open door organization.” In the mid to late 1970s, a number of groups emerged with open door policies for all trans individuals. These groups would come to be referred to as “open groups” whereas groups with membership criteria, like FPE, would be referred to as “closed groups.”<sup>42</sup> After the positive letters affirming her exclusionary stances, Prince published an excerpt from one letter (she said it was two pages typewritten) from a member of FPE who had recently joined and become very active in one of these open organizations. In a set-up to the letter, Prince said that the person who wrote this letter was once happily married but is now divorced and considers herself to be a transsexual. Prince’s motive here was transparent. Divulging this personal information may have been done for the purpose of discrediting the former member and invalidating her points of criticism. This letter is worth quoting extensively. The opinion that emerges from it reflected a growing criticism directed at Prince and FPE during this time. It also serves as a specific point of reference for understanding the emergence of other trans groups and organizations with *open* admission policies. This voice of dissention wrote:

I have always given you credit for the determination to start this whole TV movement during a difficult time. My criticism is that you have kept it from growing to what it could have become. For a small organization, it is one of the most formal I have ever run into. It provides GENERAL aid through the public work you do BUT it does not aid the troubled INDIVIDUAL when said individual is 1. outside of the very narrow definition you have given transvestism, 2. a different person philosophically than you, and 3. when she wants to graduate to a new level of activity. I have three further points to make: a. I believe you have hurt more TVs than you have helped due to your overemphasis on WIVES, as most wives are only ‘warm bodies’ and not participating members; b. Before I am convinced I will have to see significant

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<sup>42</sup> I am just beginning to situate and survey these other groups from what I have uncovered in the archive. Their voices and activism will be represented in future work.

evidence that those of responsibility are less willing to take chances than those who ‘have little to lose.’ In fact, what I do see is the exact opposite!! C. My final and most serious charge that has caused me to join and totally support another organization and work for it other than for personal reasons, is your most unscientific tendency to categorize rather than provide a range of TV behavior.

In a short response that followed the letter, Prince answered most of these criticisms put forth by the letter writer. She maintained that rather than her keeping FPE from “growing to what it could have become,” the members, themselves, do not want the organization to become an open group like this critic envisions it. The letter writer, according to Prince, completely misses the point that FPE was *intentionally* organized “to help a certain breed of cat.” She reminded the critic that the organization could not and had never attempted to help other individuals and groups who crossdress, “especially those who want to ‘graduate’ to a ‘new level.’” This critic’s letter implied that Prince devalues and condemns other crossgender identities and expressions. Prince would have none of that. “If one decides to become a homosexual or a transsexual or go in for bondage or punishment,” she countered, “that is not, to me, any form of graduation but simply a complete change of direction.” With this careful language, then, Prince skillfully advanced her position on selectivity while keeping presumptions of prejudice and bigotry at bay. Yet, the main thrust of this letter writer’s criticism—FPE’s exclusivity and security measures—would be echoed by many others in the transgender community for years to come.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Femme Forum” #35 (May 1972). As for the other criticisms featured in the letter, Prince did not respond to the charge that wives are merely warm bodies in FPE. She did counter the charge that her tendency to classify was “unscientific.” She reminded the critic that she holds a PhD in science and that classifying and creating taxonomies were cornerstones of scientific activity. Still, the critic was on target with the very narrow parameters Prince established and with Prince and FPE’s general belief that individuals with status and responsibilities needed a secure environment, which explains the elaborate security measures.

After Fran Connors resigned in 1972, Prince and Donna initially tried to carry on with the energy and zest that Connors devoted to the organization. However, Donna's poor health and Prince's travels and responsibilities with *Transvestia* hampered any such effort. Despite the initial intent to keep "Femme Forum" going under the editorship of Donna and with the help of Alpha members, the newsletter that had served as a unifying voice among scattered members and distant chapters did not last past the end of the year. The December 1972 issue was the last issue. In that final issue, Prince explained that contributions to the newsletter had become practically non-existent and too much of the work had been placed on herself and Donna.

Noticeably frazzled, Prince announced in the last issue of the "Femme Forum" several important organizational changes that would take effect at the beginning of 1973. The most radical change was turning FPE from a non-profit organization to an adjunct of Chevalier Publications. Prince announced that all membership dues would belong to her. She set the membership fees at twelve dollars.<sup>44</sup> Reasoning that the "the world is somewhat more tolerant these days," Prince put forth a plan to further decentralize FPE. Wanting to arrange things so that less time, work, and dedication would be required from national headquarters, Prince modified the screening system and developed a print aid to facilitate chapter development. Beginning in February 1973, Prince began publishing a yearly membership directory that would be updated quarterly with supplement sheets.

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<sup>44</sup> It would be interesting to learn if this particular change and other concomitant factors instigated a splintering and/or a drop-out effect. My presumption is that a number of members may have dropped out around this time and some may have joined one of the numerous other trans organizations that had formed or were forming around this time. The confluence of a number of factors (e.g. the general organizational disarray that resulted from Connors' resignation; Prince's decision to operate FPE as a for-profit organization; the existence of other groups, some non-exclusionary, with less strict rules; and a growing tolerance for homosexuality and transsexuality that caused some members to take issue with the sudden restatement of policies excluding these other sexual and gender minorities from membership)—all these factors may have caused a mass exodus of members from FPE into other groups in 1972 and after during this period of disarray.



This directory listed the femme-name, code, city and state, marital status, religion, wife's attitude, degree of dressing, and hobbies of each active member. The directory also listed the cities that currently had functioning chapters, as well as, the names of the interviewers for each organized area or region. Prince hoped that the directory would assist members in finding friends and in forming new groups. Prince maintained the older initial screening method in which she evaluated an applicant's answers to a list of questions on the application. If an application met her approval, she then mailed the new member the national membership directory. It was the responsibility of each new member to use the directory to find contacts and groups. As a measure of security, mailing addresses were not listed in the directory. New members and old members could only initiate communication with others listed in the directory through *Transvestia's* contact forwarding service (1.00 fee). To qualify for chapter status, a group needed to have five members that assembled with some degree of regularity. Prince allowed each group to decide among themselves who within their group should be the interviewer that meets with and screens prospective members. Prince only stipulated that each interviewer should be a responsible individual who is familiar with FPE philosophy and rules and who would make a good impression on a prospective member and his wife. In sharp contrast to a former policy, Prince did not insist that a member whom she had approved through the application process had a right to membership in a local chapter. Prince left it to a chapter's discretion regarding whether or not a newly admitted member could participate in activities and meetings.

In the absence of a national newsletter to provide a unifying voice, FPE failed to operate as a truly national organization in the years between 1972 and 1976. Beyond the

membership directory and its quarterly supplements, there was little communication among the local chapters, around twenty at that point. Prince did maintain the rule that one is not eligible for local chapter membership unless he is a dues paying member in good standing with the national organization. This was Prince's attempt at bringing some semblance of national and organizational unity among the local chapters (and probably more money into her pockets). Basically, though, chapters tended to their own affairs during this four year span.<sup>45</sup>

Then, in 1976, Prince and Carol Beecroft, leader of the heterosexual transvestite organization, Mamselle, agreed to consolidate their respective organizations. The merger created the Society for the Second Self or Sigma, Sigma, Sigma, which was more commonly referred to as Tri-Sigma Sorority.<sup>46</sup> Prince called it a productive and mutually beneficial consolidation, as Mamselle needed more members and FPE needed someone like Beecroft who had the leadership experience and the time to handle organizational matters on a national level. Prince acknowledged that Beecroft's talents and skills lean toward social activities and chapter development. Although Prince managed Tri-Sigma's finances, both Prince and Beecroft were considered the organization's co-leaders.

Beginning in 1977, annual dues were set at \$20.00. Among other benefits, this membership fee included the national membership directory (presumably the same idea

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<sup>45</sup> It is not clear to what degree local chapters complied with Prince's modified rules. Self-functioning, thriving chapters must have been tempted to bolt. Why pay national dues? What were local members getting in return besides a membership directory? I personally refer to this four year period as the 'dark ages' of FPE because so little evidence exists or has been found to write a detailed account of what happened with FPE and its chapters during these years. As I have already stated, there was no national newsletter published during this time. I have not found any of the membership directories or quarterly supplements that Prince presumably published nor have I found any local chapter newsletters. All there is to go on are Prince's sporadic announcements in *Transvestia* about the existence of FPE and information about how to join, all for the benefit of new subscribers. Sometimes letter or history writers describe some of the goings-on of their local chapter. For example, one crossdresser living in Florida contributed an article in *Transvestia* #72 (1972) that described the formation of the Sigma Phi chapter in the same state.

<sup>46</sup> Prince announced the merger in *Transvestia* #88 (1976).

as before except with Mamselle members added) and a subscription to a new bi-monthly newsletter called the “Femme Mirror,” which Beecroft edited and distributed. Tri-Sigma still operated under the same principles as FPE. As an organization strictly for heterosexual crossdressers, it barred homosexuals, leather and rubber fetishists, bondage and other kink enthusiasts, and pre and post operative transsexuals from joining. To become eligible for membership, a few minor changes were implemented. Instead of five *Transvestia*’s, an aspiring member now only had to purchase and read either three issues of *Transvestia* or Prince’s new book *Understanding Crossdressing*. Prince offered the same rationale as before for this policy. According to Prince, the reading requirement was the necessary first step that allowed potential members to see firsthand if Tri-Sigma was right for them. The philosophy seemed to be to let the inquiring reader decide for himself if he were eligible. Beyond Prince and Beecroft’s evaluation of the prospective member’s application (and there is no evidence to suggest which one assumed a greater decision making role in respect to reading and approving applications), no further screening process seemed to be established. Upon payment of the annual dues of twenty dollars, the new member received the directory of members and a subscription to the bimonthly newsletter “Femme Mirror.”<sup>47</sup>

In July of 1979, Prince sold Chevalier Publications to Beecroft, who also took over editorship of *Transvestia* and became sole president of Tri-Sigma. In 1981, Beecroft modified the name of the organization to Tri-Ess. With over thirty chapters nationwide,

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<sup>47</sup> The interviewer system was either relaxed or entirely scrapped; I’m not sure which. As of this date, I have not researched any “Femme Mirrors.” This newsletter is needed to ascertain the organizational structure and inner-workings of Tri-Sigma. This is future work on my part.

Tri-Ess today stands as the largest organization for heterosexual crossdressers and wives of crossdressers. The “Femme Mirror” remains its quarterly membership publication.<sup>48</sup>

### FPE Social Activities and Public Relations Campaigns

It is reasonable to presume that since the rise of urbanism, commercialized leisure, and the advent of underground contact services and coded language in personal ads, crossdressers of the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup>, and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries managed to find one another and socialize informally in pairs and in small groups of friends. They may have hosted private dinners and parties and went on public excursions together. I will focus, though, on the more formalized ways that crossdressers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialized as members of FPE through chapter meetings, parties, and retreats. It was these officially sanctioned social gatherings and activities that were documented in the “Femme Forum.” I will also discuss the educational and public relation campaigns waged by the more active and reform-minded chapters. As an organization that did not aggressively seek publicity or officially embrace direct action strategies of resistance, it is not surprising that the scant historical literature on postwar gender and sexual minorities overlooks the struggles and “activism” of heterosexual transvestites. While the majority of members were content with being members of a social club, a fair number of others were just as influenced by postwar rights discourse and inspired by the spirit and culture of protest as were gays, lesbians, and transsexuals. Perhaps the centerpiece of their growing political consciousness was the legal defense fund that many of them rallied

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<sup>48</sup> Tri-Ess maintains a webpage: <http://www.tri-ess.org/>

around in the mid-1960s. After recounting the history of this legal campaign, I end by situating FPE and organized transvestism within historical perspective.

Prince, Conners, Niles, and other leaders conceptualized FPE as a unified collection of social clubs. These leaders organized FPE around the principals of sociality and self-improvement. The idea was that each chapter would provide its members a secure space to freely express themselves in the presence of other members. Social interaction with other crossdressers afforded each member practice at behaving femininely in social settings. Chapter meetings were spaces where members performed their renditions of femininity, but they were also the training grounds where “regular TVs,” with the help of their more experienced “sisters,” transformed themselves into “FPs”—champion Olympic swimmers, to employ Prince’s analogy. Members who were more experienced at crossdressing supported and advised those with lesser skills. Members shared fashion tips and make-up advice. They constructively criticized one another in every aspect of how they believed a lady should behave and dress. With only a few exceptions, chapter members cultivated a sober, non-sexualized atmosphere in their gatherings, which reinforced their notions of propriety and performances of middle-class respectability.

The leadership of FPE also conceptualized chapter meetings as therapeutic discussion sessions whereby members could talk about their experiences, problems, and fears. One of the primary topics included how to educate wives about transvestism. The organizational literature and *Transvestia* are adorned with stories of all types of wives—tolerant, helpful, understanding, jealous, devastated, resentful, and non-understanding. Sharing strategies and stories of disclosure and negotiation was a frequent occurrence at chapter meetings. Meetings, in general, provided opportunities for mutual support and

affirmation and, most significantly, for the production of non-stigmatizing knowledge about transvestism. To be sure, members participated in different ways and with varying degrees of interest in understanding the motives behind their desires and in theorizing the role their organization might play in helping isolated transvestites and reforming strict gender roles. Yet, creative debate and intelligent discussion ensued, and members collectively constructed knowledge that countered the media and medical-driven narratives of transvestism. For a formerly isolated and lonely transvestite to encounter a group of others with similar desires and identities must have been an empowering experience. New members realized they were not alone and that they were not such oddballs after all. In a short essay, entitled “Why I’m Not Dropping Out,” a member named “Beatrice Carter” (North Carolina) explained:

I’m not dropping out because I waited over 40 years to find a bunch of guys like myself who liked to dress in women’s clothes. Now that I’ve met some, really know some and correspond with many, I’m not about to go back to the locked door, guilt-ridden stage that was so wonderful, yet so awful. Yes, I’ve found freedom, freedom in my mind that ‘this awful thing’ is no longer awful. Only another TV knows the heartache, the mental doubt and the great satisfaction in dressing.<sup>49</sup>

Most every member had experienced isolation. Even as members found comfort and peace of mind in their association with other crossdressers in FPE, they believed that thousands of others were still detached from supportive networks and even the knowledge that they were not alone. For this reason, FPE encouraged its members to supply their local libraries and bookstores with Chevalier literature so that when isolated TVs initiated that inevitable search for information it would produce positive results.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Femme Forum” #2 (November 1965).

<sup>50</sup> One strategy with libraries involved inserting a make-shift card on transvestism in the card catalog system. The card would cite Prince’s book and provide the address to Chevalier.

As this public relations strategy with libraries suggests, confronting dominant narratives entailed producing and releasing counter-narratives that depathologized transvestism. Although providing opportunities for members to socialize, practice and improve their skills, and share knowledge in a therapeutic, mutually supportive environment were central components of FPE's mission, Prince and other leaders also wanted the sorority to function as an educational organization. In this regard, Prince and several of FPE's chapters occasionally waged campaigns to spread their message among the public, at large, but especially to medical, law enforcement, and legal authorities. Like the homophile groups of the 1950s and early 1960s, FPE viewed these professionals as allies and as shapers of public opinion. FPE chapters and Chevalier Publications created numerous pamphlets and leaflets that were distributed to psychiatric, medical, and law offices, as well as, police departments. A few chapters held yearly "open houses" in which doctors, mental health professionals, civic leaders, and other authorities were invited to meet with members and listen to Prince or the chapter's president speak about the nature and causes of transvestism and the social objectives of the organization. Prince and FPE exercised an amicable yet cautious relationship with medical authorities. In addition to the public open houses, several chapters invited doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists to attend their chapter meetings. Also, several FPE members participated in psychological and psychiatric research projects, usually at the gender identity clinics of university-based hospitals. Prince was personal friends with Harry Benjamin, author of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) and psychiatrist Robert Stoller, author of *Sex and Gender* (1968). Prince also aided and collaborated with researchers on subject recruitment and data collection for research projects on transvestism and transsexuality.

Prince and other FPE leaders and most members viewed the medical and mental health professionals as strategic allies in their quest to rid their version of transvestism from the public's association of it with sexual deviancy.<sup>51</sup>

Like the leaders of homophile groups, Prince was interested in channeling accurate and unbiased information about her group to isolated crossdressers and to a wider public that conflated sex and gender and mistook transvestites for homosexuals. To correct misinformation and to advertise her organization and publications, Prince went on extensive public relations trips around the United States starting in the mid-1960s. She appeared as "Virginia" on dozens of local and regional radio and some local and regional television programs. Prince's public relation tours brought dozens of new members into the organization. This exposure warrants a more detailed discussion.

#### Prince's Public Relations Efforts

In late 1966, Prince's messy divorce was finalized, and she sold out of her half of a small chemical manufacturing company. She informed her readers in an aptly titled column, "Life Begins at 54," that she would devote the rest of her life to building Chevalier, investigating, reading, writing, helping people, and traveling. "Virginia will be a freer soul now even if she has to crossdress as Charles now and then.... I'm going to do everything that will continue to broaden (literally and figuratively) my experience of life in my closing years. Everything with three specific exceptions that is, I draw the line at homosexuality, transsexuality, and a third marriage."<sup>52</sup> Previous years had given Prince a

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<sup>51</sup> The membership of FPE did not split over an anti-sickness resolution, which divided the homophile movement in the middle 1960s.

<sup>52</sup> *Transvestia* #43 (February 1967). I have included more information on Prince in an appendix section.



taste of moving about in public for sustained periods of time as a woman. Since 1961, she had lectured to service clubs in the Los Angeles area, and she had participated in a few medical conferences. Yet 1967 marked the official beginning of Prince's entrance into the public arena as a full-time author, intellectual, activist, and lecturer. For the next fifteen years, Prince traveled around the United States and to England and the Scandinavian countries, where she appeared on local and regional radio and television talk shows, lectured to college classes, gave newspaper interviews, delivered papers at professional conferences, and appeared at local FPE chapter meetings and social functions. Traveling and appearing as a woman in public also steered her on a course to decide to live full time as a woman in the fall of 1968.

Prince appeared on dozens of radio and television talk shows in the latter half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s. She encouraged members of FPE to contact their local networks to set up potential appearances. Prince appeared on either radio or television shows in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Chicago, Madison, Minneapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, New York, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Indianapolis, Houston, and Tulsa, among other cities. On these radio and television programs, she promoted her books, the magazine, and Phi Pi Epsilon. In *Transvestia*, she published photographs of herself with television and radio personalities and described her trips in extensive travelogues.

With respect to Prince's public relations travels, two "firsts" are noteworthy. In the December 1966 issue of *Transvestia*, she recounted her first appearance on television in a travelogue describing a trip to Hawaii:

We had a kind of first, a 'TV on TV'. Others may have talked about it in the masculine role, but I was there as Virginia and was interviewed for about twenty

minutes before I was asked what personal interest I had in the field—it had all been professional before that—and I dropped to my masculine voice and confessed all.... We covered the subject rather completely starting with my Hawaiian paper for the psychiatrists last year and going through the magazine, the philosophy, FPE, and my personal experiences and feelings after my own TVism had been revealed. The tape will be shown on both commercial and educational stations in Honolulu. It's a beginning and a good place to start, because it is somewhat disconcerting to have that [microphone] around your neck...and having 2 or 3 big cameras poking their noses at you.<sup>53</sup>

Another first came in August of 1967 when Prince appeared on the Irv Kupsinet show in Chicago. Prince was billed as the author of *The Transvestite and His Wife* and participated in a panel discussion along with Dr. Gebhard of the Kinsey Institute, Dr. Wright, author of *Black Power*, and with an unnamed psychiatrist.<sup>54</sup> “For the first time over the air,” she proudly wrote “a TV was treated as the intellectual equal of other persons with some stature and not as a sort of curiosity to be taken apart.”<sup>55</sup> Prince’s statement reflected her awareness that many programs invited her on as an oddity. Yet, she used the air time to plug Chevalier, promote her cause, and debate the host, audience members, and callers on issues related to gender and sex. She reported positive feedback, with only the occasional “Virginia, do you believe in God” type questions from callers [her words]. All in all, these appearances accomplished exactly what Prince intended; she received hundreds of letters of inquiry from individuals who wanted more information on transvestism or FPE and from those (TV and non-TV) who wanted to thank her for challenging their thinking. Most important, membership in FPE greatly expanded due to these radio and television appearances. “Within a week of the radio broadcast in Chicago,” reported Fran Connors in the national newsletter, “over fifty

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<sup>53</sup> *Transvestia* #42 (December 1966).

<sup>54</sup> I believe that “Dr. Wright” was, in fact, Richard Wright.

<sup>55</sup> *Transvestia* #47 (October 1967).

letters came to Virginia asking to learn more about TVism.... Our chapters should raise some money to bring Virginia to their areas for a radio discussion. There is no better way to get our story across as well as pick up new members who understand what it is all about.”<sup>56</sup> The rank and file followed Prince’s public relation tours with interest and enthusiasm, and the membership of most chapters voted to help finance her travel expenses.

Prince’s public relations trips informed a strategic alliance she sought with the medical, legal, and law enforcement professions. “We cannot educate all the population at once,” she wrote to her readers, “but we can spend some considerable effort in trying to enlighten those groups in society who in the long run influence, administer and enforce society’s laws and policies.... If we can reach the doctors, lawyers, marriage counselors, police officials and judges, we could help those TV’s indirectly even though they might never hear of this magazine.”<sup>57</sup> With regards to building strategic alliances, I think Prince’s bravest encounters came with police departments. She did not merely send informative pamphlets to law enforcement agencies; she actually set up meetings with police chiefs and the heads of vice squad departments in most every city that she visited. Here is her account of one of these visits in 1966:

I went as Virginia to see the Lt. who was public relations assistant to the Police Chief in San Diego. He then took me to the Lt. in charge of the vice squad. After about 45 minutes with him I left for an appointment with the City Attorney....The reason for my call on them was that San Diego is working on an ordinance which could make the wearing of the clothing of the opposite sex with the intent to commit an illegal act, illegal itself....Both the Lt. and the City Attorney made it clear that if a TV such as myself was just walking the streets, acting like a lady and minding his own business that no law would be being broken because there would be no ‘intent’....I urged them to try to get the ordinance through leaving

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<sup>56</sup> “Femme Forum” #10 (May 1967).

<sup>57</sup> *Transvestia* #21 (June 1963). This, of course, was also the philosophy of the homophile organizations.

out the clothing as a means to their ends. I don't think I succeeded in selling them on this, but they did admit that I had a point.<sup>58</sup>

This account and others indicate that Prince was direct and unapologetic when confronting police and legal officials. She always called ahead to set up an appointment with an officer. She brought along her pamphlets and leaflets to give to whomever she met with. Her premise for requesting a meeting was to inquire about the city's laws regarding crossdressing. Once in the door, she set about fulfilling her agenda of educating whoever was listening about the harmless motives of heterosexual crossdressers. As was the case with her talks to doctors, Prince would emphasize to law enforcers the distinctions between transvestites and "sexual deviates," i.e. gays and street queens.

Prince advocated for her breed of crossdressers and was not so much concerned with the image and well-being of other groups who crossdressed. During a trip to Hawaii in 1965, Prince made an appointment with the lieutenant in charge of the Honolulu police vice detail. She informed her readers that the Honolulu authorities "seem to be pretty reasonable. The basis for the 'I am a Boy' signs on the queens is that the law prohibits crossdressing with intent to deceive, it being understood that the deception is for some illicit purpose."<sup>59</sup> Except for a rude rejection by the Denver police department, Prince reported only positive experiences with the law enforcement agencies she visited. By her accounts, she was always treated respectfully. I have found no evidence that indicates what exactly police officials thought about Prince—whether they took her seriously or as a complete joke or as another urban oddity whose voice they, as public servants, were obligated to listen to. Accompanying her many travelogues are photographs of Prince

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<sup>58</sup> Virgin Views "Let's Do Make Waves" in *Transvestia* #38 (April 1966).

<sup>59</sup> *Transvestia* #35 (October 1965).

with prominent psychiatrists, doctors, and radio and television personalities. It may be telling that there is not one photograph of Prince posing with a police chief or law officer.

In addition to appearing on radio and television and meeting with police authorities, Prince served as a panelist at numerous professional conferences. In her first paper delivered to a professional conference—the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in New York in 1963—Prince presented themes and formulated arguments that she would develop in future papers and presentations. She pointed out that most professionals conflate sex and gender, which leads them to mistakenly classify transvestites as sexual deviates. She explained the differences among transvestites, transsexuals, and homosexuals, and she unveiled her new term, *feminiphilia*. Speaking to psychiatrists and doctors well aware of the sexual nature of the practice of crossdressing, Prince refrained from denying its erotic components. Although she openly acknowledged the sexual rewards of crossdressing in this address and in future presentations, she emphasized that other motivations, including self-expression, also factor into the reward equation.

To underscore the normality and respectability of heterosexual men who crossdress, she presented findings and statistics from the hundreds of questionnaires she had sent out to her readers. In this 1963 speech, she reported her findings from 272 surveys. This number expanded to over one thousand by the mid-1970s. Prince would cast the transvestite's personal struggles into a larger story of every man's need for emancipation from limited, restrictive, oppressive, and completely arbitrary gender roles. She believed that her group was the vanguard of a movement for men's liberation. Consequently, Prince despised cures and treatment programs that attempted to make a patient conform to the idealized stereotypes of manhood. In this particular speech, she lambasted aversion

therapy, which she considered a shameful and cruel technique. Prince maintained that doctors should advise transvestites to accept themselves as they are and not feel guilty about their practices.

In this paper and others, Prince boldly confronted mental health professionals who pathologized transvestism using a narrow sample of case histories. The following words were hard-hitting given the fact that Prince—dressed in women’s attire—delivered them to a room of medical and mental health professionals:

There is no question but that persons with these types of histories [i.e. troubled] do exist and that they turn up in the offices of psychiatrists. Unfortunately, the psychiatrist only sees a specialized sampling of transvestites and therefore the conclusions drawn are based on a biased population of cases. Generally speaking, the only cases that go to a doctor are those that have been sent there by legal authorities, are forced to come by wives or parents, or are quite disturbed by their desires and seek help. The well adjusted, happily married and out-of-trouble transvestite does not go to the doctor, and he is therefore not studied nor counted in the population of cases from which most conclusions are drawn.<sup>60</sup>

In reference to the medicalization of transvestism, Prince delivered her most scathing critique in front of around eighty transvestites who had gathered for a weekend retreat at Susanna Valenti’s resort in October of 1962. In her address, she historicized the field of psychiatry and noted its tendency to study “all patterns of behavior slightly out of the ordinary.” She stated directly that she did not regard herself or any other heterosexual femmepersonator as emotionally or psychologically ill. In this speech, Prince also pointed to the outright contradiction between contemporary psychologists’ research findings on gender and their actual practice of labeling deviancy:

Further indication of the falsity of this arbitrary division [between genders] is evident in all the tests and devices which psychologists come up with to measure masculinity and femininity ‘indexes’ in each sex. They therefore give lip service to the presence of masculinity in the female and femininity in the male, but when

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<sup>60</sup> “The Expression of Femininity in the Male” in *Transvestia* #24 (December 1963)

it comes to practical and actual expression of this (at least on the part of the male) they raise their eyebrows...and start to work ‘helping’ the individual to ‘get back to normal’—to ‘adjust himself to society’ and, if possible, to stop being what he is.... FemmePersonation as we know it and show it is not a perversion, sex deviation, anomaly, obsession, or similar terms denoting that ‘something is wrong’.... It should be made clear that ‘statistically uncommon’ is not synonymous with ‘psychopathological,’ and ‘culturally impermissible’ is not necessarily ‘morally reprehensible.’ All a true TV or FP is doing is to seek to express some of the values and traits which, when they were drawn from the common human supply depot, so to speak, were arbitrarily assigned to the female.”<sup>61</sup>

This was a very powerful critique of the medical and psychiatric management of “deviant” behaviors. It is important to note that also in the resort’s audience that weekend were a handful of wives, a prominent psychiatrist named Dr. Hugo Beigel, and a few researchers from the Kinsey Institute.<sup>62</sup>

Only a few other FPE members confronted the public through the media. It was largely Prince who conducted this more audacious kind of public relations work. In doing so, she became the public face of male-to-female heterosexual transvestism. Some would criticize Prince for being content to represent transvestites and not to mobilize them. Yet, one tangible result of limited media publicity and Prince’s growing reputation in some medical circles was that a handful of doctors and mental health professionals began referring their transvestite patients to FPE and *Transvestia*. These kinds of referrals occurred on a larger scale in the homophile movement as result of reformers’ engagement with health professionals. They “signaled a shift in the way some psychiatrists and other professionals viewed homosexuals—no longer as deviants needing a cure but individuals

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<sup>61</sup> The speech was entitled, “Taking Stock” and was published in #19 (February 1963).

<sup>62</sup> Dr. Hugo Beigel wrote about his experience at the 1962 retreat in an article entitled “A Weekend in Alice’s Wonderland” *Journal of Sex Research* 5 (1969). Darrel Raynor provides an account of the weekend in his 1966 book, *A Year among the Girls*. He witnessed Prince and Dr. Beigel conversing as they walked along the resort grounds. According to Raynor, Dr. Beigel displayed a skeptical look on his face as Prince emphatically related her views to him.

marginalized by mainstream society who needed the support of their own community”<sup>63</sup>

The same could be said for transvestites.

One way to ascertain the character of the transvestite club movement is to examine the activities and evolution of its chapters. Between 1962 and 1975 somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty to twenty-five chapters organized under the banner of Phi Pi Epsilon. In 1972, Fran Conners tallied past and present membership rosters and concluded that around 1,800 crossdressers had passed through FPE’s ranks. Some chapters in the South and Western Plains regions were very small, comprising only a handful of members. The chapters in larger cities, such as Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago comprised upwards to thirty members. Each chapter had a unique personality and social vision. In this chapter, I focus on four FPE sororities and treat the remaining chapters in an appendix section.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Martin Meeker (75)

<sup>64</sup> The main source of evidence concerning each chapter’s organizational culture, activities, and practices is the social section of the “Femme Forum.” The social section featured condensed news-bits from longer chapter and regional reports that chapter presidents and regional counselors sent to Sheila Niles, the editor of the social section. These condensed news items were often sketchy and non-specific regarding business matters and chapter activities. For example, a medical education project would be mentioned but the details regarding its design and implementation was not described. Descriptions of parties and socials abound. But where are the many photographs that were taken at these events? Where are copies of chapter newsletters, such as “Delta Diary,” “Beta Beat,” and “Alpha Bits”? The Security Manual? The tapes of voice recordings? And film footage of chapter parties and retreats? Were they and other sources of evidence, like original chapter reports, private letters, and various ephemera, destroyed in a sudden “purge”? Were these items destroyed later by an embarrassed or oblivious child or relative of a deceased member? Could these treasures still be hidden—undiscovered in an attic, closet, or basement? Because of the absence of the above evidence and because the descriptions of the goings-on, social activities, and educational campaigns are frustratingly vague in the “Femme Forum”, only a partial narrative about each chapter can be constructed. Still, these rudimentary narratives offer a hopeful avenue for future research by myself and other scholars to fashion a more complete story of the chapters that organized under Phi Pi Epsilon.



## Alpha Chapter

In Los Angeles, Alpha was the first chapter organized under FPE. It was the easiest to charter, as the group that became Alpha had been known as the Hose and Heels Club and had been meeting regularly since Prince started the club in 1961.<sup>65</sup> Even some of these members, including Prince, had been involved with the informal gatherings at the Long Beach home of a crossdresser named Johnny Thornton back in the early 1950s. In the second largest metropolitan city in the United States, Alpha rose to become one of the most populous chapters of FPE. The April 1965 chapter meeting had eighteen members and five real women present. Their meetings became so well-attended that in 1967, the leaders rented a large hall to accommodate the numerous members and wives. The April 1969 meeting had twenty-one members and five genetic women present.

With a full social calendar, Alpha was one of the more active, well-organized, and well-run chapters of FPE. Alpha members conducted a business meeting and threw a party every month of the year. In August of 1968, Alpha held a “constitutional convention” to devise a constitution of chapter dress codes and by-laws. In 1970, leaders created a booklet of chapter rules to give new members, covering issues such as dues, dress codes at meetings, guest policy, and security measures. Alpha may have had some of the more open-minded members of FPE, if a few of the chapter’s guests are any indication. For example, the August 1971 meeting hosted “Lady Java,” a professional female impersonator. Alpha members kept abreast of all the local news, gossip, and

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<sup>65</sup> Prince announced in the April 1962 issue that the Hose and Heels Club had been dissolved and reconstituted as Alpha. Those members of the Hose and Heels club who applied for membership and who were accepted by the selection committee held their first organizational meeting on March 16, 1962. Prince reported that 15 FPs, 5 wives and 4 interested women were present. The members adopted various policies and procedures and elected a committee to consider a set of by-laws, which would also be circulated to other FPE leaders in other parts of the country.

happenings through “Alpha Bits,” their chapter newsletter. Begun in 1967 by a member named Inez, it was, according to Sheila Niles, one of the more impressive and long-lasting FPE chapter newsletters.

Looking good and appearing “real” were important for the Los Angeles cross-dressers who joined Alpha. The theme of one of their many topical meetings was called “passing.” At their chapter meetings, they welcomed various non-TV guests, such as wig designers, hair stylists, and cosmetologists to teach hair maintenance and make-up techniques. Even some of the members’ wives taught classes on feminine topics. Two members named Irene and Maxine set up a Polaroid picture studio and assisted other members with taking glamour portraits.

Alpha developed several different kinds of activities and events for the self-improvement and the social benefit of its members. Members held White Elephant sales, and they created drives called “operation sharing” and “swap club,” in which members shared or swapped articles of clothing. With “criticism hour,” Alpha had one of the most unique chapter activities. In this group activity, each member would take a turn standing in front of the other members. He would demonstrate his best feminine walk and follow other commands issued by the crowd. On sheets of paper, the onlookers wrote compliments, criticisms, and suggestions for improvement. These were then collected and given to the spotlighted member. “One of the remarkable things that struck me and others too,” beamed Alpha’s president, “was the upgrading of femininity of the group as a whole—the whole bit—clothes, make-up, and manners. We are progressing.”<sup>66</sup>

Alpha members not only experienced a vibrant chapter social life with many formal and informal social get-togethers, the chapter also occasionally waged public relations

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<sup>66</sup> “Theta Thoughts” #20 (May 1965).

campaigns. Although few details were given, the “Femme Forum” mentioned an on-going program with UCLA. More than likely, members made themselves available for interviews by Robert Stoller and other researchers at the university’s gender identity clinic. In 1964, a member named Barbara Turner (5-T-8) visited four law enforcement agencies to look into obtaining a special permit (a “double driver’s license”) for transvestite drivers. Alpha’s February 1967 meeting hosted two attorneys who were interested in improving the legal status of transvestites in California. In respect to public relations, Alpha held an “open house” annually in which the chapter invited city leaders and public officials to a catered dinner and to hear a lecture by Prince. The first open house in November of 1967 welcomed around fifty guests. Other chapters of FPE would follow suit with their own open houses.

#### The Chapters of Theta Region

When the national officers devised the regional / counselor system in 1965, the region of Theta included the states of Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois (outside of Chicago). The region was named after a chapter based in Madison, Wisconsin. Theta chapter was the only functioning chapter of FPE that existed at the time in that geographical region and only one of four FPE chapters in the United States. Fran Connors resided as president of Theta before resigning to assume the appointment of executive secretary in the fall of 1965. His leadership helped produce one of the most active and best organized chapters, with a written constitution and a highly sophisticated newsletter named “Theta Report,” later changed to “Theta Thoughts.” Connors and his wife edited and distributed it. The newsletter began in the fall of 1963 and lasted twenty-one issues,

until June of 1965. It was discontinued after Connors accepted the post of executive secretary and began editing “Femme Forum,” the national newsletter, later that year.

In March of 1965, Connors reported in the newsletter that the membership stood at forty-two, with ten regular members and thirty-two “associate members” from other states. During Theta’s hey day, the chapter conducted regular monthly business meetings and hosted numerous socials. Theta’s 1964 Christmas party was attended by seventeen members and wives. Initially, the membership allowed wives to be present only at socials. Then, in early 1965, the regular members voted to include wives in their monthly business meetings. Theta members felt socially obligated to help other members, even their associate members in other states. They raised money and sent clothing to an associate member in Florida who had fallen into poor health and who had recently lost big in a divorce settlement. In respect to public relations, Theta developed a “medical education project” in which members contacted area doctors to educate them about heterosexual cross-dressing. The members welcomed one local doctor, who “hopes to help us enlighten the psychological world,” as a guest at a June 1965 meeting.<sup>67</sup>

The northern Midwest was a well-developed geographical region in respect to involvement in FPE. Members of Theta joined with members of Beta (Chicago) and Delta (Cleveland) in South Bend, Indiana, in May of 1965, for the Midwest Conference. The turn-out was disappointing. Only fourteen FPE members and three wives made it to the event, but the afternoon business session proved to be an important moment to share ideas and public relations strategies. The conference’s attendees discussed the importance of making *Transvestia* more widely available. They devised a strategy for placing ads for *Transvestia* in newspapers, other alternative magazines, and popular science journals.

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<sup>67</sup> “Theta Thoughts” #21 (June 1965).

These ads served as recruitment ploys. Fran Conners wrote that “the best possible way to let other TVs know what they are and that help is available is to make every effort to find new book stores and magazine stores where TVia can be sold.”<sup>68</sup>

Apparently, Conners was the social glue of Theta chapter. Sheila Niles, the social editor of the “Femme Forum,” reported in the November 1966 issue that due to Conners’ work with the national office of FPE, a large Theta gathering had not occurred “in some time.” Carol, one of my interviewees, vaguely recalls an incident involving a disgruntled wife of one of Theta’s members. This draught of inactivity, then, may have resulted from Conners’ fear that the wife might expose the group to police. Regardless, many of FPE’s chapters were kept afloat by a few dedicated, hands-on chapter presidents and leaders. It was not uncommon for a chapter to decline after one or more of its devoted leaders moved, quit, or lessened their leadership responsibilities. The social life of the Theta chapter seemed to rebound in 1967. However, no news was reported from Theta in the “Femme Forum” after January 1968. Instead, news from the Theta Region focused heavily on the second chapter to form in that region—Theta Tau.<sup>69</sup>

In March of 1966, the “Femme Forum” reported on the plans of the “Twin Cities group” to form an official chapter. By November of that same year Theta Tau had already had several meetings and had elected its officers. Although the chapter’s membership was dispersed, the members managed to convene on a fairly regular basis. Theta Tau and its regional sister chapter, Theta, occasionally had joint gatherings. For instance, in

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Lack of news could be attributed to the failure of a chapter’s leader to send a report to Shelia Niles, not necessarily that a chapter became defunct.

January of 1967 the two chapters held a combined party that served as a reception for Prince's visit and as a welcome to new members.

Theta Tau grew to become a chapter with an active membership. The chapter's newsletter—"Tau-Getherness" began publication in early 1967 and lasted at least until 1972. Like other chapter newsletters, "Tau-Getherness" offered helpful shopping hints, "with names of specific stores where clothes of all kinds can be purchased from understanding sales people and also places for alterations, wigs, and electrolysis."<sup>70</sup> Theta Tau formed an educational committee and, like Theta, developed a medical education project. Members of Tau cooperated in research with doctors at the University of Minnesota Medical School.<sup>71</sup> In September of 1967, Tau invited a member of a psychiatric research group to report on his research at a chapter meeting. Also, in the same year, members joined Virginia Prince for her visit to the University of Minnesota. Prince and members joined in discussions with researchers there.<sup>72</sup> Finally, one member of Tau named "Myrtle Ann" appeared on a radio talk show on station WLOL in Minneapolis in February 1971. Myrtle Ann was only one of only a few in FPE, besides Prince, who directly engaged the media.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Femme Forum" #33 (January 1972).

<sup>71</sup> A Doctor Hastings is mentioned.

<sup>72</sup> The "Femme Forum" #12 (November 1967) reported: "Sally...says that there are actually two research programs going on there, one dealing with TS [transsexuals], and the other with the stable, mature TV's. We shall hear much more of this from the Education Committee reports."

<sup>73</sup> Recently I have established contact with a surviving member of Theta and Theta-Tau. "Carol," who lives in Minneapolis and is seventy-eight years of age, co-founded Theta and was one of the three founders of Theta-Tau. She (Carol now identifies as a transgender woman) was an active member in both groups until she got married in 1966 to a wife who did not approve of Carol's association with either. Carol said that her activities with FPE greatly diminished about a year after his marriage.

## Gamma

In the fall of 1965, plans were being made for reviving the nuclei of a group in Connecticut. In December of that year the chapter known as Gamma held its “long awaited” meeting in Hartford. The chapter had its second meeting on March 24, 1966. Initially, Hartford was the center of Gamma activity, with members in Rhode Island and Boston joining in. To be fair to all members within this widespread region, the group developed a “rotating plan” to have chapter meetings in several different places within the area. Early on, Gamma formed an education campaign but no details were recorded about it. Several chapters of FPE forged ties with persons in the hair and beauty industry. Gamma was no exception, as the membership befriended a hairdresser who agreed to keep his shop open late one night a week for TV customers.

By 1969, Boston had become the hub of Gamma activity. The Boston group helped the Hartford and Providence groups of the Gamma region develop their territory. By the end of that same year, Gamma had become the second largest chapter, with an excellent retention rate. The chapter was having bi-weekly meetings in Boston and Providence, and gatherings were happening in Hartford on a less frequent basis. The chapter developed a handbook called “Gamma Guidelines” to initiate new members to the group. Members also used this handbook as a public relations device to be given to professional people. In Boston, Gamma produced a newsletter called “Gamma Goodies.” Twelve issues had been published by May of 1970.<sup>74</sup>

When activities became centered in Boston, the chapter started having weekly meetings and a party once a month. The chapter hosted special holiday parties (18

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<sup>74</sup>And it was being used for news bits up until the demise of “Femme Forum” in December of 1972.

attended the 1969 Christmas party), dress up parties, clothing auctions, monthly socials, and trips to special events. For example, the chapter sent a convoy to New York's Spring Masquerade Ball.

Gamma developed extensive educational and medical campaigns. Members established connections with psychologists at Boston University and elsewhere, and often they invited area doctors and psychiatrists to their meetings. In 1969, Gamma invited a Dr. Cohen and seven psychology interns from Boston University to a chapter meeting for a discussion on tranvestism. According to the "Femme Forum" this discussion meeting was a "resounding success" as the "guests were genuinely interested and asked many pertinent, thought provoking questions." Several chapter members contacted two psychiatric associations and volunteered to be research subjects and to participate in discussions with the staff and students-in-training. The chapter also prepared a brochure-letter about transvestism and sent copies of it to the offices of mental health professionals, libraries, police departments, the judiciary, and to college health and science departments.<sup>75</sup>

In 1970, the chapter successfully placed an organizational ad in "Boston after Dark" a popular section in one of Boston's mainstream newspapers. This ad first had to be submitted to the Massachusetts Attorney General for approval. The ad resulted in eighteen inquiries. Gamma sought to build bridges with other minorities by way of a public speaking circuit. In 1971, the "Femme Forum" reported that one of the leaders named Dot "spoke to an evening meeting of the Homophile Union of Boston on transvestism as we know it and judging by the questions afterward, she was a great success. Some asked for the FPE California address; others complimented her on a fine

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<sup>75</sup> "Femme Forum" #20 (May 1969).



presentation; all learned something.” This same leader later gave a talk to a chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis. Unfortunately, little was said about the outcome of these outreach talks to the “homophile” community.

In all likelihood, Gamma was not attempting to build a genuine coalition with the gay and lesbian movement. These speeches were more of an attempt on the part of the more politically and socially conscious chapters to carve out a space in a fomenting movement of sexual and gender minorities in the wake of gay liberation. By the early 1970s, with gay liberation making significant headway, Dot and other leaders within FPE wanted to affirm and differentiate their group identity while riding the wave of the broader movement. Prince had expressed this viewpoint and strategy years earlier in association with the homophile movement:

Whatever the more highly organized homophile community does to improve their lot tends to improve ours and vice versa.... The homophile group is much better organized, larger, and has been at it far longer than we have. Thus where we can assist any general programs they have for breaking down prejudice and legal restrictions, we should do so. Where we can take advantage of any organizations or procedures which they have set up which can be of help to us individually or collectively, we should do so. We should establish and maintain contact with the organizational centers that are maintained by the homophile community, getting from them and giving to them such information and assistance as may be mutually helpful.<sup>76</sup>... The homophile community is on the march AND on the way to gaining acceptance.... Some of the more narrow minded of our sister TVs see nothing good in anything that homosexuals do, but we ought to remember that their persecution is our persecution and their victory will be our victory too.... So, personally I am all for their success and would cooperate in helping them to achieve it where I could out of pure self interest for our group if nothing else fails. There is, however, the broader interest of helping all minorities toward acceptance.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Untitled Virgin Views in *Transvestia* #18 (December 1962).

<sup>77</sup> Virgin Views “Our Changing Times” in *Transvestia* #37 (February 1966).

Heterosexual crossdressers observed the tactics, strategies, failures, and successes of the social movements centered on sexual and gender identity. FPE members identified with these movements for social change in varying ways. Many saw no connection with their own private and public struggles. However, a handful of the more socially and politically conscious members and leaders, including Prince, did identify with and support these broader social movements. As a member named Jeri (Wisconsin) observed of the social ferment of the era, “the common denominator for the 70’s seems to be more freedom—freedom of expression of the self, of the body, of the individual in all ways, including sex.” Jeri seemed to have absorbed many ideas from second wave feminism. He recognized that “the presence or absence of one or another set of hormone-producing apparatus—used only occasionally for reproduction, and most often as a source of pleasure was basically a pretty stupid criterion for determining so much, so very much, of an individual’s destiny, conduct, and social position.” Like scores of other crossdressers who viewed the social changes around them in a positive light, Jeri more or less celebrated the sexual and gender revolutions that he saw exploding around him, with a specific reference to the women’s rights movement. “There is no doubt that we are on the brink of some new kind of ferment,” he wrote. “Around us, the women we all admire (or profess to), but have also helped maintain their position as second-class citizens, are beginning to demand and actually gain more freedom for themselves.”<sup>78</sup> Jeri was just one example of many FPE members who reevaluated his life in relation to women’s rights and women’s liberation, even acknowledging his complicity in women’s second class citizenship. Undoubtedly, these issues were discussed and debated in FPE chapter gatherings.

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<sup>78</sup> “Femme Forum” #23 (January 1970) “Silk in the Seventies” by Jeri (Wisconsin)

By in large, the evidence I have seen suggests that even though these mostly white heterosexual crossdressers exhibited many social blind spots, most members of FPE felt inspired by the women's movement, the civil right's movement, the sexual revolution, and to a lesser degree, gay liberation. If other groups, they reasoned, could fight for their rights, then why couldn't they? It could be said that a community forms when a group of people perceive a sense of grievance and injustice that leads to a sense of shared fate and hope with other members in the group. If this is the case, then a series of events in the mid-1960s may have galvanized transvestites like nothing else before it.

#### The Legal Defense Fund

If the force behind implementing medical and educational public relations campaigns involved fighting for control of the 'story' of transvestism, then it is no surprise that heterosexual cross-dressers brought their narratives to the legal front, as well. Without a doubt, many crossdressers wanted to change what they perceived to be grossly unfair local laws and statutes that criminalized crossdressing. The most significant activity in regards to the legal front occurred in 1964 and 1965, when the readers of *Transvestia* and *Turnabout* and members of FPE raised funds to support a legal defense appeal for a man who had been convicted in a New York City court for "masquerading" as a woman. With a favorable appeal, they hoped to set a precedent for future legal challenges.

In March of 1964, "Felicity," a crossdresser from New York and member of FPE, was arrested, tried, and convicted under Section 887-7 of the New York State Code of Criminal Procedure, otherwise known as the masquerading law. The story of the conviction and legal challenge was detailed in *Transvestia* and another underground

magazine named *Turnabout*, published irregularly in New York City from 1963 to 1967. *Turnabout*'s editor, Siobhan Fredericks, quoted from the 887-9 statute. He said that this law brands as a "vagrant" a person, who "having his face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or being otherwise disguised in a manner calculated to prevent his being identified, appears on a road or public highway or in a field, lot, wood, or enclosure." He further explained that "In spite of the fact that this law was originally enacted to prevent criminal acts...from being perpetrated by disguised persons, it is now used almost exclusively to arrest TVs who dare go out on the street in feminine attire."<sup>79</sup> A very adventurous crossdresser in respect to going out in public dressed, Felicity had been arrested in feminine attire near his home in New York City. Despite the fact that his purpose for being cross-dressed had no criminal intent, he was convicted and handed a two day sentence that the judge subsequently suspended. Nevertheless, the arrest cost him his job with Eastern Airlines because a mental health expert informed his employer that such behavior signaled homosexuality. Felicity decided to appeal the conviction if he could enlist others to help finance the appeal. He needed support because he could not afford the hundreds of dollars it would take to finance an appeal.

Both Prince and Siobhan Fredericks championed Felicity's cause. Fredericks sent out 500 letters to individuals on his magazine's subscription list, asking them to help finance the appeal. Fredericks also contacted Prince to see if she could help. Prince agreed to support the appeal and published a request for contributions in the next issue of *Transvestia*. She also donated 300 dollars from FPE funds toward the attorney's fees. Prince and Fredericks jointly opened a special checking account for the donations.

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<sup>79</sup> *Turnabout* #4 (1964). Information about the Defense fund can also be found in *Transvestia* #27 (June 1964); #33 (June 1965); and #34 (August 1965).

Readers of *Transvestia* and *Turnabout* contributed more than 1,200 dollars to what was called the “John Miller Defense Fund.” With financial support from hundreds of other crossdressers, Felicity’s lawyers prepared the appeal to be heard by the Appellate Term of the New York State Court of Appeals.

As the lawyers prepared, two events happened that gave the challengers a ray of hope. In October of that year the American Civil Liberties Union filed a separate brief as *amicus curiae*. Also, a reporter from the *New York Times* wrote a sympathetic story about Felicity’s challenge.<sup>80</sup> There was, however, an early set back. While preparing the case, the lawyers discovered that the New York Court of Appeals, the highest court in the state, had just ruled adversely on a similar case in which two cross-dressers had appealed the same statute. The only difference was that the lawyers of the other appeal argued on the basis of misapplication of the law, whereas Felicity’s lawyers were preparing to argue on the basis of its constitutionality.<sup>81</sup> Although they knew that it was highly unlikely that the lower Appellate court would overrule the higher Appeals court, the lawyers decided to present their brief anyway. The hearing was held in early 1965, and as expected, the Appellate Term denied the appeal, but with a closer than expected split of four-to-three. The lawyers then sought permission from the Court of Appeals for a hearing. The Court refused on the grounds of the prior case involving cross-dressing in which the appeal had been denied. The only other legal recourse was the United States Supreme Court.

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<sup>80</sup> O’Kane, Lawrence. *A TRANSVESITTE GETS LEGAL HELP: Civil Liberties Union Argues Wearing Garb of Opposite Sex Is Not Criminal MISUSE OF LAW CHARGED Group Notes 1845 Statute Was Applied to Persons Disguised as Indians. New York Times* (New York, N.Y.: Oct 13, 1964) p. 45

<sup>81</sup> I have not found any evidence on this other case. It is reasonable to assume that those arrested were not associated with FPE or the *Turnabout* crowd or else Prince or Fredericks would have mentioned their case.

Felicity and his lawyers decided to go for it. This was an important moment for the crossdressers who contributed to the defense fund and a potentially watershed moment in the history of transgender. Both Prince and Fredericks knew that the stakes were high and both galvanized their readership, encouraging them to contribute to this once in a lifetime opportunity to make the freedom to dress as one chooses the law of the land. “The negroes have achieved progress by their actions AFTER some legal and social sanction had been obtained,” Prince stated to her readership. “The same will go for us, but we have to get the sanction first.... I’m not advocating any protest parade or a sit-down in skirts in the mayor’s office. All I’m saying is that the attitudes of people begin to change slowly when a thing previously considered illegal is supported by the law.”<sup>82</sup> Prince published several letters from readers and FPE members that illustrates the rank-and-file’s support of this legal fund. This moment of hope was short lived though. Unfortunately, in early October of 1965, the Supreme Court denied the *Writ of Certiorari* prepared by Miller’s lawyers.<sup>83</sup>

The decision was a huge disappointment, but Prince and Fredericks both managed to reflect positively on the experience. “A large number of transvestites,” wrote Fredericks, “forgot all their differences of opinion and personality long enough to participate in this appeal fund. More than seventy TVs contributed to the fund through *Turnabout* alone! This shows that TVs really do give a damn about one another and can work together when it’s really important to do so.”<sup>84</sup> Prince agreed that the defense fund provided a

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<sup>82</sup> Transvestia #34 (August 1965).

<sup>83</sup> 145--John Miller, petr., v. New York. Petition for writ of cert. to the New York Court of Appeals denied. “Proceedings Monday and Yesterday in the U.S. Supreme Court.” *New York Times*. Oct. 13, 1965. p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> Turnabout #6 (Winter 1966).

common cause for many crossdressers to rally around and “offered proof that there is united spirit here and that we are not just a bunch of isolated, self-centered odd balls each in her own cocoon. Rather we do have contacts, communications, and common interests strong enough to get behind an idea and push it.”<sup>85</sup> As a measure to show that this legal challenge was not in vain, Fredericks planned to mail the Miller brief to all who had contributed to the defense fund and to anyone else who requested the document. Both Prince and Fredericks recognized the importance of having laid the legal groundwork for future court challenges. Fredericks encouraged his readers to give the brief to their attorneys, as it cites “valuable precedents and points of law” that might be useful for future cases involving transvestism. “The Miller case is a dead issue in the courts,” Fredericks reflected, “but its ghost may yet rise to haunt those unenlightened prosecutors and enforcement officials who deny the TV’s right to cross-dress.”<sup>86</sup> In light of these and other shards of activism engaged in by dozens of members in what was existentially a social club, it becomes necessary to characterize organized transvestism with an eye toward other postwar sexual and gender identity groups and movements

#### FPE in Historical and Comparative Perspective

“We are not marching alone today.”<sup>87</sup>

On balance, the chapters that comprised FPE were nurtured by only a handful of dedicated leaders. The general character of their organizing efforts cannot, of course, be

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<sup>85</sup> *Transvestia* #36 (December 1965)

<sup>86</sup> *Turnabout* #6 (Winter 1966). I have not found this legal brief in any of the archives that I have visited.

<sup>87</sup> Reprinted in “Femme Forum” #23 (January 1970) from “Doing Our Own Thing” in the Gamma newsletter #10.

classified as a social movement. However, I will term their collective efforts as an “identity movement.”<sup>88</sup> By the time it merged with Mamselle in 1976, FPE had developed almost two dozen local chapters across the United States and achieved its main goal of fostering in its members peace of mind, self-understanding, and a sense of community. More limited success was achieved in respect to educating the public, encouraging objective scientific research, and changing discriminatory laws. In 1979, in the special 100<sup>th</sup> issue of *Transvestia*, former columnist Susana Valenti resurrected her popular column to comment on all that had been accomplished since the birth of *Transvestia* in 1960 and the wake of organized transvestism. The upbeat and optimistic tone that had characterized her columns in the 1960s had turned to melancholy. She marveled at the progress made by homosexuals, transsexuals, and women but issued a pessimistic assessment of the state of transvestite liberation. “We seem to have moved forward to a certain extent,” she wrote. “A good number of people,

many more than there were one hundred issues ago, know about us. The moral ‘liberation’ of our times seems to have helped somewhat, too. But, we ask ourselves, have we really become liberated? Have we really become understood? Accepted? Our transsexual sisters are willing to meet the cameras, to make the headlines, but we are not quite willing to follow the example of GG’s [genetic girls] and transsexuals and gays. We are still at the bottom of the acceptance totem pole....We are letting the revolution pass us by, while we timidly hope that the GG’s, transsexuals, and gays will win their battle so that we can gather a few crumbs from their banquet. We can count with the fingers of one hand the number of TV’s...who have dared a break-through in radio, television, and other organizations. The rest of us sit back silently and do nothing but wish that something, somebody, would do something for our liberation.”<sup>89</sup>

In her editorial, Susanna compared transvestites with other marginalized groups and singled out group visibility, publicity, and media attention as factors for gaining social

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<sup>88</sup> While in a sense most all social movements are fueled by identity, organized transvestism was so tiny at this stage that labeling it a social movement seems inappropriate.

<sup>89</sup> “Susanna Says” *Transvestia* #100 (1979).



acceptance. She largely attributed the success of the movements waged by homosexuals, women, and transsexuals to each group's willingness to directly engage the media—"to meet the cameras"—as she put it. These activists had courageously brought their stories to radio, television, and print in order to oppose and reframe medical, legal, cultural, and religious discourses that had stigmatized, marginalized, and criminalized their identities. They captured media attention by disrupting the status quo in public acts of civil protest. With her statement that crossdressers were "letting the revolution pass us by," Susanna may have been referring to the failure or unwillingness of transvestites to engage in direct action techniques and public protests like other minority groups had done in the postwar era. Having once sided with Prince and other leaders who viewed organized transvestism as the vanguard of a movement for free gender expression, Susanna now charged that the reluctance of transvestites to mobilize a mass constituency and 'take it to the streets' was to blame for their status at the bottom of the "acceptance totem pole."

Ironically, the group that many heterosexual crossdressers had historically derided and relegated to the bottom of the "totem pole" in an attempt to make their crowd more respectable in the eyes of the public had achieved significantly greater gains. In the mid-1960s, inspired by the black civil rights movement, militant constituencies within the homophile organizations gained hegemony within the movement. They engaged in direct action techniques and developed civil rights initiatives to challenge police harassment, government discrimination, and sickness models of homosexuality. By the early 1970s, young radicals, many of whom had been inspired and politicized by the rhetoric of the New Left, the anti-war movement, black power, and radical feminism, lifted the banner of gay pride. The gay liberationists moved the struggle for homosexual rights to a new

level of defiance and infused it with elements of radicalism and confrontation. Combined with the widespread protest fervor and anti-authoritarian tenor that characterized the late 1960s and 1970s, gay liberation inspired and mobilized masses of homosexuals. Gay liberation engendered a new paradigm of coming-out that reversed the cost / benefit equation that had kept many homosexuals hidden in the closet. The grand result was a flowering of gay culture and institution building in the 1970s, as well as, an emerging ethnic model that reframed homosexuality as a valid social identity. In short, the post-Stonewall era saw homosexuals as a group transform from a subculture to an identifiable community.

A militant wing of FPE, one that advocated for direct action, pickets, demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, and anti-sickness resolutions, never developed within its ranks. Also, heterosexual transvestites, as a group, did not confront the media en masse or pursue a very public profile. What may be described as Phi Pi Epsilon's more accommodationist philosophy reflected the mindset of its founder. "It is not yet the time to go out and beat our heads against social prejudice," wrote Prince during the year of FPE's birth, "but we can work behind the scenes and in small ways to gradually bring this philosophy to public attention. All new and non-conformist groups must not proceed so fast as to get ahead of social tolerance or they will be slapped down."<sup>90</sup> Prince's views changed little over the next fifteen years, and no radical contingent within FPE rose to alter the moderate path or challenge the accommodating temper of the organization. It is of little wonder, then, that Susanna, who had witnessed the palpable changes that homosexuals

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<sup>90</sup> "Phi Pi Epsilon—Our National Sorority" in *Transvestia* #13 (February 1962).

had brought about through direct action and protest in the late 1960s and 1970s, painted such a dismal portrait of “transvestite liberation.”<sup>91</sup>

Interestingly, Susanna articulated a point of view that would dominant many post-Stonewall historical and popular interpretations of pre-Stonewall life and activism. In respect to the struggle for homosexual freedom and rights, this dominant view describes the homophile movement of the 1950s and early 1960s as hopelessly accommodating, apologetic, overly cautious, and obsequious to medical authorities and professionals. Historian John D’Emilio revised this interpretation with a brilliant history of the homophile movement’s accomplishments in “breaking the conspiracy of silence” that characterized the widespread public ignorance, fear, and condemnation of homosexuality in the pre-Stonewall era. However, he undermines this larger revision narrative several times throughout his book by his less than laudatory treatment of a group he calls the “homophile accommodationists.” According to D’Emilio, the radical vision of Harry Hay and the original founders of the Mattachine Foundation (1951—1953) was lost when these accommodationists took charge and transformed the Foundation into the Mattachine Society (1954—1967). While this cohort of leaders made the organization less secret and more democratic, they kept the larger movement from growing by being insular and beholden to notions of middle-class respectability. They also thwarted political and social progress by being overly accommodating to professionals. “By 1960, the homophile movement remained at best marginal to the lives of homosexuals and

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<sup>91</sup> John D’Emilio, in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, offers evidence of these changes: “In June 1970 between 5,000 and 10,000 men and women commemorated the first anniversary of the riot with a march from Greenwich Village to Central Park. By the second half of the decade, Gay Freedom events were occurring in dozens of cities, and total participation exceeded half a million individuals. The fifty homophile organizations that had existed in 1969 mushroomed into more than 800 only four years later; as the 1970s ended, the number reached into the thousands. In a relatively short time, gay liberation achieved the goal that had eluded homophile leaders for two decades—the active involvement of large numbers of homosexuals and lesbians in their own emancipation effort” (237–238).

lesbians....” D’Emilio argues. “Fear, along with the lack of confidence in their own ability to speak with authority about homosexuality, created a crippling dependency. In their search for allies and their quest for legitimacy in the eyes of the establishment, movement leaders often bowed to an apparently superior professional wisdom that was part of the problem they needed to confront.”<sup>92</sup> Thankfully, in this climate of fear, a cohort of “homophile militants” in both the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis and in new groups like the Society for Individual Rights rose to prominence in the early and mid-1960s, rebuked the obsequious “old guard,” and achieved more victories by way of a conscious turn toward direct action strategies, anti-sickness resolutions, and civil rights initiatives. Although D’Emilio credits pre-Stonewall “homophile accommodationists” and “homophile militants” with doing the slow and hard work of plodding the ground for a post-Stonewall mass movement to blossom, he portrays both the accommodationist and militant wings of the homophile movement as short-sighted and ultimately ineffective in bringing about social change and transforming the consciousness of gays. He clearly favors the young radicals of the gay liberation movement whom he asserts recaptured the “lost vision” and the “goals of pride, openness, and community” of the early founders of the Mattachine Society. Employing confrontational tactics, fostering gay pride, and championing the idea of “coming-out” enabled gay liberationists to do what their predecessors, including the homophile militants, had failed to do, which was *mobilize* the gay masses.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> D’Emilio, 123 and 125.

<sup>93</sup> Personally I am not clear why D’Emilio champions the leaders and vision of the Foundation (1951—1953) and views the Society (1954—1961) and its goals as an unfortunate detour from the movement’s “radical beginnings.” A highly secretive and hierarchical organization, as what was designed and implemented by the Foundation, is not all that radical and would be slow to foster pride and community.

Historian Martin Meeker goes even further in revising post-Stonewall interpretations of the American homophile movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Meeker corrects scholars, including D'Emilio, who have tended to impose a post-gay liberationist and lesbian-feminist model of political activism onto the homophile movement. Judging the homophile movement through the lens of a post-1960s social movement model, Meeker contends, inevitably renders the homophile groups as apologetic, accommodating, and lacking vision. Meeker shows instead that the “homophile accommodationists” actually developed a direct, practical, committed, and activist agenda based on a grounded understanding of their oppressive conditions. They saw their most daunting obstacles as group invisibility, isolation, media misinformation, and the widespread cultural demonization of same-sex attraction. To confront the charges of sin, sickness, and criminality and to break the isolation that made it difficult for homosexuals to connect with one another, 1950s homophile activists developed a “politics of communication” in which they created a reliable, stable, and authoritative “communication network.” Hal Cal, Don Lucas, Phyllis Lyon, and other homophile leaders recognized that the conspiracy of silence surrounding homosexuality “demanded a revolution in the manner in which [it] was represented and, hence, introduced into America’s dominant public sphere”<sup>94</sup> Meeker reframes D'Emilio’s “radical beginnings” / “lost vision” narrative by arguing for the revolutionary nature of the accommodationists’ educational and communication project. For example, he nails this point in his discussion of the

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<sup>94</sup> Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 35. Meeker first offered this revision of the homophile movement in, “Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (January 2001): 78-116.

Daughters of Bilitis, one of the homophile groups most tainted by a post-Stonewall frame of accommodationism:

Rather than apologize for lesbian sexuality or educate lesbians to accommodate themselves to society's view of homosexuality, [Phyllis] Lyon argued that the only way to end the so-called homosexual problem was to end the oppression of homosexuals through a widespread program of education to dispel fear. These ideas, however, were uttered in the 1950s without an established mechanism for their execution. In fact, the channels of individual and mass social education were dominated by figures such as doctors, ministers, and psychiatrists who named homosexuality an illness, a sin, and a pathology, respectively....Lyon and her colleagues in the DOB and in the homophile movement overall knew they had to build stable communication networks within which an alternative message and new information could travel relatively unmolested.<sup>95</sup>

Meeker's "politics of communication" and his choice to look "behind the mask of respectability" influence my interpretation of FPE. Although no hard evidence indicates that Virginia Prince consciously modeled FPE and *Transvestia* after the homophile organizations and their respective publications, the goals she stated and the direction the organization and magazine turned make it clear that she too wanted to build a kind of communication network to channel unbiased information and knowledge about transvestism to isolated crossdressers and to professionals who shape public opinion.

Indeed, the shards of activism and moderate reform efforts that local chapters of FPE carried out resembled the strategies adopted by the homophile organizations in the 1950s

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<sup>95</sup> Meeker, 84. I see truth in both D'Emilio and Meeker's interpretations. Meeker is, of course, right that a post-Stonewall mindset has clouded our understanding of the radical and courageous efforts of pre-Stonewall individuals and groups. Yet, D'Emilio does not necessarily impose this frame. He presents sufficient evidence showing that activists during that time saw their contemporaries as accommodationist. Still, D'Emilio goes back and forth. He has a curious tendency to praise homophile achievements: "Gay liberation was able to give substance to the dreams of the Mattachine founders because of the work of homophile activists in the intervening years.... In attempting to build a politics based on sexual preference, the homophile movement in effect helped create the community that, later, was able to sustain a liberation effort" (249). But he also castigates them for failures that ultimately stem from them not being radical enough by his judgment. His major beef is that homophile leaders were unwilling to mobilize the masses, settling instead for being their public representatives, which involved projecting an image of respectability to the public. Meeker would argue that given the circumstances, mass mobilization was not a viable strategy at that time and that "behind the mask of respectability" were faces of radicalism.

and early 1960s. In terms of ideology and goals, FPE strongly resembled the Daughters of Bilitis, a support and self-help group whose membership comprised mostly white, middle-class, non-bargaining lesbians who desired to socialize with other gay women. Concerned with projecting a nonpathological public image, both organizations were insular and exclusive, FPE as a matter of policy and the DOB mostly by custom. Both cultivated a “politics of fitting-in” that restricted membership to individuals who adhered to middle-class notions of respectability. For FPE this meant welcoming “men with responsibilities” who desired self-expression in the context of security and propriety. Consequently, other types of individuals who practiced crossdressing, such as homosexuals, transsexuals, and fetishists, were barred from joining FPE because each of these groups represented a non-respectable stigma that heterosexual crossdressers wanted to deflect from their group. For the DOB, exclusivity entailed assembling a membership that countered popular images of the gender-transgressive bar-dyke. “The Daughters,” writes D’Emilio, “looked askance at both bar life and the butch lesbian [and] tried to wean patrons away from the bars.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, while it devised no official policy, the DOB discouraged butch women and poor and working-class bar-going lesbians from joining unless they altered their gender presentation.

The DOB in the 1950s has been described by Martin Meeker as a privately cultivated “lesbian grapevine.” As he observes, “the membership of DOB tried to balance a somewhat contradictory strategy of maintaining a private and selective club while running a limited and tightly controlled publicity campaign to advertise its message and

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<sup>96</sup> D’Emilio, 106.

attract new members.”<sup>97</sup> Prince and FPE leadership were similarly guided by both principles of publicity and privacy in respect to their efforts in building the membership and publicizing their cause. As middle-class white males who identified as heterosexuals, most FPE members were already ‘well-adjusted’ and integrated into society. In fact, many of them were married. The heterosexual and class privilege of the membership certainly influenced their choice of a moderate path to self-understanding and social reform. The goal of public acceptance and the avocation of free gender expression conflicted with many members’ wish to remain underground and their desire to protect their masculine privilege and class status. As was also true with many middle-class homosexuals who joined the homophile organizations in the 1950s, FPE’s reticence toward publicity and its reluctance to risk its members’ social reputations thwarted any realistic chance for a direct action platform or an aggressive publicity-seeking campaign to take effect or be seriously considered among the rank-and-file. This and FPE’s unwillingness to include other “trans” folk limited its membership and brought about a fate that closely paralleled that of the DOB in the 1950s and early 60s. “The external limitations of censorship and public reticence,” explains Meeker, “meant that the DOB would not be well publicized for several years—and would never become a household word nationwide.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Meeker, 78. Meeker notes that by 1962, the leadership of the DOB in San Francisco was beginning to modify their exclusive stances and realize that the “split public/private approach” was problematic. They would soon follow the model set by the Mattachine Society in attempting to create “a massive, nationwide communication network” (102).

<sup>98</sup> Meeker, 80. Yet Meeker offers an important caveat for the DOB of the 1950s that is equally applicable to my historical actors in the 1960s: “In fact, although they sounded accommodationist and even apologetic to contemporary ears, such ideas were in the vanguard in the mid-1950s, so much so that many lesbians and gay men thought those who penned them were speaking with their heads in the clouds. Indeed, while some particularly visible and courageous employees and regular habitués of lesbian bars dismissed the DOB on the grounds that it was too apologetic, boring, or just not their scene, the emerging evidence suggests that



In general, those who affiliated with FPE can be divided into two camps: those who saw transvestism as identity-based versus those who viewed it more as a hobby or private (and sometimes shameful) practice. These two different conceptions of transvestism affected what each member wanted out of FPE and what each could imagine as politically and socially possible. “FP’s have a chance to be the vanguard of a very significant social movement,” stated Prince early on, “as they are able to conquer their guilt and fears and learn to accept themselves...and to see vistas that they did not dream about while locked in their rooms secretly wearing their dresses.”<sup>99</sup> By establishing a magazine and creating a national organization, Prince wanted to offer crossdressers a sense of belonging to something that was more socially meaningful than what the practice of crossdressing meant privately. She was enjoining them to reconceptualize transvestism as a public identity. No matter how inspiring Prince’s words and no matter how compellingly the leadership solicited involvement and participation from the membership, the fact was that most members joined for sociality and support and could never quite wrap their minds around the idea of organizing for reform and for a broader goal of free gender expression. The desire to wear feminine attire and behave ‘womanly’ did not register as socially legitimate concerns to rally around in the minds of numerous members, especially the ones who did not view crossdressing as a basis for a legitimate social identity. From the start, there were those who criticized Prince because they did not or could not understand the impulse to organize crossdressers. Early on, Prince acknowledged that “some have poo-pooed its [the idea of an organized group] purposes

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another sizable population of bargoers prized their privacy and rejected the DOB because it was too public, political, and even radical” (83).

<sup>99</sup> *Transvestia* #13 (February 1962).

directly to me and others indirectly to others who have relayed it to me.”<sup>100</sup> Prince attributed all criticism to those who were in a lesser stage of development, but this was not always the case. Many crossdressers, even those who possessed a strong feminine gender identity or orientation, simply did not want to politicize or publicize transvestism, the identity, nor the practice of crossdressing.

Further, the pride and peace of mind that FPE attempted to instill in its members was balanced by strong feelings of guilt and shame that many members had always experienced and could never quite shake despite the counter-narratives they created. Guilt, shame, and fear of social sanction resulted in a general reluctance to extend activities beyond intra-group social gatherings. Most members were not actively engaged in public relation efforts and educational campaigns because ultimately, in even the more relaxed political climate of the 1960s and the sexualized culture of the 1970s, there was too much at stake for these mostly white, middle-class husbands and fathers who comprised the membership. The risks and the costs of public exposure and loss of reputation outweighed the benefits of becoming radical agents for social change and kept many of them from becoming anything more than just casual, dues-paying members. “Drop-outs” and “free-loaders” plagued the organization. Although a handful of leaders and members articulated greater social visions of gender reform and public acceptance of transvestism, without the sustained support and active involvement of the majority of rank-and-file members, anything akin to a movement had little chance of taking shape. With policies that kept the membership small and geared toward individuals who had ‘everything to lose,’ FPE was fated for historical obscurity.

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<sup>100</sup> *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962).

This may be a tough assessment, but it is necessary to measure what FPE leadership imagined and what they actually got accomplished and also to speculate on reasons why they did not achieve the results they wanted. To be sure, this kind of critical assessment must take into account the titanic hegemonic barrier that they faced in the form of a conglomeration of discourses that yielded deep seeded feelings of sheer disgust for gender-transgressive males. Gender transgression was and is on the pinnacle of non-normativity. A presumably heterosexual male who enjoys the wearing of women's clothing was firmly entrenched in things that are simply 'weird.' By extension, to organize these men into a support group and one that also advocated free gender expression could not be imagined as anything less than a silly and ludicrous idea.

Therefore, with the benefit of historical hindsight and having poured through the organizational literature of Prince's national sorority, I find Susanna Valenti's portrait of the failures of organized transvestism in the 1960s and 1970s somewhat flawed. It is true that at that point in 1979 transvestites had not achieved widespread public acceptance or tolerance, but that was not for a lack of a sizeable number of them trying. Those who led and those who joined for more than the social aspect wanted to 'rescue' other "locked-room" crossdressers from isolated and anxiety-ridden lives. They also wanted to be able to crossdress and/or to identify as a transvestite (or femme-personator) freely and without fear of public retribution and social stigmatization. Their specific targets were pathologizing medical and cultural discourses, discriminatory laws, and condemnatory wives and family members. Beyond mutual support, their tactics were edification and education, with the broader strategy of managing competing narratives of transvestite identity while propagating a story of heterosexual transvestism devoid of any associations

with abnormality, sickness, and sexual deviancy. With this broader goal, chapter meetings became “brainstorm sessions”—akin to feminist consciousness raising groups—in which members discussed and debated the nature and causes of transvestism. They generated grounded knowledge about their ‘condition’ deemed personally and socially useful. They viewed themselves as engaged in a cause for self understanding and for social acceptance of their unconventional behavior patterns. Fusing their layman’s knowledge of psychology with their own understanding of who they were and why they crossdressed, they fought against social intolerance, self loathing, and even death. Many did, in fact, believe that unmediated transvestism could lead to an unhappy life of frustration and eventually to suicide.

To be sure, the struggle for self-dignity, “rights,” and free gender expression comprised an identity movement predicated on the normalizing politics of respectability, as well as, the homophobic and heteronormative construction of transvestism. Yet, most every segment of the “trans” population during this era engaged in similar distancing practices, as “trans” and “queer” identity groups were each trying to sort themselves out from the fray of non-normative sexual and gender identities. As for many heterosexual crossdressers’ general aversion to homosexuals, it is equally true that many homosexuals displayed a good deal of trans-phobia. I am not excusing either group’s prejudices but rather pointing out that hostilities ran in both directions and that usually, as is still true today, aversion and disrespect came more vehemently from the homosexual direction.

From the beginning, then, FPE chapters were conceived as spaces not only for mutual support, sociality, and the pursuit of self-knowledge, but also for moderate activism. In highlighting the social and political significance of FPE, I do not wish to downplay the

sociality that was the organization's primary *raison d'être*. Even if chapters had not engaged in public relation efforts and educational campaigns or had organized a fundraising drive for a fellow crossdresser's legal appeal, FPE still would be important to analyze for its role in helping crossdressers achieve self-acceptance, gain understanding from their wives and loved-ones, and experience the joy of socializing with others who shared their unconventional interests. In his farewell address in the "Femme Forum," Fran Conners remarked on these very aspects when reflecting on the legacy and achievements of the organization he had steered for seven years:

FPE has played an important part in all of our lives to make us more total and effective human beings.... We have gathered knowledge together and dispersed it wherever it was received. Through this knowledge, we have learned a great deal about ourselves which in turn has precipitated truth and peace of mind.... Our struggles have been long and difficult, but at long last we know that we are not alone, and through others of like dreams we can now have friends who do understand and accept.... For the wives and loved ones who have yet to accept our full personalities because they cannot see us as human beings but rather as masculine beings, we will display the patience necessary to win their favor and acceptance. We are stronger now that we are not alone....<sup>101</sup>

How should we view FPE historically? Was organized transvestism a fleeting moment of hope, of unfulfilled dreams and possibilities? A bleep on the radar of 1960s and 70s protest culture? Certainly FPE was these things because of its own internal contradictions and a host of interlocking external factors. Part of the story of FPE concerns the issue of what groups and identities are able to garner public legitimacy. Heterosexual crossdressing as defined and practiced by Prince and the membership of FPE would not attain the status of a minority group identity in the manner that homosexuality and transsexuality would. Yet organized transvestism cultivated a tangible legacy for future rights-based activism within the transgender community. Besides its

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<sup>101</sup> "Femme Forum" #32 (November 1971).

direct lineage to Tri-Ess, perhaps one of FPE's greatest legacies was nurturing and politicizing a handful of members who went on to organize other groups, organizations, and annual events. A member named Marilyn from the Lambda chapter of FPE started the annual Oregon DREAM retreat in 1972. A few members of the Gamma chapter were instrumental in founding and organizing the annual Fantasia Fairs in the mid-1970s that are still held today. Another legacy resulted from FPE's exclusivity. Prince's closed door policies inspired disaffected individuals to form other groups who defined themselves against the policies of FPE, such as C.H.I.C., TAO, and the International Alliance of Male Feminists.<sup>102</sup>

Prince and the national leadership of FPE organized during what can be considered the nascent stages of the transgender movement. During this formative stage in the 1960s and 1970s, dedicated members of a unique social organization for heterosexual crossdressers planted important seeds for a future rights-based transgender social movement to blossom in the 1990s. With this claim, I am not implying that there was a seamless and unproblematic progression from FPE to the transgender social movement of the 1990s. Heterosexual crossdressers have a complicated history and strained relationship with the category of transgender. "Transgender," after all, is an umbrella term. It is a political category that aligns disparate gender-variant identities and forms a coalition from trans groups that have sometimes had a history of mutual aversion. The road to coalition building was rocky and uneven. Unity had to be forged, and it was hard fought.

In addition to nurturing a handful of future leaders and activists, another seed that FPE planted was the possibility of change. For many of the active participants, their time spent in FPE represented a moment of hope when other possibilities and alternatives to the

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<sup>102</sup> I will write about these groups and others in the future.

gendered world as they knew it seemed possible. These dedicated members really believed they could win public tolerance for their form of gender expression, as is evident in their letters and life histories sent to *Transvestia* and to the “Femme Forum.” Prince and members of FPE who practiced the “girl within” or dual personality philosophy *did* imagine a world where a person could freely express the gender he or she desired, if even periodically and for only a short period of time.

In the end, I cannot impose the status of “minority” or even “community” as traditionally defined onto what was and what turned out to be a subcultural network of chapters. At the same time, I cannot rob FPE of its organizational and political impulses, which revolved around turning the private practice of crossdressing into the basis for organized social life. The evidence indicates that the impulse to form community across a vast geographical space was articulated, and, in more than a few instances, acted upon. It is important to consider the fact that Prince and other leaders did not know exactly how many of their kind existed in the United States or the rest of the world. I am struck by their original vision for the regional / counselor system. They were definitely dreaming big when they ambitiously divided the entire world into fifteen regions in order to accommodate and organize a legion of isolated crossdressers that they suspected were out there. Like much of sixties’ protest culture, a good deal of overblown rhetoric infused FPE and its local chapters. Yet, these utopian expressions are examples of a subject’s critical engagement with the social system she inhabits and with the official gender and sexual discourses that limit, shape, express, and circumscribe her desires. The fact that these dreams never fully materialized as the dreamers had hoped does not diminish the fact that other expressions of gender and other alternatives to the postwar era’s gender

regime were actually theorized and carried out. Susanna Valenti was right about many things, but she was wrong about organized transvestism. Members of FPE did not passively watch as the revolution passed them by. Many hopped on the bus.



## CONCLUSION

### “TO LOOK FOR MEANING IN MY DESIRES”

...My first letter to you was written as I embarked on this great adventure not knowing what to expect. You helped me. You removed the shame; taught me *to look for meaning in my desires*. This I did and through you I began to know what is in me. It is the beginning of a long, long road...[emphasis added].<sup>1</sup>

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon on Monday October 9, 2006, in Claremont, California. I arranged my note pad and checked again to make sure I had my pen as I stood outside a gray and white duplex located near the center of a sprawling retirement village. A red mobility scooter was parked on the porch outside the door. My friend, Richard Docter, knocked loudly. A retired psychologist from Cal State Northridge, Dick Docter as he is affectionately known by his friends, had generously offered to drive me from my hotel in Northridge to Claremont.

“Virginia!” Richard yelled after a few silent moments.

“I’m coming,” replied a familiar voice, one I had heard several times on the phone in lengthy conversations about *Transvestia*, Phi Pi Epsilon, and other subjects relevant and some not so relevant to my dissertation. The door opened and Virginia Prince stepped out, dressed in a red knee-length skirt with flower prints and a loose fitting white blouse that revealed her bra straps. A red beaded necklace hung around her neck, and she had on fire engine red lipstick, some of which had become smudged in the corners and top of her

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<sup>1</sup> Tecla to Prince, *Transvestia* #23 (October, 1963).

lips. She looked remarkably good for ninety-four years of age. As for me, I must have appeared star struck. After traveling two days by train from Ann Arbor to Los Angeles, I had finally come face-to-face with the central figure of *Transvestia*'s gender community, a pioneer transgender warrior who had fought in the gender wars of the 1960 and 1970s.

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This dissertation has shown that *Transvestia*'s gender community provided hundreds of male persons who wore the medical label of transvestite in the 1960s and 1970s a space to speak new stories of identity, desire, embodiment, and empowerment. Before the publication of the magazine and the formation of Phi Pi Epsilon, many men who practiced crossdressing had little or no conception of themselves as being part of a larger group or community. The histories and letters sent in by readers of the magazine to Prince reveal a common, repeated trope of lives lived in alienation, isolation, and secrecy. Those who had turned to science and to medical professionals for answers usually discovered that they were not alone, but they also learned or were reminded that they were medically, socially, and culturally perceived as abnormal sexual deviants. Of course, collective outlets for expression and manifestations of group consciousness existed before 1960. Many crossdressers who lived in large cities found sociality in informal crossdressing networks, drag queen cultures, gay bars, and underground sexual bondage and fetish rings. And many transvestites across the United States found outlets for their 'predilection' in correspondence clubs. They participated in a vibrant culture of correspondence with pen pals from all over the country and in other parts of the world.

Regardless of whether or not crossdressers found expression and connection through localized subcultures, letter writing, and lifestyle enclaves before 1960, the arrival of *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon marked a significant turning point in the transvestite social and cultural experience. After 1960 hundreds of men who enjoyed dressing and behaving as women possessed tools for cultural resistance and negotiation and collective empowerment. In these regards, the print culture and social organizing further facilitated a sense of connection and group consciousness. Writers, readers, and members also began to imagine transvestism as a legitimate social identity, as opposed to a shameful hobby, a sexual predilection, or a gender disorder. Therefore, the social knowledge produced and recorded in the magazine and generated within the social clubs transformed minds, beliefs, and attitudes and created a new paradigm for understanding this particular culture of transvestism as a self-conscious minority gender community. Through this cultural and social process, hundreds of transvestites generated new knowledge, challenged medical frames, and seized control of the story of transvestism. These transformations, challenges, and re-conceptualizations brought about by a non-patient population of crossdressers during the formative and organizational stages represented seeds of hope that would later blossom into a rights-based transgender political movement in the 1990s.

The script that *Transvestia*'s gender community wrote and promulgated excluded a number of repudiated others. Taxonomic practices and a politics of respectability were enacted especially in Prince and Susanna's opinion columns, entitled "Virgin Views" and "Susanna Says," respectively. In these columns, this emerging social formation's foremost intellectuals theorized the main issues that they believed to be of concern to

heterosexual transvestites. Furthermore, they played an important role in helping create a grassroots lexicon and constructing various “others” (namely, homosexuals, fetishists, street queens, and transsexuals) against whom the “true transvestite” was defined. It was precisely this otherizing practice and the normalizing politics of respectability carried out in *Transvestia*, Phi Pi Epsilon, and the wider cultural and social imaginary of *Transvestia*’s gender community that began the processes of articulating collective identity, demarcating gender and sexual variance, creating social memory, and narrativizing a fledgling transvestite ‘political’ movement. These processes, in turn, ignited a transformation in consciousness and social being among self-identified heterosexual men who found pleasure and who experienced self-actualization by dressing and acting as women. It is not an overstatement to argue that *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon helped to create the dominant social world of heterosexual male-to-female transvestism after 1960—one that was more clearly articulated and formally organized than any transvestite social formation that had previously existed in the United States.

To be sure, Prince and Susanna and most of the readership of *Transvestia* and membership of Phi Pi Epsilon fought for social legitimacy through the deployment of heteronormativity and white, middle-class notions of respectability and propriety. With this mindset, they relentlessly tried to divorce the erotic from transvestism. Prince, who exercised an extraordinary amount of editorial control, disallowed risqué photos or sexually explicit stories in the magazine, and the leaders of Phi Pi Epsilon created a rigid system of membership to screen out persons who did not fit the respectable mold. On all fronts, Prince and her followers attempted to dignify and de-pathologize their version of

transvestism (*feminiphilia* or *femmepersonation*) by framing it within a discourse of heteronormativity.

On a broad level, they wanted to create a socially recognizable public category for heterosexual crossdressers, one that would not be confused with homosexuality or transsexuality. On a more immediate level, they wanted to create a social and cultural space for white and middle-class men like themselves who had that “feeling for femininity” and who needed an environment of security and peace of mind in order to express this non-normative side of themselves. Living in a society that would surely brand them as sexually deviant—as ‘queers’—if ever their strange desires were discovered, they desired to build a world where they could experience connection and a sense of belonging among other individuals like themselves.

Can this unique subculture of crossdressers tell us anything new about the deployment and maintenance of gender and sexuality in postwar America? Their subject positioning is fascinating. Depending on the context, they were privileged actors and marginal subjects. As white middle class married husbands and fathers, they possessed much cultural and social capital. But their unconventional desires to dress and act as women placed them on the sexual margins. The intense shame and guilt they experienced during adolescence and young adulthood drove them to pursue success in the masculine world, and many of them accumulated an impressive list of manly achievements. The form of transvestism that many would come to practice when they joined this subculture was a unique product of the post-war hysteria over gender and sexual deviancy—which during that era was defined as anything that strayed from the norm of reproductive, marital, patriarchal heterosexuality and from the expression of traditional masculinities and

femininities. Heterosexually-oriented transvestites could take comfort in the idea that their male selves were lodged safely within the confines of that privileged space. Yet, according to the letters and histories that they wrote for *Transvestia*, they worried profusely about their peculiar desires to dress and act like women. Many would ask themselves: Am I a homosexual? Am I normal? What is going to happen to me? Where will all this lead? How will I find a girl to marry and how will I raise a family and take my place in the world? Virginia Prince and Susanna Valenti would help provide the answers to those questions and many others for hundreds of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers.

Using the magazine as a storytelling forum and as a space to constitute social identity, readers and letter and history writers collectively searched for and constructed meanings to explain and justify their desires. Their compulsive and unbridled yearnings to crossdress, coupled with their intense fear of social stigmatization and sanction, propelled them to create an elaborate rationale in order to socially manage the stigma. They fabricated a grand narrative, one that could only make sense in a postwar society of rigid gender roles and sexual norms. Therefore, it was these anxious concerns circulating around appropriate gender expression—which were not necessarily unique to the immediate postwar decades but certainly had greater resonance during that era of consensus and conformity—that shaped the modes of gender expression, practices, and forms of social identity developed by this culture of transvestite men. As the postwar gender regime unraveled in many parts of the country during the latter half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, their rationale for wanting to merely express traits and attributes arbitrarily assigned to the other gender would fall apart, as men could then more freely express a softer side without fear of stigmatization and public sanction.

The sexual revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s, coupled with women's and gay liberation, created a crisis moment for many of *Transvestia*'s crossdressers, forcing them to re-evaluate their practices and ideologies. These wider social and cultural changes also accentuated differences among the various subsets that comprised *Transvestia*'s gender community. Those who emerged from the social ferment were never quite the same. Many left the ranks of what had become Tri-Sigma to join more open groups. Some came out as transsexuals. Others gave up crossdressing entirely. Some lived socially as women without surgery. And, of course, more than a few chose to remain "true."

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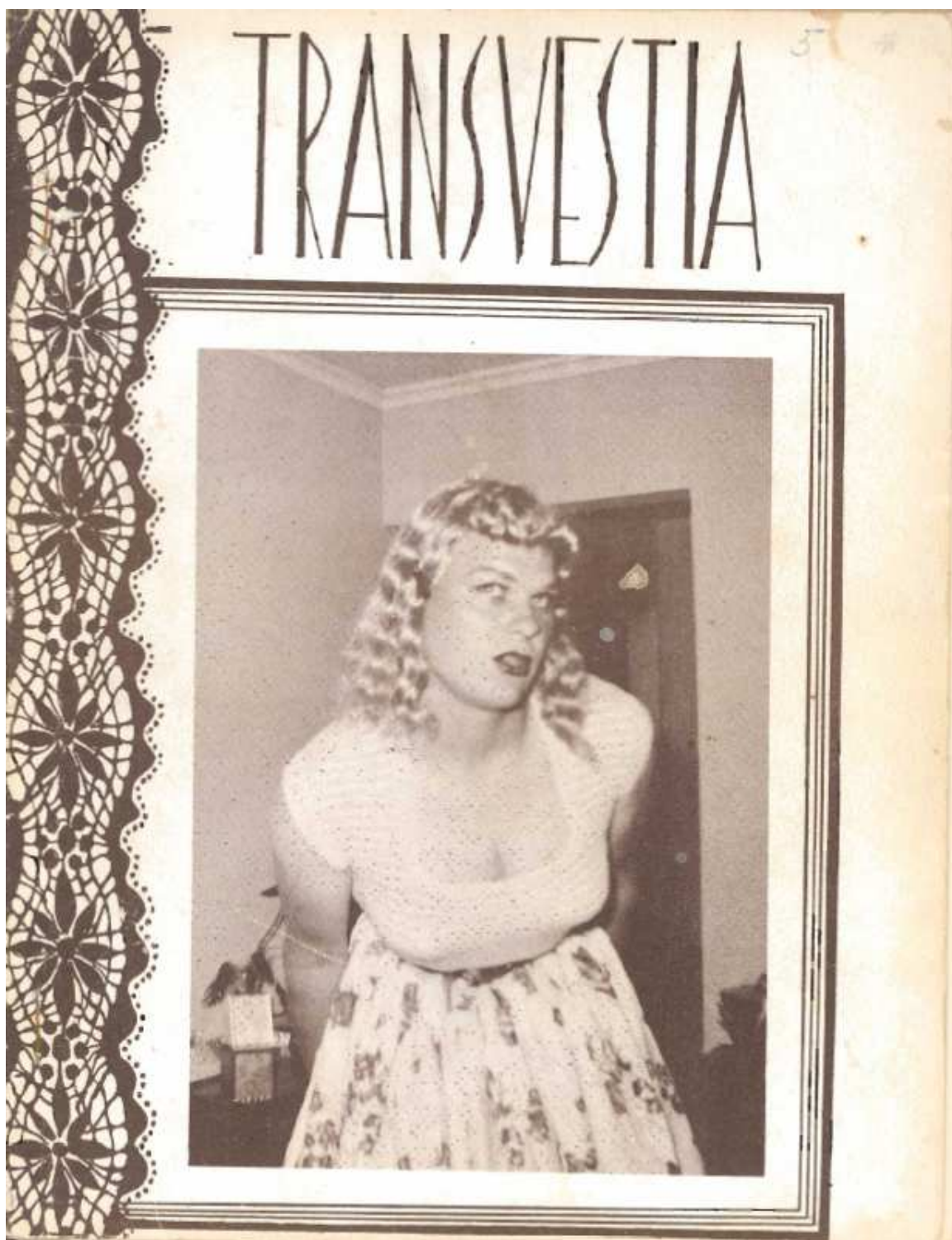
I sat next to Virginia on her couch and watched her ancient hand as she signed my personal copy of the special 100<sup>th</sup> issue of *Transvestia*, the last one she edited before handing over the reigns to Carol Beecroft. We had just completed a two hour interview, well, actually it was more of a conversation. I was particularly proud of one moment when I reminded her of the political dimensions of Phi Pi Epsilon. Her memory had caused her to question my framing of the club movement in any manner beyond its primary function as a social organization for self-expression. I argued that her and her followers' willingness to engage the medical, legal, and law enforcement establishments were political acts that afford the kind of historical treatment that has been given to other groups who socially organized during the postwar era. She nodded and the expression on her face told me that she understood and accepted the meaning I was constructing from her past endeavors. It felt immensely satisfying to get this validation—Virginia's blessing.

When she finished writing I thanked her for meeting with me. Virginia then wanted to get up from the couch to retrieve something from her bedroom. I stood up, bent over slightly and offered her my forearm. She grabbed it and pulled herself to a standing position. She did not let go and wobbled slightly. By instinct, I helped stabilize her and then started to escort her around the couch toward the hallway. She took my lead, still clasping my forearm for what seemed like for dear life. I thought this strange; she had managed to move about the living room with ease only minutes before. I remembered how she had spent her career divorcing eroticism from transvestism. Yet her strong grip felt electric as we, almost in a two-step, traversed down the hall toward her bedroom. For a few moments, it was just Virginia and me. I was holding a hand of history. I thought about the respectability she had cultivated and the desexualized notion of dual personality expression that she had promoted throughout her long career. I thought about these things as we danced down the hallway, and I wondered.



## APPENDIX A

### Photos of Annette and Friends' Tributes



Annette was *Transvestia*'s first cover girl (#5 September 1960).



ANNETTE--IDAHO





MORE OF ANNETTE



## *IN MEMORIAM*



### *ANNETTE — THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL*

Marilyn 47-1-1 FPE

A Chicago businessman with whom Shel (Annette) recently had associated, remarked following his death that "You meet a lot of people over a lifetime but rarely do you come across the "All American Boy. And that," he said, "was Shel."

The characterization was indeed accurate, but those of us who knew Annette can add: She was "Miss America" as well.

These words are not said lightly. For it is true that Annette had the rare quality of being respected and admired in his masculine self, being adored and envied as her feminine personality, and yes, being loved dearly in both roles.

Hard working, skilled, strong (yet compassionate), highly regarded in a line of work which was "strictly masculine"; a wonderful husband; a fine father. But, transformed to Annette, she was feminine perfection: lovely, graceful, soft spoken, delightful in every way.

Never one to swish, to exaggerate or to otherwise artificially draw attention to herself, all eyes nonetheless followed her every step because she carried herself gracefully and because she was strikingly beautiful.

Annette always found *fun* in TVism — as it should be. It was serious business to her to expertly prepare herself; still, once dressed and made up, the laughter flowed. She was able to laugh at herself but never at others. She always brought happiness — and love — to any gathering, be it large or small.

These then are rare qualities: the perfect blend, and the gift of joy and laughter for herself and those about her.

Her physical presence will be missed dearly. But those of us who had the great fortune of knowing Annette (and Shel) have been touched by her in a manner that allows her to be ever present.

The "Fairest of Them All" is gone . . . and yet, really, she *is* here.

## *MY FRIEND ANNETTE*

by Maureen 6-J-1 FPE

Annette (12-F-1 FPE) died today, February 9, 1971, at the age of 35, of a sudden heart attack. Marilyn phoned me tonight from Seattle with the tragic news. I sat there at the phone a long time, numb and empty. My chest hurt with the weight of it but I couldn't cry.

Annette was my Councilor in FPE. She came all the way to Denver to interview me. I had been apprehensive as her plane neared that day; yet I was at ease with her from the first moment I met her. She helped and encouraged me as I took my first steps in FPE. Sometimes when something special came up she would phone me long distance late at night and we would chat for a few minutes like two excited women.

As I was maturing in FPE I looked to her as my goal. Of all the FPs that I've known, her life was the best balance between the two roles of man and woman. As a man he lived with confidence, moving in a masculine world with enthusiasm and satisfaction. He was notably successful in his business and his associates stretched up and down the west coast, over the Rockies and on into the midwest. One of his business friends that knew nothing of Annette described Sheldon as the All American Boy. At home in the valley town of his beloved Idaho his influence permeated the populace. Everybody I talked to seemed to know and respect him.

He had the rare gift of not taking himself and Annette too seriously. He could laugh at the femme side of his life and joke about Annette — a woman with human foibles and failings just like any other woman. As a woman, Annette was quiet and charming. I want to say she was pretty but what I really mean is attractive. Everything about her was correct for a woman her age and lifestyle. No pretense, nothing artificial that had to be labored over. She was at ease as a woman, a warm and friendly person, free of the tendency to overdo the feminine aspects that characterizes some FPs. And much to my surprise both men and women were comfortable around her.

Her public acceptance in the role of Annette was unbelievable. When I was with her dressed she would introduce me to a policeman friend as casually as to another FP. No one seemed shocked. No one gasped. In the unique frame of reference that she had created, this was all quite normal to her friends. Because Annette accepted herself, it was easy for the world to accept her. At times I would look at this woman and marvel. She seemed so happy, so healthy, so well adjusted. And there was something else about her that I could never define — perhaps a heightened sensitivity to life's promises, perhaps a quiet awareness of the brevity of life.

Then one day I met her family; a wonderful GG, a handsome son, a tenderly beautiful daughter. I was in their home and it was a place of peace and contentment. There was a naturalness and a balance about it all. He was her husband. The children called him Dad. They loved and admired him; he loved and cherished them and worked hard and long to meet their needs. And yet Annette was there too, in him. I could detect no difference in the family attitude as he moved from one role to the other. Self restraint and consideration marked the activities of Annette so that her fun and satisfaction were not bought at the expense of family happiness.

Idaho was beautiful to me because Annette lived there. On winter evenings I would get out my flying maps and go over the route I would take in my plane when, come May, I would once again go there. Her house on the scenic hill was like a beacon on a dark night, beckoning me to come up North. Now the light had gone out. I was sick with loneliness. I thought of the loved ones who were left behind and prayed quietly for them. It was many hours that night before sleep came to release me . . . I tried to write a few words of comfort to those dear ones —

It was good to have known Sheldon. His life reached far beyond the circle of his loved ones to touch others like me. Though he lived out his life in the body of a man there was also the spirit of a gentle kindly woman living there in the home on the hill — and this is the person I really knew. She was my friend, but oh so briefly. My hours with her seem so short now — like a walk around the block together.

This evening before the call came I had been dreaming of the wonderful weekend that Annette was planning for us in May, the annual gathering at her home of all the girls in the northwest. I had been working on a new peach and white dress that I was to wear at her banquet. I carefully put it away. I would never finish it. The tears came now. I lay back in the chair and wept for my friend Annette.

Her days have known their number; her life's work done she has moved over the Great Divide. But I will walk again the streets of memory with her in the days and years to come. Perhaps I shall never again walk up that winding road to her hilltop mecca. But if I do I know that in my heart I shall see her there on the lawn, tall, blond and good looking, smiling and waiting to greet me.



## *TRIBUTE TO A DEAR FRIEND*

Virginia

This short note of mine and the two sad tributes which precede it are about a dear friend of mine, a girl (and man) whom many of you knew, and many did not, yet as Marilyn and Maureen have said much more eloquently than I, she exemplified so much of what these pages over the years have tried to teach. She had really achieved self acceptance and comfort with herself. It wasn't always so. I met Sheldon and his wife Gail (and Annette) way back in 1960. They hadn't been married long and they were in the throes of marital adjustment to each other and to Femmpersonation as so many of us have been. They sought the help of myself and my then wife. We rendered what we could to them and I guess it helped because the marriage continued, produced two wonderful children and produced many, many friends both FP and otherwise. I would be unfair and in a sense dishonest to paint a perfect picture of domestic bliss. These two people were human and as such they had their differences, their trials and tribulations but they also had each other, a family, a host of friends and a great deal of appreciation, admiration and respect from all who knew them. These are the things that count.

For those who don't know but who happen to have copies of TVia No. 5 stashed away somewhere, get it out and look at it. Annette was our first Cover Girl — way back when. Compare the pictures then with the one at the head of these memorials. It is easy to see the growth, the acceptance and the openness that developed in those years. I never ceased to marvel at the way in which she had proceeded with her FP life in a small town where she was known to a majority of the people. Probably everybody did not know of the Annette behind Sheldon, but plenty of people did and accepted Annette as just part of Sheldon. He was so "up-front" with it all, so disingenuous and so relaxed and self accepting about Annette that even those who might have been motivated to disapprove or condemn found it very difficult to do so. The parties at the home of Annette and Gail which have been written up in past issues of TVia were very unique social experiences. With all of the rest of us running in and out of the house, his children and his employees and various friends from the town came up to say hello or to do business and the presence of the rest of us, some readable and some not, just didn't disturb anybody. Sheldon had made the matter

of acceptance of Annette so broad and all encompassing that the rest of us were carried along in it and accepted equally. The idea of disapproval or condemnation just didn't get past the front door so if we were friends of Annettes we were friends of theirs and it didn't make any difference whether they were business people, police detectives or truck drivers we were taken at face value as friends.

The news of Annette's death came as a particular shock to me. Not only was it the loss of an old and dear friend but the fact that I had stayed with Sheldon in his apartment in Chicago on Thursday and Friday, he had gone with me to the two TV appearances made in Chicago, been at the Chi party on Saturday night, gone part way to the airport with me on Sunday morning and then to learn from Maureen in Denver by long distance phone to me in Bloomington, Indiana that Sheldon-Annette had left us on Tuesday — just two days after I'd last seen him — was really a terrible shock.

In conclusion I can only say that the things said by Marilyn, Maureen and myself about Sheldon-Annette are true but the fact that they are said after his departure leads me to the inescapable thought — wouldn't it have been great if we had said those things to Sheldon or Annette when we were there with one or the other? Isn't it sad that all the nice things we feel about someone somehow don't get said until an obituary piece becomes in order? Perhaps each of you who read these lines might dwell on them for a moment. Think of those in your own lives both relatives and friends whom you love, respect, admire, and enjoy — why not tell them now when they can hear it and be warmed by your appreciation. Death coming as unexpectedly as it does you might never get another chance. We loved Annette, I hope she knew it, but I regret most poignantly as I write this that I didn't personally say it to her in so many words while she was with us. I shall try to do so with those who still remain in contact. Why don't you do the same?

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We also lost other sisters in 1970 — Deanna from Baltimore, Myrtle from Wisconsin and others less well-known. The fact that considerable space has been devoted to Annette is not intended to slight anyone else. It is due to the fact that, a) Marilyn and Maureen sent in their contributions and I, of course, had to add mine because, b) Annette was something special as you have read — she was one of the real pioneers of our movement and a dear friend.

## APPENDIX B

“Susanna Valenti: The Girl Within”

After immigrating to the United States from a South American country in the mid-1940s, Susanna attended graduate school at a Midwestern college where she cross-dressed privately. In 1952, she met another crossdresser for the first time. Fifteen years later, she had met, by her own estimation, around two hundred other transvestites and had corresponded extensively with approximately 150 others.<sup>1</sup> This appendix section will uncover Susanna's rich social life and examine more of her ideas regarding transvestism, dual personality, homosexuality, and medical discourses.

### Sociality

While Susanna certainly played the role of watch dog, it was not my intention in Chapter Three to portray her as fashion and behavior tyrant. In fact, she was a vivacious, fun-loving person. A central figure of the transvestite scene in New York City, Susanna hosted many parties at her apartment in New York City and at her upstate resort property in the Catskill Mountains. One reason for her popularity was that her wife, Marie, owned a wig shop in Manhattan that was popular with crossdressers and female impersonators. Susanna and Marie operated their upstate vacation resort during the summer season for a marginal profit. Throughout the 1950s, she hosted small numbers of transvestite friends at the resort during the off-season. In 1960, she got the idea to turn the property into a full-time "TV haven." In the early issues of *Transvestia*, Susanna advertised the "Chevalier D'Eon Resort" as a place where transvestites (and their wives) could visit and be completely free to dress around the resort grounds. She made many preparations and, according to her, received hundreds of interested replies. However, by July 4<sup>th</sup> that same

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<sup>1</sup> Susanna was cover girl for *Transvestia* #12 (Dec. 1961). In that same issue she contributed her life history. Her estimation of the number of contacts she had made was in her column in #45 (June 1967).

year, less than ten transvestites had visited the resort. “I have come to believe,” reflected Susanna, “that those long phone conversations and fiery letters were just another way to live out a transvestic desire without any real wish to carry out the feeling into fact.”<sup>2</sup> To avoid financial loss, Susanna and Marie were forced to return to catering to conventional vacationers. Future crossdressers who visited would have to limit their movements to certain areas of the resort during the vacation season and had to be dressed in male attire to watch the popular impersonator show, called the Chevalier Revue, which Susanna ran for a few years.

Susanna made her debut as a female stage impersonator on July 29, 1960. “It’s the most wonderful thing a TV can do,” she wrote, “to have the rest of society applaud you and praise you for looking and acting feminine.”<sup>3</sup> Susanna’s foray into the art of stage impersonation was a rare experience for a heterosexual transvestite. Although she had always dreamed of stage performance, her entrance into the art was propelled by a serendipitous event—one of the stage queens she hired for the Chevalier Revue unexpectedly quit a week before a scheduled performance. Susanna ‘reluctantly’ took the place of the departed performer. Unfortunately for Susanna, her new hobby did not last long. She announced before the summer season of 1961 that the time-consuming and costly Revue would cease to operate.

Even after the disappointing number of visitors in the summer of 1960, Susanna continued to extend an invitation to all transvestites to visit her resort anytime, especially on weekends. She suggested that if enough people could get together at the same time,

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<sup>2</sup> *Transvestia* #4 (July 1960) Virginia Prince attributed the low turn-out to the failure of many transvestites to accept themselves as they are instead of as they dream of being.

<sup>3</sup> *Transvestia* #5 (September 1960).

then they could hold classes on make-up, sewing, dancing, and poise. Many adventures were had by those who managed to find their way to the resort. For example, two transvestites named “Vickie” and “Lee” visited during a mid-November weekend in 1961 when a group of hunters had also made reservations. Marie and Susanna had invited Vickie and Lee to help take care of these guests. Susanna, Vickie, and Lee all cross-dressed in front of the hunters, using the excuse (i.e. lie) that they “run a female impersonator school here in order to select talent for the summer stage show.” For the shy and demure Lee, the experience was, according to Susanna, yet “another victory for self-expression,” as he finally mustered the courage to dress in front of the hunters. This story and many others recounted by Susanna and visitors, who recorded their experiences in testimonials, letters, and life histories published in *Transvestia*, indicate that the upstate resort became a space for self-expression for many of those who visited. The resort inspired self-definition and created a sense of normalcy, as is evident by Susanna’s beautiful description of four transvestites relaxing on the porch of the main house after a magical evening of socializing en femme:

Scene: The porch in the main house at the Chevalier D’Eon—our resort in the Catskill Mountains. The time: about 4 o’clock in the morning as Labor Day is ready to awaken in the distant darkness. The cast: four girls just making small talk and getting to know each other. It’s been a strenuous day for everybody but we are greedy; we don’t want to say goodnight yet, and we squeeze a few more hours from a day that’s already gone. It’s dark in the porch; just a row of lights illuminate part of the property at intervals...perhaps a bit chilly at 2,400 feet of altitude, but we don’t seem to care...bare shoulders, bare arms...the feel of that long hair that strangely has become part of our own selves. An occasional flame lighting a cigarette throws a glow on feminine faces...smiling, serene, relaxed, happy faces....just a weekend at the resort, hours in which we know ourselves a little better by seeing our image reflected in new colors and a new perspective through the lives of new friends.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Transvestia* #17 (October 1962)

In the summer of 1963, Susanna and Marie sold their resort property because it had become unprofitable. In early 1964, they bought a new 150 acre place with a large house, which was affectionately dubbed “Casa Susanna.” Casa Susanna was a three-story country house located in Hunter, New York, about ten miles from the former property. The third floor had three bedrooms. Five bedrooms were on the second floor. And one bedroom, a living room, a dining room, and two kitchens comprised the main floor.<sup>5</sup> Just as with the Chevalier D’Eon resort, Casa Susanna became a social haven for Susanna’s transvestite friends from the New York City area and others from outside the state. Susanna reported with glee the many “driving thrills” that she and her guests took to the drive-in movies and to the houses of friendly neighbors and relatives.

Fun and sociality was also experienced in more public settings away from the idyllic resort properties. In the 1950s and 1960s, Susanna and a coterie of her transvestite friends went to female impersonation shows at the famed 82 Club and drag balls and masquerade parties in New York City. According to Susanna, the Phil Black Dance and the National Variety Artists ball were “the greatest attractions for the TV world.”<sup>6</sup> These events and others “became the gathering places of a veritable ‘who’s who’ in skirts.”<sup>7</sup> Before venturing out to these events, they convened at Susanna and Marie’s apartment on West End Avenue, where they dressed in their finest and most glamorous wardrobes, applied make-up, put on their wigs and accessories, and posed for pictures. A few in her crowd entered the beauty contests that were featured at the drag balls but almost always lost out to the more outrageous queens and ‘authentic-looking’ female impersonators. The balls

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<sup>5</sup> Susanna describes these balls in *Transvestia* #26 (April 1964).

<sup>6</sup> *Transvestia* #2 (March 1960).

<sup>7</sup> *Transvestia* #8 (March 1961).

attracted straight curiosity seekers, who lined the entrances hoping to catch a glimpse of the drag queens and transvestites in their fabulous costumes as they entered the venues. Susanna relished the thrill of stepping out of her car onto the carpet to the sound of applause, hoots, whistles, and the flashes of the cameras. In her column, she enjoyed retelling the experiences of first-timers to her pre-parties and to these grand spectacles of the balls. Susanna and her group's forays into the drag and gay scene were atypical, as most heterosexual transvestites separated themselves from the gay crowd and would not be caught dead at a gay bar or drag ball. However, Susanna and even Prince encouraged their readers to experience the excitement of these balls. They recognized these forms of commercialized entertainment and carnivalesque spectacles as being rare occurrences where a heterosexual transvestite could be him or herself in a carefree and relatively safe public environment.

### Gender Ideology

As mentioned in Chapter Three, it was Susanna who coined the popular term, "the girl-within," in order to describe the feminine personality (or self) that many members of Phi Pi Epsilon and readers of *Transvestia* believed existed in duality with their masculine one. To be sure, some readers and many outsiders were skeptical of Susanna and Prince's notion of a dual personality. Susanna maintained that the personality split was entirely possible, but only if one practiced crossdressing on a regular basis, not just intermittently. Both Prince and Susanna understood one's "gender personality" to be something that develops and is worked on over the course of a lifetime. For instance, Prince observed that for women, "each feminine experience is recorded, and over the years [she]



constructs a feminine personality.” Prince and Susanna maintained that this was the way one’s male personality is fashioned, as well.<sup>8</sup>

Given this behaviorist logic, it made perfect sense to Susanna that a male could develop a second feminine personality or persona if he took on the cultural role of a woman regularly and trained himself accordingly. The trick for Susanna and others who subscribed to the dual personality philosophy, though, was to maintain a balance between the masculine and feminine personalities. “The balance,” Susanna stated, “can be reached, but it takes constant vigilance and care to keep it that way. Some observers of the TV scene believe that TVism—as the years go by—tends to grow stronger at the expense of the masculine personality. The ‘girl within’ becomes more and more important and the delicate balance breaks down.” Susanna’s statement here would prove most ironic, as she would decide to live full-time as a woman by the end of the decade. She would have to save face, rationalize her decision, and deflect potential charges that she had become a transsexual. Susanna and other transvestites who decided to live full time and inhabit what would later be described as the “transgenderist” category helped further consolidate the definitional boundaries separating transexuality and transvestism.

Susanna’s thoughts on transsexuality further elucidate important aspects of her gender ideology. Like Prince, Susanna was intellectually and emotionally invested in defining and maintaining the distinctions between transvestites and transsexuals. In the early 1960s, Susanna conceptualized the boundaries between the two identities as fluid. She thought that if crossdressing were allowed to go on unchecked and if the “delicate balance” mentioned above broke down, then “the TV *becomes* a ‘trans-sexual’” [emphasis added]. Her views would change. Later, in 1968, Susanna wrote a column that

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<sup>8</sup> *Transvestia* #8 (March 1961).

indicates how hardened the differences between transvestism and transsexuality had become in her mind. In this column, Susanna's criterion for transsexuality shifted from the failure to maintain the delicate balance to the desire for surgery. As one who had allowed the "girl-within" to take greater control of his/her life, Susanna relied more heavily on the criterion that had become, in the opinion of many doctors and crossgender individuals, the deciding difference between the two categories—the sex change operation.

What had prompted Susanna to write about transsexuality in this 1968 column was Prince's recent appearance on the Alan Burke television show. According to Susanna, Burke tried to trick Prince into admitting that any transvestite who takes hormones or considers surgery was opening the door to "transexualism," as he would, in effect, be indicating that he wishes to be a woman both in body and in soul. Susanna was impressed by Prince's blunt statement to the host that she would not have the operation for anything. "Such a statement," wrote Susanna, "marks the boundary between the TV and the TS. The TV rejects the thought of surgery. He enjoys living the two sides of the human coin. The TS hates the masculine side and is willing to do anything to get out of the male role thrust upon him by nature."<sup>9</sup>

Transsexuality was a hot topic within the pages of *Transvestia*, especially in the mid-1960s and afterwards, when gender identity clinics appeared and surgery became more available at American university-based hospitals. During these years of socially and medically sorting out gender and sexual minorities, Susanna was able to recognize the contingent and fluid nature of these crossgender identity categories that were in formation. She knew that there existed self-identified transvestites who were really

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<sup>9</sup> *Transvestia* #50 (April 1968)

transsexuals-in-the-making but who did not yet know it. And she believed that there were individuals who thought of themselves as transsexuals but who were really transvestites. In this 1968 column, Susanna estimated that she personally knew about a dozen transsexuals who had undergone sex reassignment surgery. “I met them all before the sex change, and some of them, at first, did not know they were TS’s, they only knew that they enjoyed dressing and would feel much happier as girls than in their male role. As they multiplied their TV hours they became convinced that this was the way they would like to spend their entire life.” Susanna’s column reflected a time when crossgender identified individuals and doctors debated these categories. From the early 1960s to the point in the late 1960s when she herself decided to live full-time as a woman, Susanna’s definition of transsexuality shifted from a belief that it represented the end point on a range or continuum of crossgender identifications to a steady belief that it is an in-born trait and defined by a request for surgical procedures. Still, even in 1968, Susanna held out the possibility of transvestites who may be “incipient” transsexuals. She considered these folks borderline cases—those who admitted that under the right circumstances they would consider living the rest of their lives as women. “The TS thrust is there,” observed Susanna, “but it is held back, repressed, crushed under the realities of life and is held only as a pleasant day dream.”

Susanna, like Prince, was at times insensitive to the transsexual’s plight. Her concern for transvestites who wrongly believed themselves to be transsexuals betrayed a deep sentiment of disrespect for transsexuals as a group. Susanna had always maintained a rule that if a man enjoys crossdressing, then he should always try his best to pass as a woman, especially when in public. The ability to pass was extremely important to Susanna in her

own crossdressing practices, and she imposed this mandate onto others, including transsexuals, whom she believed to be the worst case offenders. “Very few of the TS’s I know have learned to move and gesture with that suppleness that is exclusively female.” In another column the following year, her derision would grow into issuing a very offensive metaphor describing transsexuals’ passing deficiencies. “The present crop of TS,” she stated, “is rather pitiful. With a few notable exceptions of course, a good many of them are in worse shape than a TV that’s just graduating from panties and hose to a complete outfit, wig and make-up.... These brand new gals, just arrived from the factory, can be compared to an old car with a gleaming new body and fenders, but still with the same old engine that rattles, the [same] old connections, the [same] dirty filter, and the [same] leaky radiator.” According to Susanna, most transsexuals and pseudo-transsexuals failed to learn to become women (gender) first before planning to become females (sex). “Society insists upon females behaving like ladies—and this is where our TS and pseudo TS friends fail in a most regrettable way. I am thinking right now of several instances whereby people continue to ‘read’ a TS as being a man even AFTER the operation.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Susanna’s standards were biased and unfair as she reduced feminine gender orientation to the performance of stereotypically feminine behaviors and mannerism. She even went so far as to note what she considered a tragic dilemma: that “this brand new girl” was now stuck in a world where “real girls” could “out girl” her in every way. According to Susanna’s formulation, post-operative transsexuals were trapped in a freakish limbo.

In this respect, transsexuals, in Susanna’s mind, were individuals to be pitied, not only for their farcical condition but especially since their economic status as men was put in

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<sup>10</sup> *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969)

jeopardy as soon as they surgically and legally changed their sex. Susanna claimed to have known of many transsexuals whose income fell sharply after the operation. “I am afraid,” Susanna went on, “that most TS’s do not exhibit enough realism before they take the final step.... So much so that there is one TS that I know who had the operation and today is earning a living as a man! She continues to dress in masculine attire because she found out that she could not stand the small income she was offered as a girl.”<sup>11</sup> Susanna was dumbfounded that this transsexual woman only dressed as a woman at home after work, in effect, following the same dressing patterns as many periodic crossdressers. Here, again, Susanna betrayed her blindness to the issue of gender orientation. Because her investment in gender dichotomies was so great, she could not imagine the possibility of a male-to-female transsexual working as a man—in drag. It was because of all the above reasons that Susanna doubted Dr. Harry Benjamin’s statement that he knew of no one who had undergone the operation and was disappointed. Susanna could imagine few successful scenarios for post-operative transsexuals.

### Strange Bedfellows

One of the most fascinating “Susanna Says” columns was the one describing her contact with a local chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis. According to Susanna, she had met the editor of *The Ladder* in 1965. Susanna found common ground with her and enjoyed the perspectives of the organizations official magazine. In her column in *Transvestia*, Susanna quoted extensively from an essay featured in *The Ladder* entitled “I Hate Women.” (Susanna did not indicate the name of the person who authored the piece.)

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<sup>11</sup> *Transvestia* #50 (December 1969).

The irony in the following passage that Susanna quoted from “I Hate Women” was completely lost to her:

‘I can’t stand the current model of American femininity, trussed into the Feminine role of Wife and Mother, with a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval stamped across her Maidenform-upholstered bosom.... She is busy playing the feminine Role forced upon her by American industry, psychology, sociology, and the mass media. It’s not an accident that wigs and false eyelashes are becoming widely marketed consumer products now. Added to the already popular false bosoms and stiletto heels, they indicate that to play the ‘natural’ Feminine Role, the American woman has to use all the props of the female impersonator.... The Feminine Role is rigidly defined, and every female is supposed to fit into it.’<sup>12</sup>

In her column, as she discussed the similarities between transvestites and lesbians, Susanna appeared clueless to the fact that heterosexual transvestites emulate the very cultural roles that the author of *The Ladder* piece criticized. Instead, Susanna emphasized the “equally” repressive masculine role that men felt socially pressured to fulfill.

Modeling the author of “I Hate Women,” Susanna wrote in her “Susanna Says” column:

...the average male is forever worrying about conforming to the rigid frame which demands that he should be Arrowed, Stetsoned, grey-suited, brown-slippered, and must definitely go into raptures every time he hears the words ‘hunting,’ ‘fishing,’ ‘mechanics’ and ‘carpentry.’ If he doesn’t like these things, it is immediately assumed there’s something wrong with his ‘masculinity.’ The ideal image of man we have been forced to accept is the husband in the ads deliriously happy over a can of beer, while he experiences untold thrills over his new portable saw lawn mower and electric shaver combination.<sup>13</sup>

To her credit, Susanna displayed a keen awareness of how gender (in this case, masculinity) is reinforced and even conjured through commodity consumption. However, Susanna failed to acknowledge the white male privilege held by most heterosexual transvestites. Instead, she found common ground and cause with the Daughters of Bilitis with the fact that cross-dressers and lesbians both deal with guilt and many turn to

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<sup>12</sup> *Transvestia* #32 (April 1965).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

marriage in hopes of curing their condition. Also, she believed that lesbians and transvestites were both rebelling against narrow social definitions. To a large degree, the commonalities that Susanna pointed out to her readership were correct. Yet, Susanna failed to recognize the stigma and inequities uniquely experienced by lesbians and non-white and non-male sexual and gender minorities.

Susanna informed her readership that she had contributed two essays to *The Ladder*. Susanna's article in the May 1965 issue of *The Ladder*, entitled "I Hate Men," revealed other social blind spots in respect to genuine sexual and gender oppression. In this article, which she quoted in her own "Susanna Says" column in the August 1965 (#34) issue of *Transvestia*, Susanna pointed out that transvestites and lesbians are both rebelling against the official definitions of masculinity and femininity imposed on them by society. However, just like men's liberationists ten years later, Susanna placed the blame of men's social and cultural oppression on women. She mind bogglingly asserted that "it is women who have invented today's Masculine Role." According to Susanna, "women insist that we fit ourselves into a pattern which they themselves have created for us. Women are the ones who have decreed that men must stay within the rigid frame of that mold while women keep for themselves all the freedoms they want." Like many other white heterosexual transvestites of this era, Susanna narrowly conceived of freedom in an individualized sense, that is, in terms of one's freedom of expression, in this case, a male's "right" to express traits socially deemed feminine and to wear the clothing designated for the opposite gender. Furthermore, Susanna was lost to the fact that men are themselves responsible for creating and policing the repressive masculine norms that she despised. Susanna explained to her readership that her article in *The Ladder* was

titled “I Hate Men,” because that is, indeed, how she feels toward other members of her sex. She despised them “for being so stupid and allowing themselves to be kept within the bondage of that synthetic masculine pattern.” Susanna believed that transvestites are a vanguard group, as they are the ones who were “actually” rebelling against the artificial and repressive definitions of masculinity.

Susanna claimed to have received several favorable reviews of her article from readers of *The Ladder*, “many of whom hadn’t thought about the unfairness men face.” By the same token, if what she says in her column is any indication, Susanna remained startlingly ignorant of the genuine hardships lesbians faced. In her comparisons between the two groups (lesbians and transvestites), she conflated gender and sexuality: “They [lesbians] have turned their backs on the world of trousers, neckties, beards, heavy voices and biceps—so have we. They are intensely drawn towards the feminine—and so are we.” Susanna’s ignorance makes me wonder if the mutual understanding she claimed to have shared with this DOB chapter was actually one directional.

It was in this same column that Susanna unwittingly alluded to the class tensions among sexual minorities. Here, we also see vivid illustrations of the politics of respectability that sexual and gender minorities waged against one another during this time. Susanna suggested that the common problems experienced by lesbians (i.e. homosexuals) and transvestites largely explain the warm friendship she was able to establish with the Daughters of Bilitis. The commonality that Susanna failed to recognize, however, was both groups’ similar class positions. Both the DOB and the majority of *Transvestia*’s readership comprised individuals of middle to professional class status. Evidence of the politics of respectability that was common among members of this class



spectrum percolated throughout the following passage from Susanna's column in which she presented other commonalities shared between the DOB and heterosexual transvestites:

Let me add that the picture of the 'butch' lesbian leering at other women in a bar and eager to pervert any pretty girl she sees is greatly exaggerated. Those are a minority among lesbians, just as the 'swishy' homosexual who 'cruises' theaters, bars and streets looking for 'trade' is a minority in the larger world of the homosexual. As a matter of fact, these obvious types are thoroughly disliked by lesbians and homosexuals alike. They feel that the street walker and the bar lesbian are the ones who have created a feeling of disgust in society in general towards all lesbians. We, as TV's can say the same thing for the 'drag queen' who has created instant distrust among the public towards any male who wears skirts.

As other historians of sexuality have noted, the bar lesbians and (street) fairies tended to be of either poor or working class origins. Although a broad coalition never came to fruition, an ideology of middle-class respectability connected the Daughters of Bilitis, homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society, and Phi Pi Epsilon.

While Susanna displayed a nominal solidarity with the non-swishy homosexuals she alluded to in the passage above and while she on a few occasions scolded her readership for homophobic attitudes, it was generally more difficult for her to imagine commonalities between homosexual men and transvestites as she did with middle-class lesbians. For Susanna, de-sexualizing and de-stigmatizing heterosexual cross-dressing meant that heterosexual cross-dressers had to be differentiated from sexual identity categories that the mainstream public conflated with transvestism—namely homosexuals. In one column, Susanna explained the equation that necessitated drawing a clear and distinct line between the two unrelated identities:

It would be nice if we could do something to influence the rest of society into at least taking a second look at us. So far, most everybody experiences a negative thumbs-down emotional reaction when they are brought face to face with us. This impulse to reject [us] on sight is intimately connected with a popular formula that

reads MAN-IN-DRESS = HOMO. Since most people have been brought up to believe that HOMO = EVIL, the tragic conclusion that most people draw is: MAN-IN-DRESS = EVIL. So, how do WE go about making the distinction clear to others? The first thing to do is to disassociate the elements of these false premises. We have to look around for tools [and] weapons, and here is where 'semantics' comes in. The old vocabulary is perhaps too tainted with associations and the psychologists and MD's are largely to blame for this situation. It is up to us, as well as to them, to look around and find new terms which will allow us to start from scratch, with a clean slate.

As discussed in chapter five, Susanna would increasingly dedicate herself to Prince's semantic politics and taxonomic practices. Yet Susanna went a step further and also identified a hitch from within the group. According to Susanna, the main difficulty with gaining public acceptance involved a defeatist attitude on the part of most transvestites that society would never understand them as a group and would always condemn them. "So why bother trying to make others understand, accept, or tolerate us," Susanna wrote, voicing these defeatists' line of reasoning. "Let's just shut up, enjoy our private get-togethers, be discreet, and the heck with everybody else. If they find out, they will most certainly tag us as queers." Susanna countered this pessimistic and defeatist sentiment with an optimistic social vision. She thought that *Transvestia* made readers think about themselves and their situation in relation to the rest of the world. She believed that as their numbers grew and with more public relations efforts, they could make an impact on the world around them.<sup>14</sup>

### Contesting Medical Frames

In the previous quoted passage, Susanna alluded to the role played by doctors in helping change public attitudes. In general, transvestites forged an amicable relationship with doctors, psychiatrists, and other 'experts.' Susanna and others who desired social

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<sup>14</sup> *Transvestia* #14 (April 1962)

acceptance knew that doctors were important allies in their push for public tolerance and acceptance. However, the relationship was a strategic alliance on the part of transvestites and was always subject to negotiation. For example, Susanna consulted a doctor about her strange desires in the late 1940s. The doctor was kind and understanding. More importantly, he introduced Susanna to another cross-dresser, who would become Susanna's first contact with another person of her persuasion. Although grateful for the good doctor's help, Susanna never uncritically absorbed the medical and psychiatric constructions of transvestism as a deviant form of erotic expression, a behavioral abnormality stemming from childhood trauma, and as a personality disorder.

Perhaps the most powerful column Susanna wrote was an attack on Dr. Hugo Beigel's article, "The Myth of the Latent Femininity in the Male." A psychotherapist, Dr. Beigel published this short piece in *Turnabout* in 1965. (*Turnabout* was a rival, underground, transvestite magazine that was published only seven times from 1963 to 1967.) In this article, he claimed that no such thing as a feminine soul in a male body exists. His argument basically undermined the "girl-within" theory that had become dogma among many Phi Pi Epsilon members and those who read *Transvestia*. In the February 1966 issue of *Transvestia* (#37), Susanna defended the dual personality philosophy against what she considered a profound misreading of it. Susanna critiqued Dr. Beigel for interpreting the girl-within theory literally as opposed to metaphorically. To support the validity of the metaphor, she described several "urges" that compel a man to cross-dress, many of which stem from a man's desire to express traits and emotions, to partake of activities, and to perform tasks typically deemed feminine and thus unmanly. She claimed that these motivations vary in intensity from person to person. The metaphor of the girl-

within, she maintained, was simply an uncomplicated way of expressing these various motivations and urges that make up a transvestite's second personality, the feminine self that had to be kept hidden out of fear of social disapproval.

Susanna also qualified Dr. Beigel's claim that transvestism is an acquired condition. While Susanna and Prince harmonized on many aspects about transvestism, one area of disagreement concerned a debate that erupted in early issues of *Transvestia* regarding the nature and causes of transvestism. Susanna leaned toward the position that "a congenital predisposition (genes, chromosomes, hormones, chemical patterns, etc.) in the TV makes him gravitate towards these diverse elements which, together, spell femininity in our times." She could not accept Prince's sociological explanation and what she thought of as Prince's disregard for any possible "physical/chemical" basis for cross-dressing behavior. Susanna argued that "no matter what social and psychological elements play on a boy, he will not be a TV unless he carries within his body the biological seed of TVism."<sup>15</sup> In the column where Susanna challenged Beigel, she argued that more research was needed before anyone could definitively say transvestism was an acquired condition "without a single inborn root or whether there is a 'seed' from the very beginning which is later triggered by various social forces or environmental factors." One thing, however, Susanna strongly believed in was that transvestism—whether inborn or acquired—could not be cured. To counter Dr. Beigel's claim that an acquired condition, such as transvestism, can be cured medically, she offered a few analogies that underscored the absurdity of this idea: "A singer feels the compulsion to sing, an urge that was acquired

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<sup>15</sup> *Transvestia* #9 (June 1961). To be sure, Prince never rejected a biological basis for transvestism. However, Prince believed that the "biological seeds of transvestism" had to be triggered by environmental factors.

since the little brat was not born singing. How would Dr. Beigel go about ‘curing’ this singing and erase from him the desire to sing? Or could one ‘cure’ a painter who has acquired the compulsion to express himself in canvass and make him NOT feel like painting?” Susanna’s metaphors contradicted her gut conviction that transvestism is an inborn condition, yet they made a larger point that transvestism was harmless and no different from any other hobby or artistic gift.

Indeed, what most irked Susanna was Beigel’s characterization of transvestism as a behavioral disorder indicative of a personality disturbance. “But how about the thousands of TVs who do not feel the need to go to a mental doctor” she asked. “How about us, who feel that dressing gives us serenity, calm, contentment, happiness?” In the life narratives and letters that readers sent to Prince, there are many moments when transvestites “talk back” to medical authorities by refuting medical constructions of transvestism as a behavioral abnormality and mental pathology. No one else quite articulated the indignation felt by many transvestites towards medical representations of transvestism like Susanna did when she challenged Beigel’s misguided positions. She redirected compulsiveness and sickness back onto the medical men who theorized and diagnosed under the pretense of objectivity and benevolence. “The trouble,” Susanna sardonically remarked, “is that many psychotherapists today seem afflicted by their own peculiar type of compulsion:

...to see sickness whenever a person’s behavior veers from the accepted tenets of conduct set by society. Unconventional behavior and non-conformity automatically spell sickness, no matter how harmless such behavior may be. [Dr. Beigel] is perhaps baffled, or even angry, because most TVs do not rush to psychotherapists in search for a cure.... We are an army of potential patients who refuse medication.... The trouble is that transvestites are non-conformists and refuse to be pushed into the neat little compartment which Dr. Beigel would like us to occupy.

Interestingly, in a later column Susanna remarked that she had been “hearing and reading too many debates on the nature, causes, and cure of TVism.”<sup>16</sup> Susanna could theorize with the best of them. But she was most passionate about living her life as a part-time woman.

### From Dual Personality to Full-time Living

Susanna’s evolving self-definition and identity-work over the course of a decade exemplifies the elasticity of the transvestite category. Susanna harbored a deep desire to express her feminine side and live the life of a woman. Her columns record her movement from periodic expression in the early and mid-1960s to making plans to live full time as a woman in the latter part of the decade. It is unclear if she actually achieved this goal, as her column ended in 1970, and she provided no information regarding her gender identity and lifestyle in the 100<sup>th</sup> issue of *Transvestia* (1979) where she reflected on all that had been accomplished in the world of heterosexual transvestism.

Susanna’s decision to live full time as a woman came into context in the summer and fall of 1968 and throughout 1969 as she started befriending (as Susanna) the constable, merchants, and other locals in the town of Hunter where Casa Susanna was located and in surrounding areas. As she socialized with non-transvestites as a woman, Susanna gradually gained more confidence in public encounters. During this time, she also became more protective of her ability to pass in area around her property. She wrote that she never goes into a town accompanied by other transvestites for fear that they might “blow her cover.” In 1969, Susanna achieved additional milestones: she got her ears

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<sup>16</sup> *Transvestia* #25 (February 1964).

pierced, took voice and ballet lessons, and disclosed to her step-grandchildren and other unknowing relatives. “Susanna’s success in being accepted by all the members of her family,” she wrote, “has meant total peace of mind and complete freedom to ‘do my thing’ whenever I want, which is just about every day.”<sup>17</sup> After completing her campaign to break all family barriers, Susanna revealed her decision to more or less live full-time as a woman in the October 1969 issue of *Transvestia*:

I must be selfish in protecting my own environment, an environment for Susanna to live in. And what kind of living do I engage in? Take my two-week vacation as an example. I actually worked harder than my brother does at the office. I made beds, I vacuumed, I cooked, I set the table, I handled children, I washed dishes, I did laundry, I ironed, sewed, and I even went visiting newly acquired non-TV friends who do not know (and I am determined they will never know.) I did a lot of thinking and self analysis while engaged in all those activities. I kept thinking: I enjoy doing all these things because I am a woman and my name is Susanna; men really don’t enjoy doing these things; and pretty soon I was thinking of men as THEY. I had mentally crossed the diving line. I was doing what I had always felt I should have been doing all my life, quite happy with the limitations imposed on me as a woman. And I smiled a happy smile sewing on the porch while the children rushed to tell me about the big, big frog they almost caught at the pond. No doubt some people would say that I have turned into a transsexual. I don’t think so. Operation? Phooey! I don’t want sex, I want femininity.<sup>18</sup>

Susanna further explained how she had lost the “fabulous thrill” that comes with the transformation from ‘him’ to ‘her.’ It was becoming increasingly agonizing for her to make the switch back to ‘him.’ She found peace and contentment being Susanna, so much so, that she planned to retire from her “brother’s” job in New York City and turn Casa Susanna into a year-round bed-and-breakfast with ‘Susanna’ as hostess.

In her last column (January 1970), she responded to critical reaction caused by her announced decision two issues prior. Just as Prince had to do after she announced her decision to live as a full-time woman, Susanna also had to justify her decision, explain

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<sup>17</sup> *Transvestia* #56 (April 1969).

<sup>18</sup> *Transvestia* #59 (October 1969).

her failure to “maintain the balance” between the masculine and feminine personas, and counter accusations that she had become a transsexual. She was optimistic about overcoming what she considered her three primary obstacles to achieving full-time femininity: facial hair, voice, and “facial shortcomings—nose, facial lines, and skin texture.” Susanna felt confident that electrolysis, hormones, cosmetic surgery, and voice lessons would eventually remove these stumbling blocks. As for failing to “keep the balance,” she explained that the acceptance she had received from family and friends broke the “delicate balance” and created the possibility for her to consider a life of full-time expression and living. She also credited her ability to pass as a real woman as a contributing factor that allowed her to enter this new stage. For Susanna, the challenge was (in fact, had always been) in self improvement—“to better and improve Susanna’s image so that the day will come when she will never be read.” Susanna, in fact, wanted to blend into society. Transgenders would later refer to this as ‘going stealth.’

In the late 1960s, there was not a socially defined category for individuals like Susanna, Prince, and a few others who became “full-time TVs.” Susanna had to explain a new form of subjectivity and draw semantic lines that distinguished her new way of being from a category that was all too familiar to most readers of her column—transsexuality. Susanna admitted upfront that her conclusions as to why full-time transvestites differed from transsexuals were based on little data—only her own experiences and feelings, as well as, her observations of around a dozen transsexuals and three or four other full-time transvestites she knew. Based on these observations, she explained why she, as a full-time transvestite, had not become a transsexual, and she ended her last column with a metaphor that aptly described her new gender orientation:



The full-time TV feels he has fully lived life in one role and now he wants to explore life following a different road, with a different attitude, different tools.... To the full-time TV the most important thing in life is 'to live femininely.' The operation plays no part in his life-pattern.... To conclude: I feel that a full-time TV has simply reversed his original situation and now he lives as a woman with a 'boy-within.' The differences between the original 'girl-within' and the present 'boy-within' is that she was hungry for experience, for freedom, for a chance to be. The present boy-within has no such hunger. He has lived and [done so] fully. He well knows the meaning of freedom and responsibility. Now he simply takes a back seat and with a wise smile on his face, he lets her do the driving, and as a good backseat driver should, he keeps his mouth shut.<sup>19</sup>

As a person who relished dressing completely and behaving authentically like a woman whenever the opportunity arose, Susanna lived her life (or at least part of her life) against the ideologies that defined white, middle class, heterosexual manhood in Cold War America. "When we talk of days and weeks en Femme," she remarked, "we understand why it is so terribly painful when we must 'get back in uniform' and put her in the closet again." Susanna revolted against the "masculine mystique" and the stifling male "uniform" of the grey flannel suit. Unlike many other transvestites of her generation who dressed in private and harbored a secret shame, Susanna moved boldly and proudly across the gendered spaces of American society. She led a life that testified that one's gender orientation does not necessarily follow one's assigned sex.

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<sup>19</sup> *Transvestia* #61 (January 1970)

## APPENDIX C

### “Virginia Prince and the Sixties”

## On Liberation and the Politics of Personal Transformation

“...we are the vanguard of Men’s Liberation in that we have met and made friends with that woman formerly locked away in the dungeons of our psyche”<sup>20</sup>

In the February 1965 issue of *Transvestia*, Prince discussed Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, explaining to her readers that the women Friedan had interviewed felt unfinished and unfulfilled as human beings in the idealized, mystical housewife and homemaker roles imposed on them. “So who,” Prince asked in her review, “is going to write a book on the Masculine Mystique and the frustrations and psychosomatic disturbances that George and Harry have, because they too are trying to live up to an artificial and unsatisfying role forced on them by society? It seems to me that all of you who read *Transvestia* and myself are collectively, so-to-speak, writing such a book.”<sup>21</sup> Not just an instructional manual and entertainment medium for crossdressers, *Transvestia* represented an indictment on a narrow form of masculinity that structured the lives of many of its readers. “Masculinity today,” Prince contended, “is a very narrow concept, with sharp lines demarking it from femininity.... The restrictions on free expression by men today are much more marked than most men realize. They are much more prisoners of their gender than they think.”<sup>22</sup> It would be a stretch to say that Prince desired to fundamentally transform gender roles in the manner that many radical feminist groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s advocated. She was not that revolutionary in her thinking. Yet, in her defense of heterosexual male crossdressing, she did imagine ways to combat the stress and anxiety induced from the strain of male social role expectancy. One of

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<sup>20</sup> Virgin Views, “The Girl Within Again,” *Transvestia* #74 (1972).

<sup>21</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #31 (February 1965).

<sup>22</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #34 (August 1965).

Prince's innovative rationales as to why men crossdress included the "relief from the requirements of masculinity" that a man experienced as a result of crossdressing. According to Prince, American society expected men to be "aggressive, forthright, bold, courageous, competitive, strong, dominant, [and] boss." By crossdressing, men could "symbolically and temporarily" experience "grace, beauty, daintiness, attractiveness, [and] gentility."<sup>23</sup> Prince conceptualized transvestism as an "escape from being you"—the *you* that "society expects to behave in certain ways, [and] remain inside certain boundaries." Prince explained that for the crossdressed male "the discovery that others treat you differently, that they look at you with different thoughts in their minds, that they expect different things of you—all of this provides escape from the social expectancy attached to your everyday self by the acquisition of an entirely different set of social expectations for your new self."<sup>24</sup> Crossdressing, then, amounted to a personal solution to restrictive gender roles, not a collective practice that undermined or disrupted the maintenance of gender norms and social hierarchies.

In 1963 Prince speculated that transvestites find release from the "masculine straightjacket" by entering a "feminine world" that they perceive to have greater freedom of personal expression. In her column, she linked transvestism to a man's motivation to escape the rigid masculine gender roles of postwar American society and related a personal experience that supported this position:

I learned this clearly one day when I wanted a wide sun hat to go with a white dress with gold belt, shoes, and accessories. I found a white straw hat with big gold sequins on it. To a man it was just another silly woman's hat, and as Charles that is just the way I felt about it. But Charles didn't buy it. Virginia did and I felt

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<sup>23</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #7 (January 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

very feminine and in style with it. Apparently others thought so too as one woman came up to me as we entered a store and said, 'My dear, I just wanted to tell you how nice that hat looks with your outfit, I saw you clear across the parking lot and just wanted to tell you so.' You can imagine I was knocked off my pins by this, but I greatly appreciated it, for I knew I had 'arrived.' You don't think I was worrying about payrolls, sales, contracts, etc., at a time like that do you? That wasn't relaxation that was just living, and Man I dig that, like WOW!<sup>25</sup>

While emancipatory on an individualistic level, the above story also indicates the narrow conception of femininity held by Prince. In the early to mid-1960s, Prince's analyses of the post war gender regime did not extend far beyond the surface of cultural markers. She often equated substantive freedom with the freedom of personal expression. Prince's politics of self-expression did anticipate the concept of "the personal is political," yet she was either blind to or disinterested in the more systematic forms of gender-based discrimination, violence, and injustice. However, Prince's views changed in the latter half of the 1960s, when she joined the National Organization for Women (NOW) and encountered knowledge generated by second wave feminism. After joining NOW, she began to recognize that women's problems are more substantive and less cultural. She acknowledged the social and economic injustice inflicted upon women, even though she sometimes fell back into the habit of conceptualizing freedom primarily in terms of personal expression and transformation.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, Prince threw a spotlight on the stifling role expectations of men. Freidan's 1963 manifesto prompted numerous reactions and responses from liberal males, including Prince, who wanted to further extend Freidan's analysis to the masculine dilemma. Prince argued that women were successfully breaking through the social mold;

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<sup>25</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #22 (August 1963).

<sup>26</sup> To be sure, many other groups' platforms during this era shifted from a politics of social transformation to the politics of self-transformation.

men, on the other hand, were still constrained and needed “to break out of the confines of the current social concept of masculinity.”<sup>27</sup> Prince pointed to “society” as the culprit but was blind to the fact that “society” was actually controlled by other men. In the latter half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, books began appearing about men’s stifling and repressive gender roles. Prince reviewed these books with a sort of “you see, I told you so” attitude to her readers. The first of these instances came in the December of 1966 issue where Prince discussed the book, *The American Male* (1966) by Myron Brenton. Prince’s reaction to Brenton’s book suggests that she had never encountered these ideas in print before. She quoted the book extensively in her column and was quick to remind readers that Brenton’s arguments were exactly the same as what she had been writing about for the past six years. She even went so far as to quote Brenton and then reference specific page numbers from her earlier columns that featured the same idea. Indeed, what Brenton argued was startlingly similar to most everything Prince had written about the masculine mystique, the arbitrary construction of gender norms, and the narrow stereotypes that men felt pressured to follow.<sup>28</sup>

Prince’s ideas regarding masculinity as an oppressive category predated the social politics of men’s liberation and the theoretical insights of masculinity studies. Perhaps, Prince should be considered an intellectual forefather/mother of masculinity studies, male

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<sup>27</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #34 (August 1965).

<sup>28</sup>For another instance of Prince comparing her ideas to those espoused by early men’s liberationists, see “The Girl Within Again” (*Transvestia* #74 1972). Here, Prince related this popular concept to men’s liberation arguments: “Each of you, and every other man has a ‘girl within.’ The difference between we FP’s and the rest is that we have discovered that girl sitting in the dungeons of our mind. It is a basic act of oppression for every man to keep his own femininity in the dungeons of his psyche.... The term ‘girl within’ is just a convenient way of characterizing all those negative, no-no things that our society sees as belonging to the pink blanket set and being inappropriate for blue blanket people.” More research is needed to find out when this discourse of masculinity being a trap catches on in both intellectual circles and in the general public.

liberal pro-feminism, and the men's liberation movement. Still, if everything she wrote on the subject of gender is taken into consideration, one would have to conclude that Prince did not fundamentally challenge men and women's social expectations and obligations. Rather, she wanted transvestite men to have the right to temporarily trade in their masculine set of social expectations for the feminine set without guilt and fear of social stigmatization.<sup>29</sup>

This is not to say that Prince did not have moments where her analysis of gender and power relations was ahead of her time. Some of her insights are draw-dropping, as they presaged theoretical nuggets several years away from being uncovered by feminist, gender, and queer scholars. One astute and hard-hitting observation that Prince made in one of her columns in 1968 concerned the connection between gender (i.e. masculinity) and violence. In "Memoriam to J.F.K., M.L.K, and R.F.K.", Prince contrasted these male leaders' masculinities with the violent and aggressive forms that permeate American society. She wrote:

[This column] is intended as an indictment of our culture in one particular respect: VIOLENCE! The male citizen of our American culture, and to some extent but not to the same degree, the males of other western cultures, have elevated the cult of masculinity to the ultimate....In a world that venerates, honors, and rewards masculinity far above femininity and which at the same time equates strength, courage, determination, aggressiveness, and force with masculinity, what can we expect? Men are so frightened, so ashamed, so fearful of their gentler instincts and feelings that they shove them aside and elevate the current conceptions of masculinity to the dominant and determining place in their life philosophy. In

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<sup>29</sup> I have always been bothered by Prince's claims, which were more frequent in the 1960s than the 1970's, that women are more emancipated than men. In the following statement, Prince begins to underscore what she is specifically referring to when she argues that women are more emancipated than men: "Emancipation of the female is not yet complete, but it is further advanced today than the emancipation of the male.... 'He' is but little advanced as a person over his grandfather. Such advancements as have been made in these last 100 years have been material, technical, social, etc., not personal. A man today lives in an even more constricted personal world than his grandfather did" (#48 December 1967). Prince is clearly not speaking politically or economically when she references emancipation. Her idea of liberation entailed and encompassed primarily the realm of the personal.

order to deny femininity, a man will exaggerate masculinity well beyond its proper proportion in human life. What is the result in the world? The continued domination of the masculine ethic of force and violence, of solving problems with wars, pistols, or fists instead of with the head and the heart.<sup>30</sup>

Prince's intellectual and cultural work and her negotiations of gender can be placed in the context of other 1960's and 70's challenges to the postwar gender regime, such as those made by countercultural groups, women's liberationists, and gay liberationists.

### Sexual and Gender Revolutions

In a column entitled, "Our Changing Times," Prince situated the fledgling transvestite movement within a larger context of increasing social tolerance and cultural permissiveness.<sup>31</sup> As evidence of progressive change and the loosening of gender norms, she directed her readers' attention to President Truman's Hawaiian shirts, the Beatles, a new cult of hair styling and cosmetics for men, women increasingly wearing pants, and androgynous fashion trends. This column also indicated that Prince closely followed social, cultural, and political events and sympathized with the civil rights movement, the struggle for women's rights, and the homophile movement. Prince associated the transvestite's dilemma with these other struggles for liberation, including "the climate toward racial integration." "Color and class bigotry and prejudice," observed Prince, "would seem to be a far cry from the disapproval of sexual or general non-conformity, [but] a society that is ingrown and stratified in one way is of necessity intolerant and non-permissive in lot of other ways." She encouraged her readers to consider that transvestites stood to benefit from other minority groups' struggles. "When circumstances develop

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<sup>30</sup> Virgin Views, "In Memoriam to J.F.K., M.L.K. and R.F.K.," *Transvestia* #51 (June 1968). Like many liberal feminists of the time, Prince placed the blame not on men but on conceptions of masculinity.

<sup>31</sup> Virgin Views, "Our Changing Times," *Transvestia* #37 (February 1966).



wherein past patterns of conformity, repression, intolerance and disdain for one group are brought into question and gradually destroyed, the social ‘smog’ that blinds society to one kind of injustice begins to clear away and an atmosphere of tolerance and freedom for many other minorities comes to pass at the same time.”<sup>32</sup> By the end of the decade of the 1960s, Prince would count blacks, homosexuals, and women as “unexpected allies” in the fight for awakening public awareness of injustice, discrimination, and prejudice.<sup>33</sup>

To fully understand Prince’s sympathetic views on the identity movements and social changes that a majority of middle-class white Americans felt threatened by, one needs to know just how much Prince despised conformity. Her abhorrence for conformist, narrow-minded attitudes was illustrated in the following sarcastic tirade regarding couples’ fears of telling their children about their father’s crossdressing:

It’s ‘abnormal’, ‘unusual’, ‘different’, ‘non-conforming’, ‘confusing’, etc., so naturally the little darlings should be protected from this, just as they must be protected from every other ‘danger’, risk, heart-ache, and apparently from most other experiences that might teach them something other than how to be like everyone else. This is the age of damned conformity and every tendency of the child to go off on a tangent, every experience that might present him with problems or experiences outside the limits of the ordinary and ‘acceptable’, is to be avoided in the interest of helping the child to grow up ‘well adjusted’, secure and untroubled.... Anything that tends to encourage him towards being anything but a cog in the nicely adjusted status quo is to be kept away from him. It’s no wonder that the teenagers react against this with their rather extreme brands of non-conformity.<sup>34</sup>

Having personally fought the stigma of transvestism, Prince was able to display a remarkable degree of sympathy and solidarity with other marginalized groups that the vast majority of individuals of her race, age (mid-50s), and class position absolutely

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Virgin Views, “Unexpected Allies,” *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969).

<sup>34</sup> Virgin Views, “Further Thoughts on Children,” *Transvestia* #39 (June 1966).

loathed. Except for a few despicable mis-characterizations of transsexuals, which I discussed earlier, the vicious politics of respectability unleashed on sexual and gender minorities other than heterosexual transvestites somewhat abated in the latter years of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Her personal struggles and “live and let live” attitude can be credited for much of the social liberalism featured in her latter columns. Yet, the women’s and gay liberation movements influenced her thinking, as well.

The second wave women’s liberation movement profoundly shaped Prince’s views concerning gender. In a 1970 column entitled “Liberation,” Prince described the “liberation” being fought for and won by various minority groups. Prince encouraged her readers to support all movements for liberation but was most impressed with and influenced by the National Organization for Women (NOW). When discussing the women’s liberation movement, she was quick to note that she was not referring to the radical women’s lib groups but the broader movement. “The ‘Women’s Lib’ group is a quite radical and activist bunch of girls and unhappily they get most of the radio, TV, and newspaper publicity, which is not all the best.”<sup>35</sup> While she was not a fan of the radical feminist groups, Prince joined NOW. Prince’s experiences in NOW and her reading of feminist literature helped her to “discern the areas and ways in which men have relegated women to a second class position.” More important, “being” a woman enabled her to “feel about it the way they [women] did.” After two years of living as a woman, Prince claimed that “It [second class citizenship] was now my problem as it is the problem of all women, even when they don’t realize it. My interest in the movement has since become more personal and less intellectual.” Prince even acknowledged her former complicity in

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<sup>35</sup> Virgin Views, “Liberation,” *Transvestia* #63 (1970).

the exploitation of women. “I had been a member of the class MAN, which was collectively guilty of exploiting the class WOMAN and, as such, I felt a need to expunge or expiate this guilt.”<sup>36</sup>

Prince viewed the battles that women were fighting as mutually beneficial for transvestite liberation. She encouraged her readers to support and join the women’s liberation movement, contending that transvestites and women share a common opponent by the name of “male superiority.” She explained to her readership the relationship between male supremacy and their social ostracism and public condemnation:

How obvious it is then that not only must females be kept in their second class position as breeding stock and companions and not as real people, but that any male, endowed by birth with the superiority of maleness, who dared to lower himself to the level of femaleness (homosexuality) or womanliness (femmiphilia-TVism) must be punished, banished, or shunned.... Women aren’t fighting for our rights to the other half of our humanity; they are fighting for the other half of their own. But the opposition, that which makes the fight necessary for each group, is the same—male superiority and the need to maintain that position. When men are liberated, women will be liberated.... Since we both have a certain need to express our other side, we should recognize and support the women in their fight to regain theirs.<sup>37</sup>

Like many liberal feminists and some radical ones, Prince saw women’s and men’s liberation as inextricably joined. “Women too are getting tired of being second class citizens and they too are organizing, protesting, marching, picketing, etc. More importantly, they are coming to realize that both men and women are locked into roles and expectations and that these restraints need to be broken for both genders”<sup>38</sup>

The experience of living privately and interacting socially as a woman taught Prince more about the inequalities experienced by biological women than her intellectual forays

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<sup>36</sup> All the quotes from this paragraph come from Virgin Views, “Liberation,” *Transvestia* #63 (1970).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Unexpected Allies” *Transvestia* #60 (December 1969).

into the literature of women's liberation. In "Adventures in Womanhood," Prince related some old and new experiences encountering male chauvinism. She also discussed sexism, sexual objectification, and gender relations:

I have indeed learned very much of what it means to be a woman in our society and I have learned various ways in which women are put down or discounted or devalued by men. I understand now much of the resentment that some women feel. They are unable to be themselves, to have a career, to be valued for their own intrinsic self rather than as a potential or actual sex object. I have learned what all women have learned, that it simply doesn't pay for the woman to be too smart, too intelligent, too clever, too humorous, too gifted and so forth, because, unless she meets a very unusual man who is all these things and more, and most particularly, one who is very secure in his own masculinity, she will lose out if she lets herself be herself. She must always try to be the person the man in the situation will be comfortable with—**she must, in short, be *his* idea of her, and not her own conception of herself.** (Emphasis added)

As is evident here, Prince was becoming aware of the "hidden injuries" of gender oppression. She knew that many of her readers held chauvinist attitudes. To reach these readers, she connected the seemingly irrelevant ideas of women's liberation to her readers' personal lives. She accomplished this by focusing on what was for many of them their most significant problem—their relationships with their wives. Prince contended that one of the reasons a wife might not be tolerant or understanding of her husband's transvestism was that she was not "liberated." In "Liberation of You and Your Wife," Prince explained how a wife's liberation would positively affect a transvestite husband's freedom to express his feminine side more openly:

The problem is that she [reader's wife] is not liberated from the stereotype of man and woman that she was brought up with. So when you put on a dress you not only stop being her pride and joy, her symbol of accomplishment and fulfillment of her femininity, but in effect you join that band of harpies that she has been in competition with all her adult life. You [both] need mutual 'consciousness raising' as it is called—an increased awareness of exactly what is and has been going on with the 'woman question' all these years. As she becomes more liberated within herself, she is going of necessity and simultaneously to become

more tolerant and less demanding of you simply because the stereotype that makes her what she is requires that you be what she needs you to be.<sup>39</sup>

Prince further suggested that husbands learn about women's liberation by reading books like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*. She also encouraged them to subscribe to *MS* magazine and to join NOW. "Learn exactly how women are tied down and suppressed by the male organized culture. When you have learned something of that you will be better able to understand what's inside your wife's head."

Significantly, Prince did not place the burden of change solely on the wife. Prince believed that husbands had to eliminate their chauvinistic attitudes. In 1973, Prince received a letter from an unhappy wife who was tolerant and understanding of her husband's crossdressing but felt that her husband did not reciprocate or try to understand her. Prompted by this case of selfishness and narcissism on the husband's part, Prince, in her column, took the side of the wife and chastised her readers who were living an unrealistic presentation of womanhood and taking advantage of their wives' good graces. Prince also stated that the husband has certain obligations to an accepting wife. She admonished:

What is ridiculous is that he [the husband] sees women as beautiful creatures that have lots of time to kill and just lay around reading or doing their nails, or going out shopping, etc. Sure they do those things, but they also work, shop for food, sweep, mop vacuum, dust, polish, change beds, do laundry, pick up , darn, iron, cook, take care of sick children and husbands, and keep the kids fed and clean, healthy, happy, and out of Daddy's hair. Is it any wonder then, that in a lot of cases after several years of trying to understand and to accept the idea that men have a need to express their femininity as women do their masculinity, that she gets a bit fed up with seeing what his concept of femininity is?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Virgin Views, "Liberation of You and Your Wife," *Transvestia* #77 (1973).

<sup>40</sup> Virgin Views, "Give Him an Inch and He'll Take it All," *Transvestia* #78 (1973).

Prince later published several letters from wives who thanked her for “telling it like it is.” And many transvestite readers seemed to respond positively to her admonitions, reporting in their letters that they were going to play a more “housewife-type role” from then on. Prince and many of her readers saw their world and their lives as a series of roles to be played. They intellectually knew that gender roles were oppressive for men and women but they devised no systematic way to obliterate them. To be sure, most did not want to transform these hierarchies. They wanted to perform the appealing aspects of femininity and by pass any burdens that came along with the role. Most of *Transvestia*’s crossdressers failed to understand that a man expressing his femininity and a woman expressing her masculinity are never equal equations. Missing from Prince’s avocation of free gender expression were thorough analyses of economic and power differentials between men and women. This explains why that even as late as 1977 she could remark that “while a man’s world and a woman’s world can be toted up on a scoreboard and on any given item one or the other will have an advantage or a specific disadvantage, when the total score is taken into consideration, things are about equal.”<sup>41</sup>

If encouraging her readers to sympathize with the struggle for women’s equality was a challenge, then pushing them to support the movement for homosexual rights and liberation was an even more difficult task. “Nothing,” Prince contended in 1966, “is more basic to our insecurities, self-condemnation, and non-acceptance than the problem of homosexuality.”<sup>42</sup> The widespread demonization of homosexuality, coupled with the public’s equation that a man in a dress must be homosexual, promoted hostility towards

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<sup>41</sup>Virgin Views, “I’m Glad I Wasn’t Born a Girl,” *Transvestia* #91 (1977).

<sup>42</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #41 (October 1966).

gays among Prince's readership. Homophobic sentiments filled the letters and life histories readers sent to Prince, and homophobia crept into Prince's organizational policies. Yet, Prince's desire to distance heterosexual transvestism from the specter of homosexuality should not, in itself, be interpreted as a homophobic strategy. I want to complicate a general impression that Prince was rabidly homophobic with evidence that shows that she was more open-minded, accepting, and even supportive than commonly believed.

One of Prince's primary concerns in her columns was to assuage her readers of any fears they held that they might be homosexual. "I just can't feel that any FP who...finds herself the recipient of some masculine attention must shy away from it and get all covered with confusion and guilt and decide that she must not permit it lest this makes her a homosexual."<sup>43</sup> Having absorbed Kinsey's findings, Prince held a complex view of homosexuality. She subscribed to the Kinsey-scale theory of sexuality that posited that sexual desire fell along a range or spectrum rather than cohered within a distinct hetero-homo divide. Therefore, she recognized the difference between homosexual acts and homosexual identities. "Because one has had one or a few homosexual erotic experiences," Prince contended, "does not make one a homosexual....Any reader who happens to have had one or a few homosexual experiences need not carry around a big load of guilt about it for the rest of his life."<sup>44</sup> To illustrate her opinion that many transvestites, out of ignorance, think they must be homosexual and therefore socialize with the gay crowd, Prince described an experience at a drag ball that she and some

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<sup>43</sup> Virgin Views, "An Editorial on Homosexuality," *Transvestia* #67 (1971).

<sup>44</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #41 (October 1966).

friends had attended in 1965. At the ball, she took an informal survey of sixteen drag queens, asking each ten questions that she had pre-devised. She hypothesized that the answers to these questions would distinguish homosexual queens from transvestites. One of the bar-goers who Prince questioned actually turned out to be a transvestite and not a queen. Prince said that she informed him of that and introduced him to the other transvestites in her group. According to Prince, this newly enlightened individual would later become a member of Phi Pi Epsilon.

Prince knew that her readership harbored prejudices against gays. Anytime she wrote about homosexuality in a positive light, she would preface her remarks with statements acknowledging her readers' prejudices. Prince admonished her readers for these attitudes and asked them not to judge homosexuals but rather see the commonalities between the transvestite's plight and that of the homosexual. Prince was all too aware of the politics of respectability that occurs among stigmatized groups:

It is one of the unhappy aspects of minority group activity that they are almost always intolerant of other minorities—sort of a compensatory action I suppose. It is no less true of our group. Many of our members are very intolerant of homosexuals and I'm sure will be upset by this column. Because of our own inner guilt and because of our ignorance of my constantly reiterated statement that 'sex and gender are not the same thing', we are in some ways worse than the regular heterosexual crowd in our denunciations of the homosexual community. As I said in the first sentence, fear is bred in us through ignorance of what homosexuality actually is (and what it isn't which is even more important) and this in turn leads to distrust, condemnation and ostracism....<sup>45</sup>

These words were bold given the context of writing them for a generally homophobic audience. Moreover, Prince did not just deliver rhetoric about understanding and tolerance. In the same column, she reported that she had recently attended a national planning convention in San Francisco among the various homophile groups. She attended

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



the final session of this group as an observer. “I think it is in order,” she explained, “that we keep an observer status in this field and stand by to aid their cause when it will aid ours and to extract from their experiences and their contacts with authorities and influential groups any contacts and opportunities that may be to our advantage.”

In a column entitled “Persecution of Minorities,” Prince reacted boldly and compassionately to the conservative backlashes of the mid-1970s and specifically to the 1977 Anita Bryant / Dade County, Florida fiasco:

As you are all aware, we have been living in a more and more open and permissive society. There are those, particularly the fundamentalist religious sects who would like to push society back to Victorian times if they could. There is a wave of reaction under way in this country today and you ought to be aware of it....Thus if the anti-gay rights movement is successful, you can expect a lot less freedom for yourself, too. Remember that as far as society is concerned, FPs are the same as gays....Thus you don’t have to be gay to take the position that they, too, have a right to live, to have a job, to be able to rent an apartment, and the other things that the Miami ordinance attempted to guarantee them.<sup>46</sup>

In general, Prince supported the social and cultural liberations that were affecting many parts of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. She even supported the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which she referred to as the Christopher Street Revolution. She viewed this episode and other social rebellions as the inevitable consequence of a particular group being oppressed by society. For her, the fight for political and social change was a legitimate social action.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Persecution of Minorities,” *Transvestia* #91(1977)

<sup>47</sup> However, Prince did not support the political tactics of the radical wings of these minority movements. For example, for Prince’s eye-witness account of the famed gay and women’s liberation disruption or zaps of the American Psychiatric Association meeting in San Francisco in May of 1970, see her “Traveling Sales Lady Report” in #62 (1970). Prince was in the room when “wild haired members of Gay Liberation moved in and began to yell and shout obscenities and accusations at the speakers....Thursday morning there was another session on HS [homosexuality] and again the Gay Lib people were there joined by a bunch of young women from Women’s Lib. Between them they created so much noise, confusion and disturbance that the chairman had to dismiss the session. It was a frightening premonition of things that may lie ahead for this nation when even a professional group like that of the psychiatrists can have their

## Coda: The End of the World as She Knew It

Prince was an astute observer of culture and the transformations in gender that were happening around her. By the mid 1960s, Prince began to recognize that younger generations might have greater freedom of personal expression.

Those less than this age may come into adolescence and young manhood in a culture that is appreciably different from that which existed when most of us were going through that stage of life. It will be a culture where the distinctions between the proper and acceptable behavior of male and female persons will not be so sharply drawn. Men will be wearing longer hair, using perfume and possibly other facial cosmetics, and clothing will be lighter and more colorful. Women on the other hand, will be wearing some sort of pants more than dresses, will be taking a greater role in government, politics, business and the professions and will be much more independent and self reliant than presently....Thus males will be able to integrate their total selves without so much guilt, fear, and loneliness as we experience today.....While there probably will still be those who envy the opposite sex there may be a great diminution in the number of those who cross-dress because dress distinctions will not be so important.”<sup>48</sup>

What is most fascinating here was her recognition that the style of crossdressing practiced by FP’s may become obsolete, given the changes women were fighting for and other transformations in gender roles and ideals. “What happens,” she asked in 1971, “to the FP who finds himself espousing a form and expression of femininity in clothing that is rapidly becoming passé for the GG’s?....What happens to those other forms of ‘femininity’ (other than the clothing that is) that we FPs have long envied and sought to possess and express when they are evaporating out of our culture?”<sup>49</sup> Prince formulated an answer that was forward looking but retained a bit of nostalgia for an older gendered world that was then rapidly changing:

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meeting disrupted by the radical wing of various minority groups. During the five days of the convention I got in some good licks with various M.D.’s around and feel that I did my bit for the cause.”

<sup>48</sup> Virgin Views, *Transvestia* #33 (June 1965).

<sup>49</sup> Virgin Views, “An Editorial on Homosexuality,” *Transvestia* #67 (1971).

Ah, pity the poor FP, she is becoming obsolescent and in due course will possibly become extinct—at least in the way we have known her. Sometimes I feel like I'd like to move to somewhere else where the kind of women I was brought up on can still be found and where I can become one of them. But that would be Charles the FP thinking. As for me Virginia, I too am becoming a liberated woman though for me as I've written before it is not so much liberated as it is integrated. I can and do adapt to the changing styles, moods, opportunities and challenges of the day. Many of you neither want to nor live in a condition where you could if you did and that's fine too. Enjoy it while you can, for tomorrow's FPs are very likely to be stillborn or have their incipient FPism 'cured' in adolescence by the social freedom in which they find themselves.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Another insightful quote from the same column is: "We as Fps are in a time where that which has oppressed us is being removed (homosexual taboos), that which has attracted us—ultra femininity of dress, hair and makeup—is going out of style, that which we found so relaxing in contrast to our socially demanded masculinity—becoming a 'woman' on occasion through the medium of her clothing—is ceasing to exist both because 'she-ness' is rising from its submissive, accepting, more or less passive condition, and 'he-ness' is falling from its dominant, red-blooded-he-man, aggressive (and withal insecure) masculine throne."

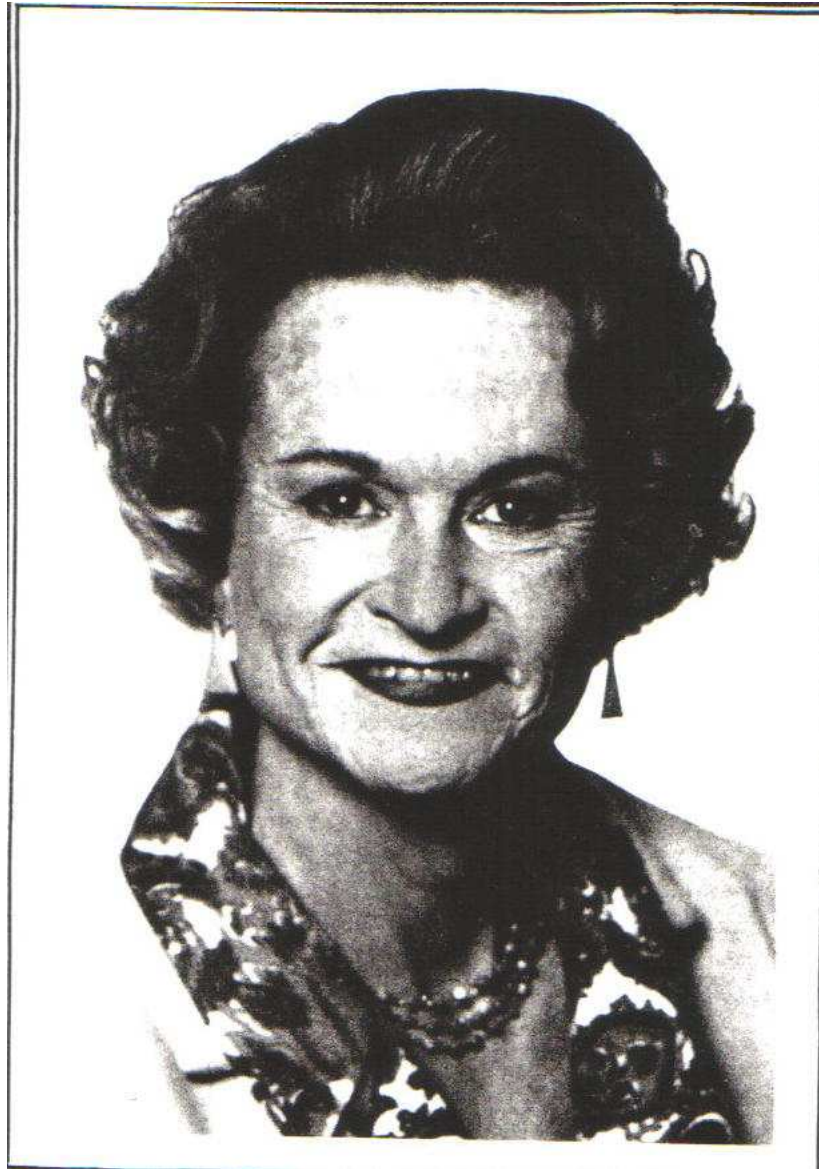
## APPENDIX D

### Selected Photographs from *Transvestia*'s Visual Archive



"ALL OF ME—VIRGINIA 1979"

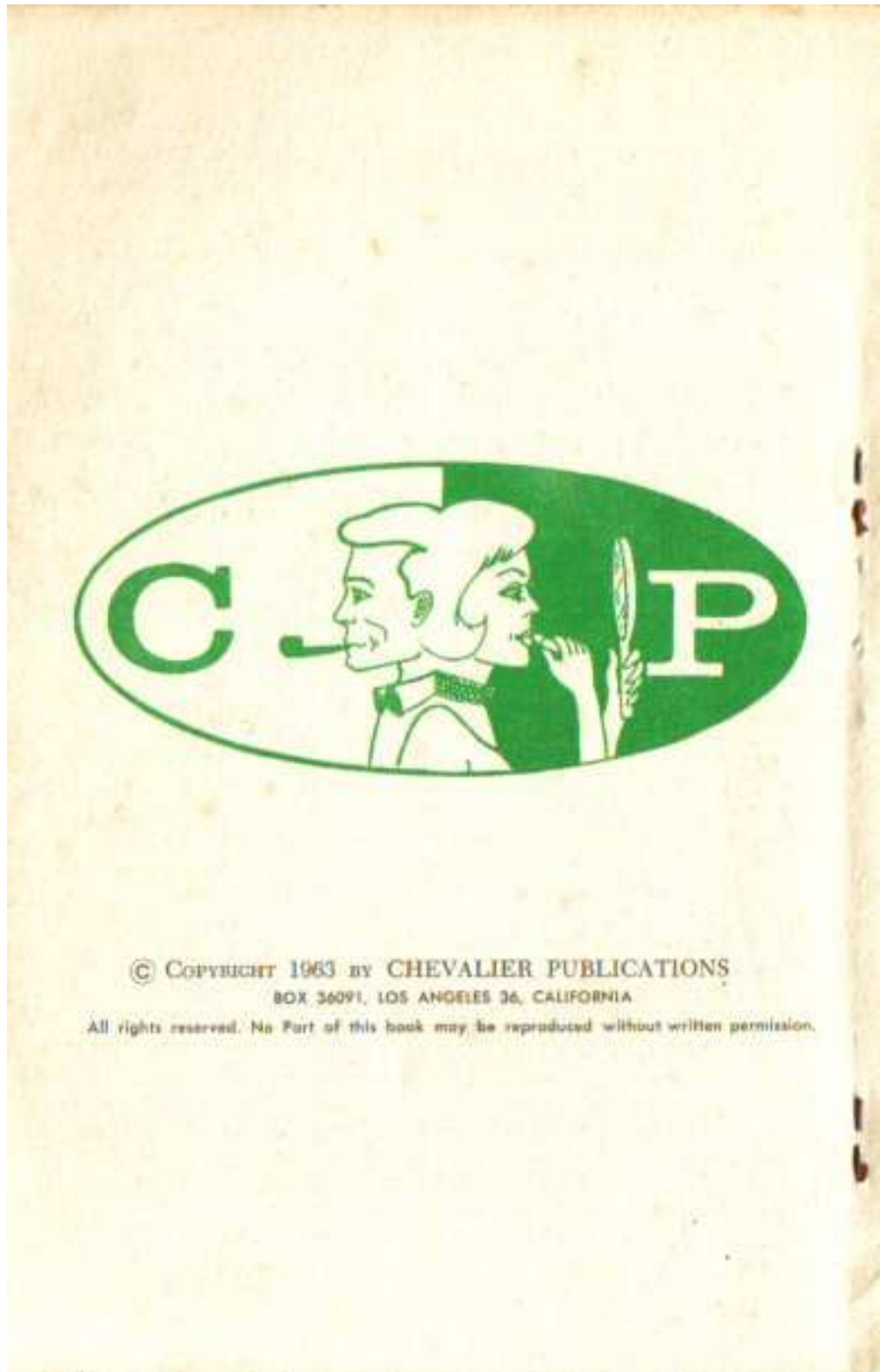
Virginia Prince, founder of *Transvestia* and Phi Pi Epsilon



Virginia Prince, 1970 portrait







The logo on the back of the magazine captured the idea of dual personality expression.





Marilyn from Seattle in *Transvestia* February 1962. Marilyn was an important leader in the Northwest chapter of FPE and founded the DREAM retreat in the 1970s.



"A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE"



A TV WATCHING TV...OR VICE VERSA?  
WAS THE PROGRAM "TURNABOUT"?



A FEW MINUTES REST  
IN THE GARDEN



LET'S SEE NOW---  
WHAT'S FOR DINNER?



BACK FROM THE STORE  
HOPE I DIDN'T FORGET ANYTHING



NANCY AND APRIL (5-3-6)  
READY FOR A WALK



SEEING THE SIGHTS!

Nancy in *Transvestia* April 1962





JUDITH THE CLUBWOMAN TYPE



*Transvestia* February 1964





SUSANNA--New York



Susanna Valenti, *Transvestia* columnist





Eileen from Virginia in *Transvestia* August 1962



RAIN RAIN  
GO AWAY

READY FOR A BIG NIGHT



EILEEN--THE SHOPPER





Charlotte 6-G-1 FPE



GLORIA

AND MORE GLORIA

Gloria from Pennsylvania, *Transvestia* February 1963



Gossiping as girls will



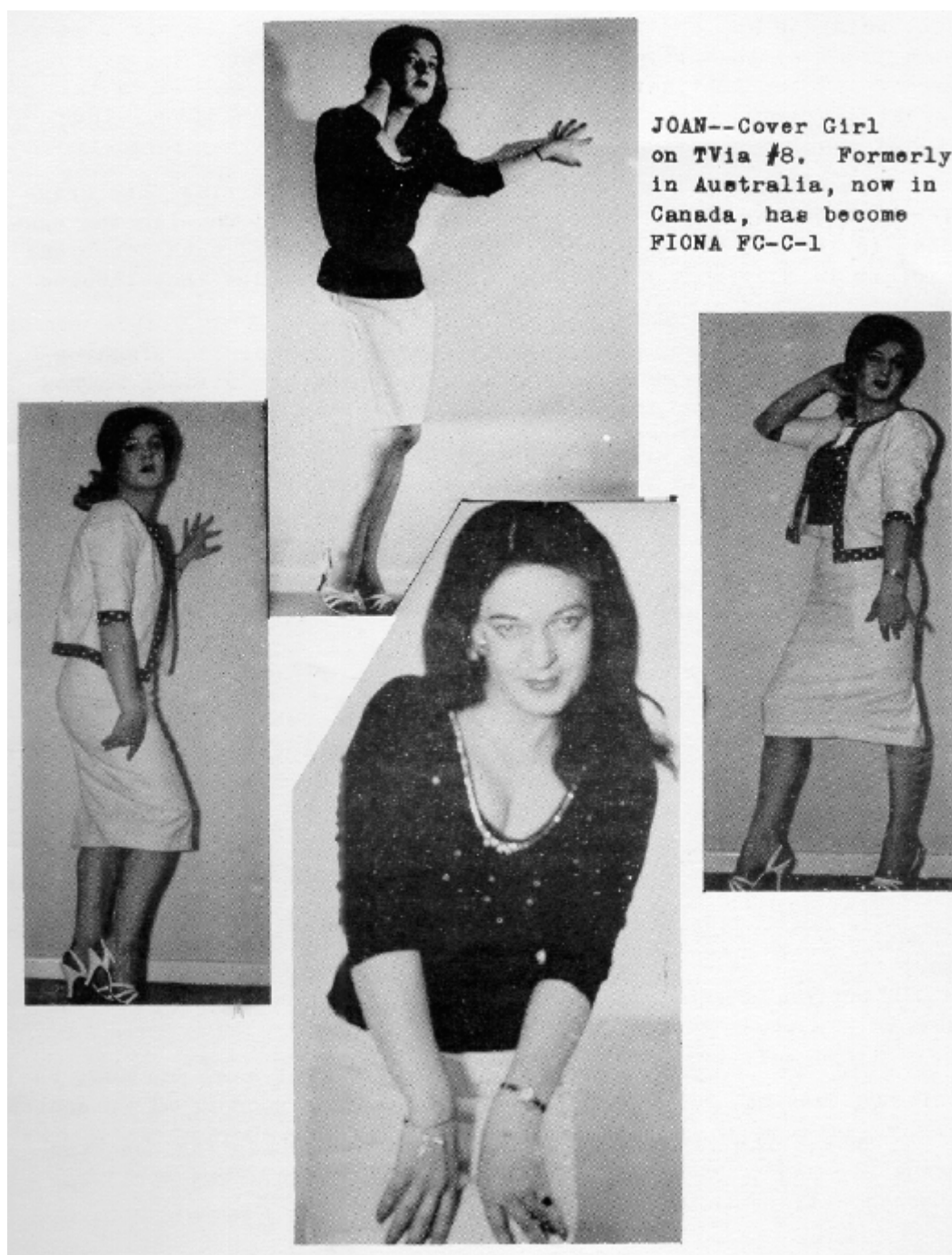
HEAVENS! Pants Again



Just BETTY at home.

*Transvestia #33 1965*





This is Katherine Cummings, a key living informant (*Transvestia* #16 1962).



The Domestic Touch

*Julie Transvestia June 1967*





*Loretta*  
Texas



*Transvestia* January 1961





DENISE



An erotic exception. The top two photos were published in the January 1961 issue before the hard push towards respectability.





Delta Girls  
 Susan, Maryann, Sue, Veronica, Jean  
 Conny, Betty Lynn



Rho Chapter  
 Jeanette 20-R-2, Lynn 38-F-2, Irene 20-R-1, Mary 38-F-2, Joanie 20-R-4





Lamda Lovelies in Portland — St. Patrick's Day  
 Sheryl 47-B-4, Marilyn 47-I-1, Laura, Brendalyn 47-B-3  
 Janice 47-A-1, Rayetta 47-S-2, Charlene 37-O-1, Lynne 37-B-5  
 Donna 37-B-4, Maureen 6-J-1, Joanne 37-K-1



Lamda's — Hallowe'en Party  
 Joanne, Marilyn, Jennifer, Sheryl, Norma, Brendalyn, Rayetta, Charlene  
 Vicki, Betty, Donna, Agnes





THE GIRLS AT THE THETA CHRISTMAS PARTY

DORIS	EDWINA	KAY	BARBARA	
23-V-1FPE	13-M-1FPE	22-K-1FPE	13-S-3FPE	
BARBARA LEE		VIRGINIA		
13-D-4 FPE		5-P-1FPE		
FRAN	GISELLE	LAURA	MARIE	CATHY
49-C-1FPE	13-J-2FPE	35-S-2FPE	14-K-2FPE	38-W-1FPE





THE WASHINGTON, OREGON, IDAHO GROUP FPE

Marilyn 47-I-1, Virginia 5-P-1, Annette 12-F-1

Vicky 47-G-2, Florence 47-R-1

Jennifer 37-M-1

Brendalyn 47-B-3



Vicky 47-G-2 FPE

Marilyn 47-I-1 FPE

Norma 54-H-2 FPE





Felicity's arrest galvanized the TV community in 1964.



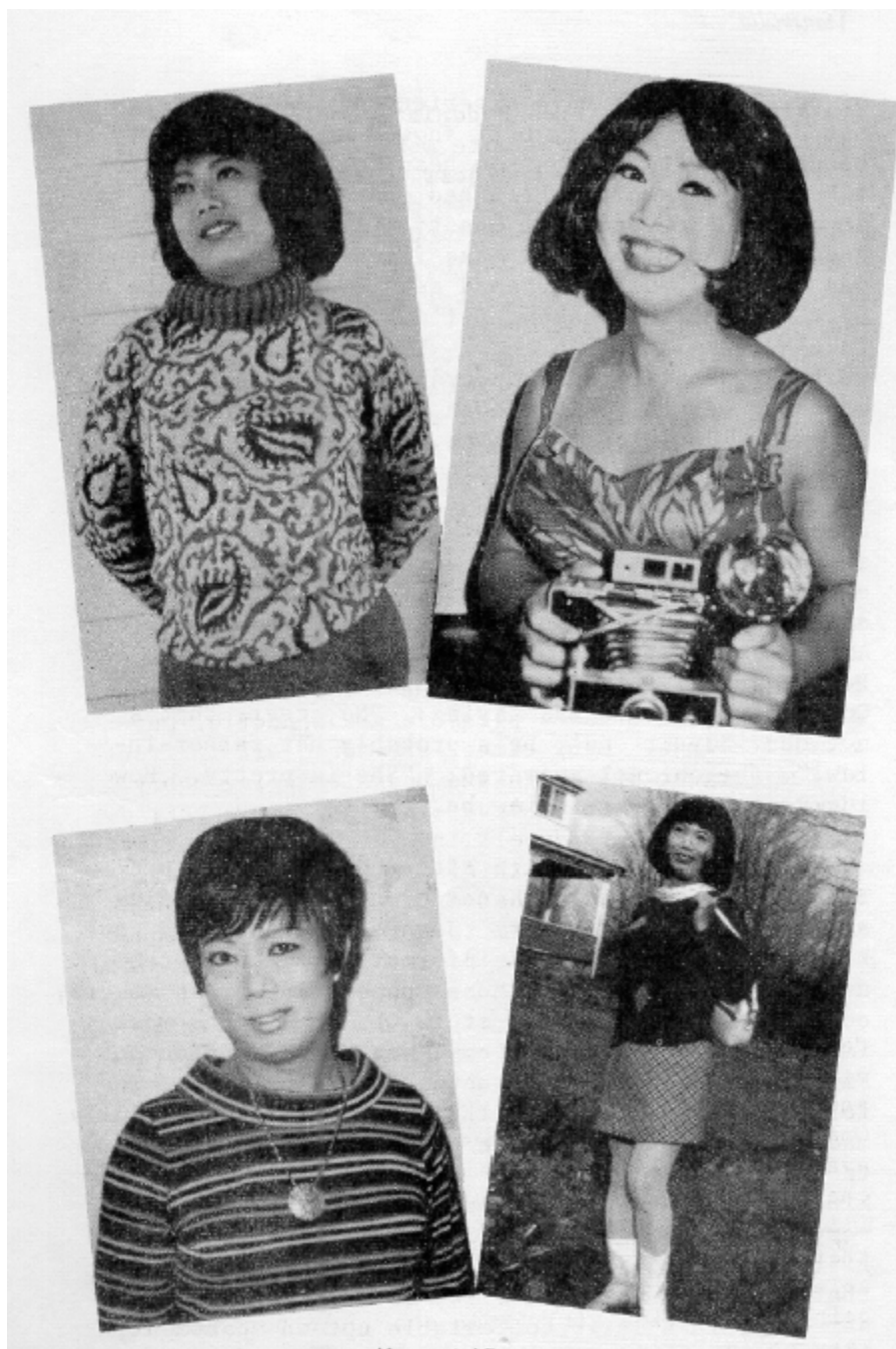


Michelle 13-J-4 FPE

One of only a few of the black 'sisters' published.







Lily in Transvestia #48 1967



Lily Thinks Nothing of Violating All of Susanna's Guidelines For TV'S by Wearing Pants, Bathing Suit, Bikini etc. and does it at Casa Susanna, yet.



With Dr. Benjamin  
1972



With Dr. Walter Alvarez  
1967



My First Television Show in WBI-Boston — 1968  
Bob Kennedy, Interviewer  
Dr. Wollman — Psychiatrist And Friend  
Virginia Giving A Plug

Prince became the public face of heterosexual transvestism in the late 1960s and 1970s.



My visit with Virginia in October 2006.



Virginia, 93 years old, revisiting her past in *Transvestia* #100 (1979), the last issue she edited.

I took this photograph during my October 2006 visit.