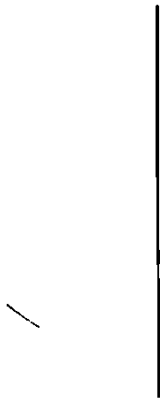
Chapter 9



Is Paris Burning?

There was a time in my life when I liked to dress up as a male and go out into the world. It was a form of ritual, of play. It was also about power. To cross-dress as a woman in patriarchy—then, more so than now—was also to symbolically cross from the world of powerlessness into a world of privilege. It was the ultimate, intimate, voyeuristic gesture. Searching old journals for passages documenting that time, I found this paragraph:

> She pleaded with him, "Just once, well every now and then, I just want us to be boys together. I want to dress like you and go out and make the world look at us differently, make them wonder about us, make them stare and ask those silly questions like is he a woman dressed up like a man, is he an older black gay man with his effeminate boy/girl lover flaunting same-sex love out in the open. Don't worry I'll take it all very seriously, I want to let them laugh at you. I'll make it real, keep them guessing, do it in such a way that they will never know for sure. Don't worry when we come home I will be a girl for you again but for now I want us to be boys together."

Cross-dressing, appearing in drag, transvestism, and transsexualism emerge in a context where the notion of subjectivity is challenged, where identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, change. Long before there was ever a contemporary feminist movement, the sites of these experiences were subversive places where gender norms were questioned and challenged.

Within white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy the experience of men dressing as women, appearing in drag, has always been regarded by the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze as a sign that one is symbolically crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness. Just to look at the many negative ways the word "drag" is defined reconnects this label to an experience that is seen as burdensome, as retrograde and retrogressive. To choose to appear as "female" when one is "male" is always constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule. Given this cultural backdrop, it is not surprising that many black comedians appearing on television screens for the first time included as part of their acts impersonations of black women. The black woman depicted was usually held up as an object of ridicule, scorn, hatred (representing the "female" image everyone was allowed to laugh at and show contempt for). Often the moment when a black male comedian appeared in drag was the most successful segment of a given comedian's act (for example, Flip Wilson, Redd Foxx, or Eddie Murphy).

I used to wonder if the sexual stereotype of black men as overly sexual, manly, as "rapists," allowed black males to cross this gendered boundary more easily than white men without having to fear that they would be seen as possibly gay or transvestites. As a young black female, I found these images to be disempowering. They seemed to both allow black males to give public expression to a general misogyny, as well as to a more specific hatred and contempt toward black woman. Growing up in a world where black women were, and still are, the objects of extreme abuse, scorn, and ridicule, I felt these impersonations were aimed at reinforcing everyone's power over us. In retrospect, I can see that the black male in drag was also a disempowering image of black masculinity. Appearing as a "woman" within a sexist, racist media was a way to become in "play" that "castrated" silly childlike black male that racist white patriarchy was comfortable having as an image in their homes. These televised images of black men in drag were never subversive; they helped sustain sexism and racism.

It came as no surprise to me that Catherine Clement in her book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* would include a section about black men and the way their representation in opera did not allow her to neatly separate the world into gendered polarities where men and women occupied distinctly different social spaces and were "two antagonistic halves, one persecuting the other since before the dawn of time." Looking critically at images of black men in operas she found that they were most often portrayed as victims:

> Eve is undone as a woman, endlessly bruised, endlessly dying and coming back to life to die even better. But now I begin to remember hearing figures of betrayed, wounded men; men who have women's troubles happen to them; men who have the status of Eve, as if they had lost their innate Adam. These men die like heroines; down on the ground they cry and moan, they lament. And like heroines they are surrounded by real men, veritable Adams who have cast them down. They partake of femininity: excluded, marked by some initial strangeness. They are doomed to their undoing.

Many heterosexual black men in white supremacist patriarchal culture have acted as though the primary "evil" of racism has been the refusal of the dominant culture to allow them full access to patriarchal power, so that in sexist terms they are compelled to inhabit a sphere of powerlessness, deemed "feminine," hence they have perceived themselves as emasculated. To the extent that black men accept a white supremacist sexist representation of themselves as castrated, without phallic power, and therefore pseudo-females, they will need to overly assert a phallic misogynist masculinity, one rooted in contempt for the female. Much black male homophobia is rooted in the desire to eschew connection with all things deemed "feminine" and that would, of course, include black gay men. A contemporary black comedian like Eddie Murphy "proves" his phallic power by daring to publicly ridicule women and gays. His days of appearing in drag are over. Indeed it is the drag queen of his misogynist imagination that is most often the image of black gay culture he evokes and subjects to comic homophobic assault—one that audiences collude in perpetuating.

For black males to take appearing in drag seriously, be they gay or straight, is to oppose a heterosexist representation of black manhood. Gender bending and blending on the part of black males has always been a critique of phallocentric masculinity in traditional black experience. Yet the subversive power of those images is radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the "feminine" that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender, that is to say when the idealized notion of the female/feminine is really a sexist idealization of white womanhood. This is brutally evident in Jennie Livingston's new film *Paris Is Burning*. Within the world of the black gay drag ball culture she depicts, the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness. What viewers witness is not black

men longing to impersonate or even to become like "real" black women but their obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is white. Called out in the film by Dorian Carey, who names it by saying no black drag queen of his day wanted to be Lena Horne, he makes it clear that the femininity most sought after, most adored, was that perceived to be the exclusive property of white womanhood. When we see visual representations of womanhood in the film (images torn from magazines and posted on walls in living space) they are, with rare exceptions, of white women. Significantly, the fixation on becoming as much like a white female as possible implicitly evokes a connection to a figure never visible in this film: that of the white male patriarch. And yet if the class, race, and gender aspirations expressed by the drag queens who share their deepest dreams is always the longing to be in the position of the ruling-class woman then that means there is also the desire to act in partnership with the ruling-class white male.

This combination of class and race longing that privileges the "femininity" of the ruling-class white woman, adored and kept, shrouded in luxury, does not imply a critique of patriarchy. Often it is assumed that the gay male, and most specifically the "queen," is both anti-phallocentric and anti-patriarchal. Marilyn Frye's essay, "Lesbian Feminism and Gay Rights," remains one of the most useful critical debunkings of this myth. Writing in *The Politics of Reality,* Frye comments:

> One of things which persuades the straight world that gay men are not really men is the effeminacy of style of some gay men and the gay institution of the impersonation of women, both of which are associated in the popular mind with male homosexuality. But as I read it, gay men's effeminacy and donning of feminine apparel displays no love of or identification with women or the womanly. For the most part, this femininity is affected and is characterized by theatrical exaggeration. It is a casual and cynical mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trapping of oppression, but it is also a kind of play, a toying with that which is taboo...What gay male affectation of femininity seems to be is a serious sport in which men may exercise their power and control over the feminine, much as in other sports...But the mastery of the feminine is not feminine. It is masculine...

Any viewer of *Paris is Burning* can neither deny the way in which its contemporary drag balls have the aura of sports events, aggressive competitions, one team (in this case "house") competing against another etc., nor ignore the way in which the male "gaze" in the audience is

directed at participants in a manner akin to the objectifying phallic stare straight men direct at "feminine" women daily in public spaces. *Paris is Burning* is a film that many audiences assume is inherently oppositional because of its subject matter and the identity of the filmmaker. Yet the film's politics of race, gender, and class are played out in ways that are both progressive and reactionary.

When I first heard that there was this new documentary film about black gay men, drag queens, and drag balls I was fascinated by the title. It evoked images of the real Paris on fire, of the death and destruction of a dominating white western civilization and culture, an end to oppressive Eurocentrism and white supremacy. This fantasy not only gave me a sustained sense of pleasure, it stood between me and the unlikely reality that a young white filmmaker, offering a progressive vision of "blackness" from the standpoint of "whiteness," would receive the positive press accorded Livingston and her film. Watching *Paris is Burning*, I began to think that the many yuppie-looking, straight-acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience were there because the film in no way interrogates "whiteness." These folks left the film saying it was "amazing," "marvelous," "incredibly funny," worthy of statements like, "Didn't you just love it?" And no, I didn't just love it. For in many ways the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized black people (in this case black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit. The "we" evoked here is all of us, black people/people of color, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness.

The whiteness celebrated in *Paris is Burning* is not just any old brand of whiteness but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself—its way of life—as the only meaningful life there is. What could be more reassuring to a white public fearful that marginalized disenfranchised black folks might rise any day now and make revolutionary black liberation struggle a reality than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited, black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure. Indeed it is the very "pleasure" that so many white viewers with class privilege experience when watching

this film that has acted to censor dissenting voices who find the film and its reception critically problematic.

In Vincent Canby's review of the film in the *New York Times* he begins by quoting the words of a black father to his homosexual son. The father shares that it is difficult for black men to survive in a racist society and that "if you're black and male and gay, you have to be stronger than you can imagine." Beginning his overwhelmingly positive review with the words of a straight black father, Canby implies that the film in some way documents such strength, is a portrait of black gay pride. Yet he in no way indicates ways this pride and power are evident in the work. Like most reviewers of the film, what he finds most compelling is the pageantry of the drag balls. He uses no language identifying race and class perspectives when suggesting at the end of his piece that behind the role-playing "there is also a terrible sadness in the testimony." Canby does not identify fully the sources of this sadness; instead he states, "The queens knock themselves out to imitate the members of a society that will not have them." This makes it appear that the politics of ruling-class white culture are solely social and not political, solely "aesthetic" questions of choice and desire rather than expressions of power and privilege. Canby does not tell readers that much of the tragedy and sadness of this film is evoked by the willingness of black gay men to knock themselves out imitating a ruling-class culture and power elite that is one of the primary agents of their oppression and exploitation. Ironically, the very "fantasies" evoked emerge from the colonizing context, and while marginalized people often appropriate and subvert aspects of the dominant culture, *Paris is Burning* does not forcefully suggest that such a process is taking place.

Livingston's film is presented as though it is a politically neutral documentary providing a candid, even celebratory, look at black drag balls. And it is precisely the mood of celebration that masks the extent to which the balls are not necessarily radical expressions of subversive imagination at work undermining and challenging the *status quo*. Much of the film's focus on pageantry takes the ritual of the black drag ball and makes it spectacle. Ritual is that ceremonial act that carries with it meaning and significance beyond what appears, while spectacle functions primarily as entertaining dramatic display. Those of us who have grown up in a segregated black setting where we participated in diverse pageants and rituals know that those elements of a given ritual that are empowering and subversive may not be readily visible to an outsider looking in. Hence it is easy for white observers to depict black rituals as spectacle.

Jennie Livingston approaches her subject matter as an outsider looking in. Since her presence as white woman/lesbian filmmaker is "absent" from *Paris is Burning* it is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay "natives" and not recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston. By cinematically masking this reality (we hear her ask questions but never see her), Livingston does not oppose the way hegemonic whiteness "represents" blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counter-hegemonic. By shooting the film using a conventional approach to documentary and not making clear how her standpoint breaks with this tradition, Livingston assumes a privileged location of "innocence." She is represented both in interviews and reviews as the tender-hearted, mild-mannered, virtuous white woman daring to venture into a contemporary "heart of darkness" to bring back knowledge of the natives.

A review in the *New Yorker* declares (with no argument to substantiate the assertion) that "the movie is a sympathetic observation of a specialized, private world." An interview with Livingston in *Outweek* is titled "Pose, She Said" and we are told in the preface that she "discovered the Ball world by chance." Livingston does not discuss her interest and fascination with black gay subculture. She is not asked to speak about what knowledge, information, or lived understanding of black culture and history she possessed that provided a background for her work or to explain what vision of black life she hoped to convey and to whom. Can anyone imagine that a black woman lesbian would make a film about white gay subculture and not be asked these questions? Livingston is asked in the *Outweek* interview, "How did you build up the kind of trust where people are so open to talking about their personal experiences?" She never answers this question. Instead she suggests that she gains her "credibility" by the intensity of her spectatorship, adding, "I also targeted people who were articulate, who had stuff they wanted to say and were very happy that anyone wanted to listen." Avoiding the difficult questions underlying what it means to be a white person in a white supremacist society creating a film about any aspect of black life, Livingston responds to the question, "Didn't the fact that you're a white lesbian going into a world of Black queens and street kids make that [the interview process] difficult?" by implicitly evoking a shallow sense of universal connection. She responds, "If you know someone over a period of two years, and they still retain their sex and their race, you've got to be a pretty sexist, racist person." Yet it

is precisely the race, sex, and sexual practices of black men who are filmed that is the exploited subject matter.

So far I have read no interviews where Livingston discusses the issue of appropriation. And even though she is openly critical of Madonna, she does not convey how her work differs from Madonna's appropriation of black experience. To some extent it is precisely the recognition by mass culture that aspects of black life, like "voguing," fascinate white audiences that creates a market for both Madonna's product and Livingston's. Unfortunately, Livingston's comments about *Paris is Burning* do not convey serious thought about either the political and aesthetic implications of her choice as a white woman focusing on an aspect of black life and culture or the way racism might shape and inform how she would interpret black experience on the screen. Reviewers like Georgia Brown in the *Village Voice* who suggest that Livingston's whiteness is "a fact of nature that didn't hinder her research" collude in the denial of the way whiteness informs her perspective and standpoint. To say, as Livingston does, "I certainly don't have the final word on the gay black experience. I'd love for a black director to have made this film" is to oversimplify the issue and to absolve her of responsibility and accountability for progressive critical reflection and it implicitly suggests that there would be no difference between her work and that of a black director. Underlying this apparently self-effacing comment is cultural arrogance, for she implies not only that she has cornered the market on the subject matter but that being able to make films is a question of personal choice, like she just "discovered" the "raw material" before a black director did. Her comments are disturbing because they reveal so little awareness of the politics that undergird any commodification of "blackness" in this society.

Had Livingston approached her subject with greater awareness of the way white supremacy shapes cultural production—determining not only what representations of blackness are deemed acceptable, marketable, as well worthy of seeing—perhaps the film would not so easily have turned the black drag ball into a spectacle for the entertainment of those presumed to be on the outside of this experience looking in. So much of what is expressed in the film has to do with questions of power and privilege and the way racism impedes black progress (and certainly the class aspirations of the black gay subculture depicted do not differ from those of other poor and underclass black communities). Here, the supposedly "outsider" position is primarily located in the experience of whiteness. Livingston appears unwilling to interrogate the way assuming the position of outsider looking in, as well as

interpreter, can, and often does, pervert and distort one's perspective. Her ability to assume such a position without rigorous interrogation of intent is rooted in the politics of race and racism. Patricia Williams critiques the white assumption of a "neutral" gaze in her essay "Teleology on the Rocks" included in her new book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Describing taking a walking tour of Harlem with a group of white folks, she recalls the guide telling them they might "get to see some services" since "Easter Sunday in Harlem is quite a show." William's critical observations are relevant to any discussion of *Paris is Burning:*

> What astonished me was that no one had asked the churches if they wanted to be stared at like living museums. I wondered what would happen if a group of blue-jeaned blacks were to walk uninvited into a synagogue on Passover or St. Anthony's of Padua during high mass—just to peer, not pray. My feeling is that such activity would be seen as disrespectful, at the very least. Yet the aspect of disrespect, intrusion, seemed irrelevant to this well-educated, affable group of people. They deflected my observation with comments like "We just want to look," "No one will mind," and "There's no harm intended." As well-intentioned as they were, I was left with the impression that no one existed for them who could not be governed by their intentions. While acknowledging the lack of apparent malice in this behavior, I can't help thinking that it is a liability as much as a luxury to live without interaction. To live so completely impervious to one's own impact on others is a fragile privilege, which over time relies not simply on the willingness but on the inability of others—in this case blacks—to make their displeasure heard.

This insightful critique came to mind as I reflected on why whites could so outspokenly make their pleasure in this film heard and the many black viewers who express discontent, raising critical questions about how the film was made, is seen, and is talked about, who have not named their displeasure publicly. Too many reviewers and interviewers assume not only that there is no need to raise pressing critical questions about Livingston's film, but act as though she somehow did this marginalized black gay subculture a favor by bringing their experience to a wider public. Such a stance obscures the substantial rewards she has received for this work. Since so many of the black gay men in the film express the desire to be big stars, it is easy to place Livingston in the role of benefactor, offering these "poor black souls" a way to realize their dreams. But it is this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity

for the white consumer appetite that makes it possible for blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways, and for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of blacks. Just as white cultural imperialism informed and affirmed the adventurous journeys of colonizing whites into the countries and cultures of "dark others," it allows white audiences to applaud representations of black culture, if they are satisfied with the images and habits of being represented.

Watching the film with a black woman friend, we were disturbed by the extent to which white folks around us were "entertained" and "pleasured" by scenes we viewed as sad and at times tragic. Often individuals laughed at personal testimony about hardship, pain, loneliness. Several times I yelled out in the dark: "What is so funny about this scene? Why are you laughing?" The laughter was never innocent. Instead it undermined the seriousness of the film, keeping it always on the level of spectacle. And much of the film helped make this possible. Moments of pain and sadness were quickly covered up by dramatic scenes from drag balls, as though there were two competing cinematic narratives, one displaying the pageantry of the drag ball and the other reflecting on the lives of participants and value of the fantasy. This second narrative was literally hard to hear because the laughter often drowned it out, just as the sustained focus on elaborate displays at balls diffused the power of the more serious critical narrative. Any audience hoping to be entertained would not be as interested in the true life stories and testimonies narrated. Much of the individual testimony makes it appear that the characters are estranged from any community beyond themselves. Families, friends, etc., are not shown, which adds to the representation of these black gay men as cut off, living on the edge.

It is useful to compare the portraits of their lives in *Paris is Burning* with those depicted in Marlon Riggs' compelling film *Tongues Untied*. At no point in Livingston's film are the men asked to speak about their connections to a world of family and community beyond the drag ball. The cinematic narrative makes the ball the center of their lives. And yet who determines this? Is this the way the black men view their reality or is this the reality Livingston constructs? Certainly the degree to which black men in this gay subculture are portrayed as cut off from a "real" world heightens the emphasis on fantasy, and indeed gives *Paris is Burning* its tragic edge. That tragedy is made explicit when we are told that the fair-skinned Venus has been murdered, and yet there is no mourning of him/her in the film, no intense focus on the

sadness of this murder. Having served the purpose of "spectacle" the film abandons him/her. The audience does not see Venus after the murder. There are no scenes of grief. To put it crassly, her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining.

For those of us who did not come to this film as voyeurs of black gay subculture, it is Dorian Carey's moving testimony throughout the film that makes *Paris is Burning* a memorable experience. Carey is both historian and cultural critic in the film. He explains how the balls enabled marginalized black gay queens to empower both participants and audience. It is Carey who talks about the significance of the "star" in the life of gay black men who are queens. In a manner similar to critic Richard Dyer in his work *Heavenly Bodies,* Carey tells viewers that the desire for stardom is an expression of the longing to realize the dream of autonomous stellar individualism. Reminding readers that the idea of the individual continues to be a major image of what it means to live in a democratic world, Dyer writes:

> Capitalism justifies itself on the basis of the freedom (separateness) of anyone to make money, sell their labor how they will, to be able to express opinions and get them heard (regardless of wealth or social position). The openness of society is assumed by the way that we are addressed as individuals—as consumers (each freely choosing to buy, or watch, what we want), as legal subjects (equally responsible before the law), as political subjects (able to make up our minds who is to run society). Thus even while the notion of the individual is assailed on all sides, it is a necessary fiction for the reproduction of the kind of society we live in...Stars articulate these ideas of personhood.

This is precisely the notion of stardom Carey articulates. He emphasizes the way consumer capitalism undermines the subversive power of the drag balls, subordinating ritual to spectacle, removing the will to display unique imaginative costumes and the purchased image. Carey speaks profoundly about the redemptive power of the imagination in black life, that drag balls were traditionally a place where the aesthetics of the image in relation to black gay life could be explored with complexity and grace.

Carey extols the significance of fantasy even as he critiques the use of fantasy to escape reality. Analyzing the place of fantasy in black gay subculture, he links that experience to the longing for stardom that is so pervasive in this society. Refusing to allow the "queen" to be Othered, he conveys the message that in all of us resides that longing to transcend the boundaries of self, to be glorified. Speaking about the

importance of drag queens in a recent interview in *Afterimage*, Marlon Riggs suggests that the queen personifies the longing everyone has for love and recognition. Seeing in drag queens "a desire, a very visceral need to be loved, as well as a sense of the abject loneliness of life where nobody loves you," Riggs contends "this image is real for anybody who has been in the bottom spot where they've been rejected by everybody and loved by nobody." Echoing Carey, Riggs declares: "What's real for them is the realization that you have to learn to love yourself." Carey stresses that one can only learn to love the self when one breaks through illusion and faces reality, not by escaping into fantasy. Emphasizing that the point is not to give us fantasy but to recognize its limitations, he acknowledges that one must distinguish the place of fantasy in ritualized play from the use of fantasy as a means of escape. Unlike Pepper Labeija who constructs a mythic world to inhabit, making this his private reality, Carey encourages using the imagination creatively to enhance one's capacity to live more fully in a world beyond fantasy.

Despite the profound impact he makes, what Riggs would call "a visual icon of the drag queen with a very dignified humanity," Carey's message, if often muted, is overshadowed by spectacle. It is hard for viewers to really hear this message. By critiquing absorption in fantasy and naming the myriad ways pain and suffering inform any process of self-actualization, Carey's message mediates between the viewer who longs to voyeuristicly escape into film, to vicariously inhabit that lived space on the edge, by exposing the sham, by challenging all of us to confront reality. James Baldwin makes the point in *The Fire Next Time* that "people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are." Without being sentimental about suffering, Dorian Carey urges all of us to break through denial, through the longing for an illusory star identity, so that we can confront and accept ourselves as we really are—only then can fantasy, ritual, be a site of seduction, passion, and play where the self is truly recognized, loved, and never abandoned or betrayed.