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TELL ME **LIES**, TELL ME SWEET LITTLE **LIES**. TELL ME **LIES**, TELL ME SWEET LITTLE

ARTESANIA

ON HIGH HEELS, ART THAT HEALS

BY FRANCISCO IBANEZ

"The stage is hers, but she is not yet ready. He knows his audience awaits. What will she say? This queer, this queen, this radical black sissy-fag won't shut up. Of course, Miss Girl will have to read somebody; that's part of the performance we all expect. But can she transcend the well-rehearsed roles she and her audience (sister and fellow performers yourselves) so naturally slip into? Can

I/you transcend our mutual masks – the easy, witty, critical rhetoric with which we so deftly camouflage our deeper mixed emotions, ambivalences, aversions, secrets?"

– "Unleash the Queen."
Marlon T. Riggs

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photo by author

doing drag is *artesanía* which in Spanish means decorative art such as quilting, crossstitching, or modeling clay. Doing drag is preparing for a self-indulgent masquerade the way thousands of Brazilians prepare all year long to let loose and flaunt their costumes during the carnival. My struggle against Kaposi's Sarcoma, its disfiguring effects and devastating personal toll have made me think about the reasons that make us clothe and paint ourselves and about the liberation and healing of doing drag. Doing drag is autobiographical: take Holly Woodlawn's *A Low Life in High Heels* (1991) and RuPaul's *Lettin' it all Hang Out* (1995) as two cases which might not be exemplary of great literature but can be seen as a form of testimony. RuPaul says: "I speak for the individual. For anyone out there who's ever had a dream... I'm about the politics of the soul. I transcend the gay community. I speak to everyone with pain in their heart. I am here for all of them."

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, Shoshana Felman offers the following definition: "In the testimony, language is in process and on trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantial significance." Drag queens, to give Felman's insight specificity, have become witnesses to the HIV plague even more so than their antithesis (and mirror effect), the leather man. But, not all of the scene is romantic and profound. In fact doing drag is above all caustic fun; it employs the tools of the desperate: sarcasm and irony.

The persona of the drag queen coyly resists only being the object of inevitable close-ups: Where's the dick? What is it... a man or a woman? We are not men, but we are not women either, and sure as hell we are not angels. In *To Wong Foo* one of the final lines delivered by Stockard Channing is, "I don't think of you as a man, I don't think of you as a woman either, I think of you as an angel" to which Swayze responds "That's healthy." I can hear the emasculating chop-chop of Hollywood scissors from miles away. Paglia, a suspect advocate for the Other, spits out:

My model of dualism is the drag queen, who negotiates between sexual personae, day by day. Queens are "fierce" in every sense. Masters of aggressive, bawdy speech, they know the street and its dangers and fight it out without running to authority figures, who would hardly be sympathetic. Queens, unlike feminists, know that woman is dominatrix of the universe. They take on supernatural energy, when ritualistically donning their opulent costume, the historical regalia of woman's power. Prostitute and drag queen are



warriors who offer a pagan challenge to bourgeois gentility, now stultifying modern life from corporate boardrooms to academia to suburban shopping malls.

When I do drag shows I introduce myself as *Clarita Cruz-Montt*, my alter ego, and explain how it feels to be that way. I invite the audience to bring out the drag queen in each and everyone of them, none of this inner-child crap. Clarita is a pastiche of Latina divas: Eva Perón (the political power), María Félix (the silver screen

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halo, Lola Flores (the feline body) and Celia Cruz (the voice and the rhythm). Drag is a prêt-à-porter identity that is not without risks. It is bound to offend sensibilities camouflaged in family values and by concerned-citizen overtones. At this point drag queens get their feathers ruffled and things are no longer the way Za-Za describes them in "La Cage Aux Folles": Marabú and Shalimar.

Go and occupy your place on the witness stand, you tramp! First, there is the minor charges of vulgarity that "can be enjoyed dispassionately" because, John Bayley has written, it has little to do with the spectators and does not demand anything "except our broadmindedness, our humanity, our readiness to be pleased." Such charges are forever slapped on us like bad mascara. Pardon me while I play the grand piano.

In "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag" (*Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*), Carole-Anne Tyler offers a rigorous academic critique that still doesn't articulate drag's performative power. She acknowledges that internalised homophobia of embarrassed "straight acting, straight looking" gay men who want to distance themselves from the stigma of promiscuity, be it sexual or symbolic, and she announces that "camp has been rehabilitated with a vengeance." Female impersonation, she writes, is progressive, "partly because of a long-standing link between femininity and masquerade in psychoanalysis... and partly because femininity, unlike masculinity, is thought to involve non-phallogocentric ways of relating to the body, to language, to desire and to others." Doing drag is linked with gender confusion (you say dysphoria, I say euphoria, you say tomato...); it is also connected to the practice of whites in blackface in minstrel shows. A representation of the feminine it sustains "phallic identities by figuring the lack man repudiates in himself through the regressive defence mechanisms of projection, sadism, voyeurism, and fetishism." Drag for Tyler is an example of "the gynophobic/misogynist representations of women," and "self-dispossession as castration." Tyler concludes

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that "Camp (like mimicry) functions complexly by dragging in many differences at once that are all too easily articulated with phallic narcissism in a symbolic which is really a white, bourgeois, and masculine fetishistic imaginary."

A plebeian question lingers: so what? Once again, theory doesn't meet practice. I say drag queens are a mockery of "normal" men as much as of women. Some performers choose to be misogynist and aggressive and I don't justify that. I understand that if one is evidently queer, one also has to be defensive (and offensive) if one wants to keep one's ass intact. Drag queens play up the absurd, ambiguous and contradictory in our lives. They are a jukebox of interplaying motives, assumptions and stereotypes; they stir up our closeted contradictions.

The exuberant public procession of queens reminds me of Catholic pilgrimages with strong working class *morenos* carrying *La Virgen del Carmen* (in Chile), *de Guadalupe* (in Mexico) or *del Cobre* (in Cuba) on their strong working class shoulders (now, that is a fantasy, isn't it?). In Latin America the drag queen embodies an eerie aspect of the virgin/whore duality, one of our cherished cultural themes. Send in the clowns. The drag queen enters into our North American public imaginary with her usual flair, sure of her lines, in different cinematic vehicles such as Almodovar's *High Heels*, Divine's *Pink Flamingos*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *The Crying Game*, and *Farewell my Concubine*, in plays such as *M Butterfly* and *The Torch Song Trilogy*, in documentaries such as *Paris is Burning* and *Wigstock*, in Saunder's *Absolutely Fabulous*, in *The Dame Edna Experience*, in novels such as Puig's *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and in the public works of San Francisco's own Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. A gallery of drag queen icons should include people as disparate as Boy George and Liz Taylor; beware, we are everywhere. However, watch out; straight boys have smartened up and they have clued in that the 90s sensitive guy, single father, geeky type is "in." They are getting the drag queen roles in movies like *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. The film, sporting a "multicultural" cast of Swayze, Snipes and Leguizamo, is likely to be criticized for being homophobic and coopting one aspect of gay culture. I think it is not relevant enough to stand any accusation. It is one more example of fancy packaging and no content. However, the question remains as to why these stereotypical aspects of male queer culture still mesmerise us. Have you noticed the increase in the number of funny kisses on the mouth butch buddies are giving each other on camera? Suddenly straight boys are open-minded (Dan, Roseanne's wife, is getting there); some of us are not amused, particularly if we are familiar with closets. We know they had it in them to begin with (check

the soccer games and other male spectacles). I wonder, though, where the baseball bat is hidden.

You would be, nonetheless, flummoxed by the ranging repertoire of desires that drag queens have. The louder the queen the bigger the surprise!! Drag insolently interrupts the flow of normality; look what the cat

dragged in! It reminds us that hell on earth is just around the corner: outbreaks, violences, viruses. Drag queens seem to be the catalysts for a volatile alchemy because we step over racial, class and sexual boundaries.

I've realized that I don't like doing drag for gay men. It's a hard room to sell, but drag queens traditionally are sprites of hostile environments. I prefer mixed audiences; they are less sheltered, they check each other out. It's like going to church. Clonish gay men intimidate me and make me self-conscious about my lesioned skin, my accent, and my sexual energy. Among gay men I feel I'm never enough. We are after all a cynical, jaded and scared bunch. I do drag mostly in my second language, English, and I choose to employ some black cultural elements, many Anglo and Latino ele-



ments. As Bakhtin writes, "Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and other. Consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having* to choose a language." I dress myself up in borrowed grammar, phonetics, and sense of humour. Having to appropriate artifacts and practices all the time gives us some insolence: no I've not been invited, deal with it. I think of La Lupe, the Cuban singer who is said to have gone mad and disappeared on the streets of New York in the 1960s, because she used her broken *Spanglish* fertilized in the Bronx and said things like "¡¡Ahi no mas!!" "It's not what's happening, it's what gonna happening!" and "Give me some soul now!!" all in one exuberant and loud breath.

Snap-swish-and-dish divas have truly arrived, giving Beauty Shop drama center stage, performing the read-and-snap two-step as they sashay across the movie screen, entertaining us in the castles of our homes — like court jesters, like eunuchs — with their double entendres and dead-end lusts, and above all, their relentless hilarity in the face of relentless despair. Negro faggotry is the rage! Black gay man are not.

The current interest for drag in North America will probably be short-lived. Trendy media constantly sell old ideas wrapped in crinkling cellophane. People rarely know that *Berdaches*, *Vestidas* and *Hijras* (and probably dominatrixes, masters and slaves) have been around longer than Barbie dolls and Madonna. I grew up gay in a Catholic ecology cohabited by sissies [*maricas*] and butch bullies [*machos*]. The *entendidos*, the ones "in the know," spoke to each other in feminine terms. In the privacy of our extended families we still address each other as Maria or Anita. I must have been 15 when I saw my first drag show. Long before that I had seen the impoverished prostitute drag queens, *las locas*, on an infamous street in Santiago, Chile, called *San Camilo*. (Drag and poverty often go hand in hand.) It had to be a

holy name. Long before open zoos — surely modelled after human behaviour — became popular, people flocked in caravans to watch these creatures from the shelter of their cars. *Las locas* would come around yelling and laughing to let us touch their bodies and when they realised we were *maricones* they would get angry and threaten us with their pocket knives; we were the same but called each other by different names.

The vastness of the metropolis provides loneliness, anonymity and street wisdom — none of this safe space crap — and drag queens flourish like dandelions in the cracks of the cement of despair. So what happens then when they are dragged, no pun intended, under the bleaching spotlight? I think they lose their underworld edge; they become one more Heather Locklear on display. That is why I participate cautiously in the current fad, always aware where the exit is because, in the middle of the war that is being waged against the poor, free speech and migration, anything can happen. Clutch your pearls, darling, the way Shelley Winters did in *The Poseidon Adventure*.

When my lover, Philip, began to die in 1993 I spent most of my time in Seattle where he lived with a close friend of mine. Together we discovered the healing potency of doing drag. Sounds West Coast, doesn't it? We thought of this when we were almost totally consumed by caring for Philip. Every ounce of his life expelled by his body, every bout of nausea and torrent of vomit was sweeping in its undertow a bit of our life. I had to deal with the doctors' and nurses' gringo pep talk that softly whispered: "take it easy, die quietly, don't fight." One day while I was witnessing a particularly painful hospital procedure being done on my man I thought of our incursions into S/M, tenebrous drag performances; I realized the main purpose was to delay the end, just like in doing drag. Leather folk and drag queens have had a long standing public friendship and I can understand why. If I had never seen a man crying out of pure lust I would have never been able to face Philip's pain and the puzzled look in his oceanic eyes.

My dear friend and I concocted a drag show during those long summer evenings. We rehearsed them in the basement when Philip was sedated. One day we were trying outfits and make-up when we heard Philip throwing up upstairs. We ran up in our high heels to help him. He was a bit started but smiled widely as we cleaned him and told him about our little project. Luck had it that his father showed up at the door, which was always unlocked, and froze at the sight of these deranged nurses. Soon he collected himself, turned on the denial warp, and muttered hello as if nothing had happened. Drag was starting to erode silence, denial and intolerance.

Anyway, we took our show on the road across the border, rehearsed each one of the songs at the top of our lungs on our way to Vancouver, told the astonished Canadian customs officer that we were preparing for Halloween in advance to account for all those dresses, wigs and make-up he saw in the trunk. Our drag show was a fabulous success. I recalled my Cha-Cha Queen alter ego, *Clarita Cruz-Montt*, an irresistibly pretentious name, a nom de plume (and guerre) with which I was baptised during my adolescence by my gang of flaming locas as I walked up and down the cruisy blocks, smoking with flair, talking fashion, dreams... and men. I lip-synched to a torch song sitting on the piano in a short Sharon Stone-eat-your-heart-out sequin dress, a garçon

bleached blond coiffure, long and heavy dangling earrings and pale Nancy Sinatra make-up. The audience adored us and they gave generously to the Latin American AIDS group fund. It was our therapy, our way of saying we are desperate and our friends' way of showing us love and support.

Drag shows have been done by people living with HIV and AIDS for quite some time now. Creating a mythic character and putting it out on display is empowering. I have friends in Montreal who get together and do a show when the going gets tough. In Cuba when HIV positive people were taken to *sanatorios* they were encouraged regularly to put on drag shows for guests. Certainly, the assumption prevails that drag is done by extreme individuals: homosexuals or super-virile movie stars like Terence Stamp and Patrick Swayze. It is not the individual who is extreme, however, it is the circumstances. Remember Klinger in M.A.S.H.? In such situations – the war, the plague, the poverty, the loneliness – we unleash the queen. Drag is mostly inflicted upon oneself. In Chile in 1994 I saw an emaciated drag queen who has had a show for over ten years perform, precariously stilted on her bone structure. AIDS wasn't going to stop her. *La que nace chicharra muere cantando*.

Lip-synching is what drag queens do. An act of conformism as lame as reciting "good to meet you," or "have a nice day." It is

ventriloquism that takes a turn for the perverse, thespianism gone mental, a spectacle supported by a dental prosthesis of snappy come-backs and one-liners, a cornucopia of references to popular culture. Doing drag revisits the excess of carnivals cluttered with masks, glitter, bells and whistles. We often gloss over indecent exposures, contain the rivers of bodily fluids, and turn off the currents of sexual energy in the name of misguided collective well-being. We magnify pity to the status of epic and heroic art – the AIDS artist, the innocent victim – and reduce the brutal mercy of doing drag and other forms of resistance and coping to *artesanía*. In its carnivalesque sense – Mardi Gras and Rio – doing drag does not strive to be creative, although many times it is; it appears a chronicle of popular culture, junky, self-referential, campy, and kitschy. Doing drag is as transforming (and less disfiguring) than the gym-redesigning of human bodies. Doing drag is like Seinfeld, a show about nothing, and yet it seems less empty than wearing red ribbons, having phone sex, and crying at candlelight vigils. Different people might give conflicting interpretations to the same act of doing drag. Be my guest. For the general population it might be funny or peculiar; for drag queens themselves it is guerrilla camouflage for survival.

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