Pastiches of Cultural Performance: Framed Clippings from the Magazine *Female Mimics*, 1963-1968

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Abstract:

This article is a creative response exploring the dynamics, expressions, and tensions of gender transformation playing out in selected issues of the American cross-dressing magazine Female Mimics between 1963 and 1968. Not only is drag performance, at its core, a dialogue with transformation, the first five years of this magazine capture some dimension of the mid-20th century as a time of change for cultures of cross-dressing as performance and as lifestyle. In particular, issues from these years capture some level of the complex discourse around gender transformation as a temporary theatrical act, as a full life transition, as an object of sexual interest, and as a niche market, at a time when all of these dynamics openly co-inhabited. The textual argument is structured around a series of five original collages made of images digitally clipped from the magazine and quotes from relevant gender theory. Each collage serves to illustrate a different point: the foundations of the magazine; the trend towards sexualized commercialization; the explicit presence of transgender performers and the debates they provoked; the various spaces of joy the magazine provided for readers and artists; and a dual emphasis on the exotic and professional nature of the performers, separating them from the rest of the population. By examining the multiple meanings of transformation in Female Mimics through the transformative element of collages, this article provides a glimpse at the striking visuals of its subject matter, invites the audience to engage with the artistry of the subject, and deepens the potential for analysis in a discourse so deeply entwined with appearances.

Keywords: Transgender, queer theory, gender history, cross-dressing

Introduction

In 1963, Selbee Associates, Inc.—a small publisher on New York City's Fifth Avenue that also published a variety of erotic fiction—served as the inaugural publisher of a magazine on "The world's foremost female impersonators." It was called *Female Mimics* and sold, in its first year, for $1.25.[1] In exchange, readers received 72 pages of black and white photos of performers in various stages of (un)dress, advertisements for products ranging from "Extra Long Stockings" to books on "Sexual Masochism," international updates on the field of female impersonation, and full color photos of one or two featured performers as a center insert. Many of the performers, to modern eyes, fall into a category immediately identifiable as "drag queens," and the word "drag" does appear in the pages, especially in the context of feature stories on drag balls in New York City. Other featured performers identified themselves on-page as "transsexual," including figures such as Marie-Pierre Pruvot (stage name "Bambi"), who today self-describes as transgender. "Female impersonator" encompassed a multitude of symbols which I will be exploring in this paper.

The magazine would run in one form or another under a variety of publishers for the next few decades. The name was expanded to "Female Mimics International," or F.M.I., in 1980; the last issue I have located is Volume 29, Number 1 (issue 111) from 1999, as preserved by the Digital Transgender Archive.[2] This analysis is concerned only with the twelve issues published in the first five years of the magazine, from 1963-1968. This focus is partially to complicate a common narrative of queer historiography that paints the 1969 Stonewall Uprising as the beginning of queer history. The events of 1969 that prompted an ascendancy of gay liberation as cultural movement and political strategy were momentous, but did not emerge from nowhere. Stonewall was a product of an extremely specific cultural and political climate that was years in the making. The contents of this magazine during those antecedent years map out one intersection of some of the many ways of being gender non-conforming in mid-20th century America.

Another reason to give this period particular focus is to explore certain ways of being gender non-conforming that are less present in modern conversations. Like many other aspects

[1] Roughly £10 when accounting for inflation and converted in April 2024.
[2] *FMI Female Mimics International*, Vol. 1, 29 (MAGCORP, the Magazine Corporation of America, 1999), http://archive.org/details/fmifemalemimicsi2911unse.

of society, the topic of cross-dressing has become funneled down certain absolute paths driven by current cultural factors. For example, drag has become an acutely visible art form in recent years thanks not only to the distribution of primetime television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race,* but also to a series of anti-drag bills being loudly imposed in various regions of the United States and hotly discussed on social media.[3] These bills often reflect a broader campaign of political transphobia, adding another layer to the long and complicated conversation about what relation, exactly, drag plays to gender. Given that they are written to ban performance—in front of minors, specifically—they also invite conversation about drag's history with theater and staged production. Drag occupies a multifaceted space in queer studies and modern life, as a performance style that can be done by anyone, of any orientation, but nevertheless retains an undeniable whiff of queerness.

The issues examined in this article demonstrate wildly different reader engagements with the magazine converging in the same space. The first five years of *Female Mimics* include images of performers explicitly identifying in ways that lead me to place them today in what Susan Stryker calls the "transgender archipelago" (further discussed in collage 3).[4] They *also* include a 1965 letter from readers scolding the magazine editorial board for allowing the publication to "have become a 'hand' book for freaks, perverts, deviates, transvestities [*sic.*], lesbians, etc., which has absolutely no bearing on the professional art of Female Impersonation."[5] The letter is printed with a response from the editors expressing disappointment in the writers for "judgement passing," but the initial letter remains evidence of hostile sentiments. Another letter from a reader in 1966 thanks the editorial board for having helped his wife understand his desire to dress as a woman—where before she had only been in favor of her husband wearing women's clothes at home, she was now happy for them to go out and about in public as two ladies.[6] In contrast to that sentiment, yet another letter from a reader in 1964 congratulates the magazine for demonstrating that female impersonation is "a performance, rather than a way of life."[7] After issue 8, in 1966, the section offering reader letters appears only one more time, in issue 12. It disappears in favor of more ads and more

[3] Lucas Hildebrand, "Opinion: Policing Drag Has a Long History. There's a Reason Politicians Are at It Again," *LA Times*, April 3, 2023.
[4] Susan Stryker, "The Transgender Issue: An Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 148, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-4-2-145.
[5] The Cast of Finocchio Club, "From Our Mail Box," *Female Mimics* (Health Knowledge Inc.), Vol. 1, No. 6 (1965): 67.
[6] B.& J.O., "From Our Mail Box," *Female Mimics* (Health Knowledge Inc.), Vol. 1, No. 8 (1966): 66.
[7] Terry Taylor, "the readers always write," *Female Mimics* (Health Knowledge Inc.), Vol. 1, No. 4 (1964): 55.

photos of professionals, re-emphasizing that *Female Mimics* is principally a commercial endeavor concerned more with selling itself than providing a community space.

I provide this explanation not to lift one aspect of this magazine above another, but to briefly sketch the many dimensions of meaning involved in giving *Female Mimics* full consideration from the overlook of the present. Gender transformation in 1960s America could be considered in many ways: as a temporary theatrical act safely bounded by professionalism, as a full life transition made possible through miraculous medical intervention, as an object of fetishistic sexual interest for onlookers, as a niche commercial market to be exploited, or as a comforting expression of self to be celebrated. All of these interpretations and more existed simultaneously, if not without friction, and operated in conversation with each other over the time period under examination. I present these themes through a series of five collages I created from the text and images of the magazine itself, as well as quotes from relevant academic theory. My intentions are to center and encourage engagement with the artistry of the content, visually display the juxtaposition of the various perspectives, and to embrace that, ultimately, the conversations around gender non-conformity rest and root themselves in the question of appearance. The discussion of the theory sampled is, by necessity, brief; the nature of this project is better suited to a survey of relevant theory. Furthermore, I understand that the audience of this publication may not necessarily be familiar with the authors cited, and preferred to provide an approachable introduction rather than potentially esoteric theory.

A final note on terminology. Most of the photographic subjects appearing in these collages can no longer be located and solicited for their opinion on what identity labels accurately describe them. As the driving impetus of this project was a desire to contextualize and decenter current gender theories by highlighting conversations from the past, I have avoided projecting terms like ‘transgender’ or ‘drag queen’ onto those appearing in the magazine as a whole. Instead I have chosen to use ‘female impersonators’ as a primary descriptor of photographic subjects, as appearing in this magazine indicates that if the phrase was not any individual’s preferred identifier, it was at least accepted.

Collage 1: Entering In Esther Newton

This collage functions as an introduction to the magazine, as well as a study in contrasts. The banner across the top is clipped exactly as it appears from a two-page spread, where the left-hand page contains multiple illustrated ads for sex aids while the right, following title text reminiscent of a women's domestic magazine, offers an entirely chaste personal profile of a

single performer.[8] *Female Mimics* was a professional publication trying to reach multiple markets with different points of entry. It offered titillating photos, published reader letters that fostered personal and community connections, profiled performers identifying as transvestite or transsexual. It also played a key role in constructing a narrative that sanitised 'professional' drag performers and denied the legitimacy of cross-dressing street sex workers and other individuals who did not confine their cross-dressing to the stage.

Esther Newton documented this discriminating phenomenon in action in her doctoral research and subsequent 1969 monograph *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America.* Her ethnography of female impersonators in the Midwest serves as a landmark piece of queer scholarship and the framing theory for this collage; her definition of female impersonation, informed by years of research contemporary with my sources and summarised for potentially unfamiliar audiences, is well-suited to introduce and clarify the concept.[9] This quote is excerpted from a longer and more in-depth look at the cultures Newton was working with, and without quoting her to excess, there are a few points it is useful to directly incorporate for analysis. The first is that the terms "drag queen" and "female impersonator" co-existed, with drag queen serving as "the homosexual term for transvestite," and female impersonator as a title for professionals used "for the benefit of the straight world."[10] This is to say, both words might be technically accurate when describing the same person, but "drag queen" carried more association with being gay. The second point to incorporate is Newton's use of class analysis, and her framing of female impersonators as an "occupational group" rather than an affiliation indicative of sexual or gender identity.[11] She does include discussion of the near-universal belief among female impersonators that anyone who did female impersonation personally identified as homosexual.[12] An interview with one performer who says "he dates the girl next door and thinks she's a knock-out!" in one issue of *Female Mimics* indicates this cannot always have been the case, but the widespread belief should be acknowledged.[13]

The third point is the side of the culture of female impersonation conspicuous in its exclusion from this magazine. Newton's interviews and ethnography brought her to talk with

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[8] The article is from Vol.1, No. 12, 1968. Given the number of elements in each collage, only articles and reader letters mentioned in-text will be cited. All elements may be found in issues 1-12 as held by the Digital Transgender Archive.
[9] Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 5.
[10] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 3.
[11] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 4.
[12] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 6.
[13] Anonymous, "Randy Taylor...A Man-Sized International Star," *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 6 (1965).

"street fairies"—usually young, otherwise unemployed persons who "specialize[d] in public, confrontational deviance" and often engaged in sex work—as often as she spoke with "professional" female impersonators who currently had jobs as performers. She positioned "street pattern" impersonators as fusing their personal lives with the stigma of cross-dressing, whereas professional impersonators sought to segregate themselves from stigma by restricting cross-dressing to the stage. Numerous exchanges of insults and drawing of distinctions by informants also allowed Newton to identify the conflict between these two groups. *Female Mimics,* as a magazine, signals itself rather definitively as part of the professional impersonator faction, a topic that will be explored further in collage 5. *Female Mimics* is a magazine focused on selling an image of success to those who practice female impersonation themselves as much as it is on selling the image of tantalizing stigma to those who do not personally engage in the practice. The conflict Newton identifies is, paradoxically, only visible in its complete and total absence, and the focus reserved for successful, extensively groomed professional performers.

Collage 2: Pornographic Flesh: Audre Lorde and C. Riley Snorton

Despite wanting to culturally delineate female impersonators who were 'true performers' as unlike the street queens engaging in sex work, a significant amount of the magazine's income visibly derived from selling sex appeal. The cross-dressing content of the magazine led to it being advertised as "For Adult Readers Only," and given that it was already the kind of thing that had to be mailed in a discreet brown wrapper, it is consequently unsurprising how many of its ads are for products related to sex. There were no depictions of outright sex acts, photographed or drawn, but topless shots were a recurring element in profiles of individual performers, and every issue under examination featured photographs of participants only wearing lingerie. This is the collage with the most individual elements. Most

of them are advertisements. The pen-and-ink sketch centered in the lower third, a feminine figure in lingerie sat at a desk with a quill pen, was used to illustrate the column publishing reader letters. I used reader letters in other collages, but left them out of this one, as they don't grab attention on this point the way advertisements for products like 'Instant Pussy' do.

This collage is framed by quotes from two different authors writing on sex and gender. The upper quote is from Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."[14] This particular quote centers the contrast between Lorde's definition of the erotic, which she defines as a deeply felt power of the internal spirit of great significance to women, and the pornographic, which emphasizes sensation without feeling. Lorde's essay emphasizes the understanding of internal emotion as a way to make sense of the world, which is perhaps ironic for the collage in this project most focused on external appearances and sexualizing the other. On the other hand, perhaps the collage where the only face left unobscured is one from an advertisement is the most appropriate place to include a reminder that all of the people depicted existed outside of the images they sold, as individuals with their own feelings on the work they did.

I don't know if Lorde would have approved of this application of her quote. Her notion of the erotic deeply centers the power and spirituality inherent to women, something that they deserve to manifest outside the control of masculine-valorised logical thought. While some of these people did identify and seek to be identified as women, many did not. However, I found the image of people who would otherwise be classified as men taking time and effort and passion to move through a world as women compelling, even if many of them only confined it to the world of performance. This also seemed an appropriate place to highlight the notion of *sensation*—in this case in the sense of sensational. These photographed subjects are placed to be read as bizarre, as sexualised objects, as exotic and strange—not necessarily as people who should be understood to feel and be empathised with.

The lower quote is from scholar C. Riley Snorton's book *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity,* which focuses on the ways race has historically been (and continues to be) a crucial component of defining gender, most particularly in contexts of medicalization and transness.[15] Specifically, the quote comes from Chapter 1, "Anatomically Speaking: The

[14] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches a Book by Audre Lorde* (Crossing Press, 2007).
[15] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 52.

Gendered Flesh and the Science of Sex," where Snorton examines the unethical experimentation on enslaved Black women that birthed modern gynecology. Snorton writes in conversation with Hortense Spillers's writing on the body, which is important to consider when contemplating this particular archive.[16] In a magazine focused on the physical, the body is ever-present as an object of question—what is *real*, what is visible, what does it all mean, how does the flesh represent a man or a woman or someone meant to confuse the reader? Snorton's quote also provides a touchstone for an important element of the nature of this collage's material: sex and gender are coming into an arrangement in this magazine, as part of the mechanism that allows the eponymous *Female Mimics* to be seen as womanly is that they then become sexually available. For the models to enter and inhabit the space of imagination reserved for women in society, the flesh must become pornographic. To sustain their business, the editors of this magazine must make sure it sells itself.

This is the only collage with two different framing quotes, and therefore rather complicated, just as the subject itself is complicated. I didn't want to make it simple.

[16] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 17.

Collage 3: Transgender Questions: David Valentine

The only color in this collage is from the background shaded to evoke the transgender pride flag; the three images are black and white, matching the text. The top left corner is an excerpt from the letter sent to the magazine by the cast of a particular club of impersonators, which I quoted in the introduction to demonstrate the presence of transphobic attitudes in the landscape of female impersonation. The central image asks, over a pen-and-ink drawing of a performer in the middle of applying makeup and a long-haired wig, "Do Clothes Make the Girl?" as the drawn performer makes eye contact with a black and white photo of a smiling

woman. A superimposed headline at the bottom asks "Who Has IT?".[17] The headshot featured on this page is Bambi, who, as certain quotes around the edges explains, has undergone gender affirmation surgery and "no longer has to use the excuse of being a female impersonator to dress and act how she really feels."[18] Other text reveals that someone the audience knows as "Hans" has also made arrangements to go overseas for a sex operation, and that the editors responded to the initial accusatory letter by noting that the writers seem to be engaging in "'judgement passing,' which we at *Female Mimics,* have tried, and with great success, to overcome."[19] The editors also felt that their "honest, direct presentation of a subject once looked upon with pure disdain, has helped not hurt!".

The quotes framing this collage come from David Valentine's 2007 book *Imagining Transgender*, noting how the flexibility of "transgender" as a definition seems to frequently position transsexual as a complete definition of the category, while also folding in certain boundaries of the definition and excluding others.[20] For similar reasons, Susan Stryker has introduced the concept of an "archipelago of identities," where discrete identities people attach themselves to (e.g. transvestite, trans man, trans woman, genderqueer, non-binary) exist as individual components/islands of a broader concept/archipelago—the umbrella of 'transgender' is therefore useful but not specific.[21] The second quote notes the insistence of both many gay male drag queens and many butch lesbians that they do not belong to this category, which seemed important to emphasize in this context.

This collage is intentionally spare, not from a lack of material in the archive, but from an abundance of it. The subject of this collage is one I could perhaps best expect a modern audience to find familiar. Multiple issues of the magazine incorporated profiles of transsexual women who used their profits from performing as female impersonators in order to access medical care. Bambi serves as a useful central figure because she is one of the rare figures who can be located in the modern day, where she has since published memoirs identifying herself as transgender. She also appears in the very first issue of the magazine, but in that feature a picture of Bambi is labeled "French Fooler" and "a man!" and the referential pronouns used in the article are he, him, and his. Without the context of the later article, or her later memoirs,

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[17] "Who has IT?" *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 8 (1966): 51.
[18] *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 5 (1965): 38.
[19] "82 Club Star Hans Crystal Sails Away for a Permanent Change," *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 7 (1965): 34; Ed. J, "From Our Mail Box," *Female Mimics*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (1965): 67.
[20] David Valentine, "Imagining Transgender," in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.
[21] Stryker, "The Transgender Issue."

there would be no way to explicitly identify Bambi as trans. I wanted to avoid falling into arguing 'ah, only this woman is categorically transgender and therefore legitimate and good, making everyone else who engaged in this practice and did not identify as a woman therefore illegitimate and bad.' There's no clear dividing line that can be drawn declaring categorically which parties in this magazine were encompassed by any labels starting with 'trans' and which others were not; it was merely one path people could take to find themselves in that space.

That said, the world of female impersonation was not a monolith; those who participated were not necessarily automatically ready to have transsexual women—or lifestyle transvestites—as full and fellow members. This was a multi-faceted issue that people took different perspectives on, much as they do today. Interestingly, the magazine also documents one historical stage of an ongoing argument that those performers who medically transitioned through hormones and/or surgery were *less* legitimate, or somehow cheating at cross-dressing. The full article the cover image comes from (the same image which informs us the article was written by the co-author of *Transvestism Today)* featured many excerpts from interviews conducted with both those performers who identified as transsexual women and those who identified as men, each making arguments as to why those like them were better suited to performing.[22] With its dependence on emotionally provocative quotes, general authorial tone of doubt, and lack of any clear resolution, this article read to me as something meant to engage and inflame debate rather than offer genuine insight on how people lived their lives. While it paints an accurate picture of contemporary debates, it was impossible to incorporate to an extent that would allow full understanding in the space available. I chose to leave the bulk of it in the archive, and draw out conclusions that contrast each other instead.

[22] Carlson Wade, "Do Clothes Make the Girl?" *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 11 (1968): 43.

Collage 4: Gay Abandon: Kareem Khubchandani

This collage features a lot of what originally drew me to these magazines as archival documents. Kareem Khubchandani's book *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* covers dynamics at a range of sites, including clubs and house parties, but offers particular devotion to the subject of drag queens and drag shows. *Ishtyle*, much like Esther Newton's book published five decades earlier, collects Khubchandani's doctoral anthropology work writing an ethnography of drag queens. Unlike Newton, who kept her lesbian identity professionally closeted in order to complete her doctoral program in the 1960s, Khubchandani was an open

participant in the community he worked with.[23] In the preface to *Ishtyle*, Khubchandani takes the time to discuss how his enjoyment of watching Desi drag queens perform as a young adult led him to begin performing himself, in order to fulfill the desires and pleasures of a community after moving somewhere Desi drag queens were otherwise absent.[24] Khubchandani writes compellingly and from personal experience on the emotional weight and significance drag queens offer to their audiences. This acknowledgement of joy in connection to drag queens and "those of us who traffic in her aesthetics" was enormously resonant with a particular way of being gender-nonconforming reflected in the pages of *Female Mimics.*

Until 1967, the magazine published a selection of letters and often self-shot photos from readers in every issue. Excerpts from those letters, layered over pictures of the models that drew those readers to the magazine, make up the bulk of this collage. One of the writers identifies as a shy "girlie-boy" admiring the poise of both professional and amateur models.[25] Another, who featured in the introduction of this paper, describes how the magazine has helped his wife understand his desires to dress as a woman—and though I was unable to include most of the letter, went on to describe outings he had begun to take with his wife while presenting as a woman.[26] Another letter writer simply appreciates the Mimics for expressing joy in their work rather than just professional or financial interest.[27]

In contrast to the previous collage, which focuses on 'transgender' as a single if not specific category, this collage attempts to speak to a myriad of more nebulously defined experiences. It would be impossible to find a single word that describes all the ways people find joy and solace in this magazine's pages for affirming their desire to dress and present in ways that fall outside the norm; furthermore, it strikes me as unnecessary. The angry letter outlined in Collage 3 makes it clear that the world of female impersonation was not some magical pre-identity wonderland, but there is repeated, generous evidence that distinctions of identity are not captured by images, and therefore largely meaningless when it comes with people's ability to *identify* with what they see.

While discussions of clothing and dress today give extensive consideration to gender, there is very little commentary on casual cross-dressing, as conducted by people who still

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[23] Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2020) xv; Esther Newton, *My Butch Career: A Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 108, as cited in Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024).
[24] Khubchandani, *Ishtyle*, xvi.
[25] "Pamela," *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 12 (1968): 57.
[26] B.& J.O., *Female Mimics*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (1966): 66.
[27] "Barbara," "The readers always write," *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 5 (1965): 59.

identify with the gender they were assigned at birth but enjoy playing with their presentation. Women wearing pants has become an unquestioned norm, and to a lesser extent so has men wearing their hair long. Wearing a dress, a skirt, or make-up, however, carries such heavy connotations of femininity that the act is expected to indicate something more significant about a person's gender. Even in a person otherwise and completely seen as a man, wearing 'feminine' apparel is taken as a marker of sexuality or at the absolute least a critical personality trait.

In discussions of gender in a sexist society, the question is sometimes raised of why someone already identified by others as a man—a gender considered automatically to hold a more powerful position—would act to be identified by others as a woman, a gender considered automatically to hold a less powerful position. This collage is a rebuttal to the very premise of that question. For the individuals in these pictures, and the ones who wrote in to the magazine to record and share their appreciation, the question of power had long since been abandoned. Even for those who did not consider themselves women, dressing in drag was a matter of joy.

Collage 5: Professional Exotics: Jules Gill-Peterson

The final theme of the magazine I want to highlight is the intertwining of two particular strategies *Female Mimics* used to frame its artists. The first strategy is a strict insistence on female impersonation being difficult, intense work. An emphasis on hard work intertwines with the professionalism which emerged as a theme in Newton's research discussed in Collage 1, where certain female impersonators were determined to separate themselves from street sex workers or lifestyle transvestites. The second strategy is an echo of Collage 2's displayed attraction to the explicit and exotic. While it may seem incompatible with the first strategy's

intense focus on professional work as a form of respectability, the two strategies anchor and reinforce each other such that an analysis benefits from simultaneous examination.

The central quote here is from "Queens of the Gay World," the third chapter of Jules Gill-Peterson's monograph *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*.[28] Gill-Peterson's book examines specific historical situations where pursuit of control led agendas of colonial enforcement, repression of sex work, and policing of public spaces to make trans femininity and those who practiced it targets of violence. One site of examination is the queer social scene in the 1960s and 1970s, where the status of drag queens declined sharply as members with more social and political capital saw fit to sacrifice gender nonconformity in their own quest for respectability. The issues examined from *Female Mimics* predate this time period, but the tensions driving an impetus to divide are already visible. The three quotes on hard work in the upper right are taken from three separate issues. Even for the individuals who are secure enough in their position as performers to command work in major metropolitan areas and publicise in a commercial magazine, the almost compulsive reiteration of professionalism, hard work, and a masculine grit betrays a level of insecurity and fear. Laws against cross-dressing had been on the books in many US municipalities for more than half a century.[29] *Female Mimics* filled a niche that was only available because it stood alone, and it had already begun to aspire to the same respectability that would be weaponised against any participants.

This self-conscious sense of rarity becomes visible in the magazine's emphasis on the exotic. Between issue No. 4 and issue No. 5, *Female Mimics* passed from one small publisher putting out raunchy pulps and magazines to another, and its precarious success depended on the norms of society that made their non-normative models all the more thrilling in their strangeness. The most common format for a feature on a single performer was to photograph them throughout their entire changing and makeup routine, a sequence that could be as tantalizing for voyeurs as it was instructive for aspiring performers. The text accompanying such articles alternately serves both purposes; in one issue challenging the viewers almost coquettishly to imagine entering the backstage while this performer was getting dressed, in the next providing insight into the exact process of applying makeup.[30] As Gill-Peterson says, the

[28] Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*.
[29] Kate Redburn, "Before Equal Protection: The Fall of Cross-Dressing Bans and the Transgender Legal Movement, 1963–86," *Law and History Review* 40, no. 4 (November 2022): 681.
[30] *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1963; *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 3 (1963).

forbidden territory of effeminacy was "carefully managed and monetized"—and furthermore, exoticised, in the name of sensual appeal.[31]

Frequently, anything that could play an exotic flavor up was emphasized. Parisian performers provided "exotic amusements."[32] Performer Emilio Tellez was featured as a "Puerto Rican Peach."[33] Joey Baker from the West Indies is introduced as "Exotic Joey Baker."[34] Certainly not all international performers and/or performers of color were so explicitly placed in the category of 'desirable Other'; for one thing, they appeared too often to be very far removed from the norm. In terms of the distribution of photographic subjects across formality, flamboyance, race, and gender identity, I have chosen to offer a range of presentations in these collages rather than an average, but a wide range was available. The uniting factor of those who received individual profiles remained, once again, this professionalism and commitment to demonstrating that they were hard-working performers who should be taken seriously—even if, ultimately, the exoticism they sold saw them held at the same remove from society as the street queens they personally attempted to disbar.

Conclusion

In 1963, construction on the Berlin Wall entered its second year, six Buddhist monks committed self-immolation in protest of the South Vietnamese government, the first full color television program in the world was broadcast in Mexico, and Catholic services were still universally conducted in Latin. And the first issue of *Female Mimics* was published to uplift an entertainment style that "has suffered from obscurity...because one picture is better than 100 words."[35] Six decades ago, the world we live in looked very different, a truism only emphasized by the premiere editorial of *Female Mimics* lamenting that female impersonation is the only kind of entertainment not shown in television or movies. For all that history serves to help us make human connections with the past, it's important to remember that it would be irresponsible to claim full understanding of the world through which the subjects of these photographs moved. With that said, I would like to return to the metaphor of using the

[31] Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*.
[32] *Female Mimics,* Vol 1, No. 2 (1963): 58.
[33] *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 5 (1965): 13.
[34] *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 9 (1967): 27.
[35] "Let Us Entertain You!" *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1963): 5.

magazine *Female Mimics* as a map of the crossings of some of the many ways of being gender non-conforming in mid-century America.

While the material of this magazine can make an important contribution to the cartography of being gender-nonconforming, it is important to remember the map is not the territory. *Female Mimics* is not a complete picture of anything. Esther Newton's street fairies are not visible in the pages of this magazine. Nor are those who were attacked for cross-dressing, or those who lost jobs, housing, and support because they were unable or unwilling to dress as society expected them to. It isn't even a picture of the full reality of being a female impersonator, as an enterprise that strives to entertain will understandably leave out negativity where possible. While acknowledging that this archive is prone to gaps even when undistilled, what *can* be said about the map it offers?

Fundamentally, the landscape it shows us is one of convergences, overlaps, and contrasts. The magazine's emphasis on images maintained a level of flexibility in fostering potential reader connections. There were any number of people who were interested in adopting exaggerated modes of femininity using the photographs and techniques of the performers on display as a guide for how to relate to the world. Not all of them were otherwise viewed as men—editorial remarks affirm the validity of women taking up the art of female impersonation, just as there are people assigned female at birth who perform as drag queens today.[36] There was plenty of sexual provocation: lingerie shots, provocative color spreads, sexual advertisements, and written erotica. Undoubtedly some of the models featured found sexual pleasure in their involvement with the magazine, just as there were undoubtedly readers whose only interaction with female impersonation was as a source of titillation. Other readers submitted entirely chaste photos of themselves standing in their living rooms wearing outfits their accompanying letters said they weren't comfortable taking out in public. Transsexual performers shared page space with those who unabashedly declared themselves entirely masculine men with a niche artistic hobby. The idea of men wearing women's clothing was treated in turn as strange and exotic and personally fulfilling and meaningful. All of these ways of being took place in the same space of imagination provided by this magazine; many of them took place in the same physical spaces, sharing stages at clubs and dance floors at ballrooms.

Ways of being gender non-conforming, various interpretations and claims on what it meant to be a female impersonator, did not just run parallel to each other. They overlapped,

[36] Ed., "The readers always write," *Female Mimics,* Vol. 1, No. 5 (1965): 5.

intertwined, and quite often deliberately clashed, defining their positions by opposition and contrast. ‘Female Impersonator’ as an identification, like the word ‘transgender,’ serves a useful but nonspecific function. It indicates an alignment with a particular tradition without providing any detailed information on an individual’s approach, feelings, or choices. In a sense, the act of transformation embodied in the pages of *Female Mimics* was itself in constant flux, fluidly changing forms depending on who was enacting it. Like a river undergoing avulsion or mountain paths rebuilt around rockfalls, this was a feature of this landscape, not a flaw. Even when an interest in queer history derives from a desire to draw parallels between the past and the present, that history should not be simplified. The full scope of life embodied in *Female Mimics* demonstrates that demanding singularity of expression from a past as rich and complicated as our present is equally as unjust as pretending that past does not exist.

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