

"The White to Be Angry"

VAGINAL DAVIS'S TERRORIST DRAG

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Nineteen eighty saw the debut of one of the L.A. punk scene's most critically acclaimed albums, the band X's *Los Angeles*. X was fronted by John Doe and Exene Cervenka, who were described by one writer as "poetry workshop types"¹ and who had recently migrated to Los Angeles from the East Coast. They used the occasion of their first album to describe the effect that the West Coast city had on its white denizens. The album's title track, "Los Angeles," narrates the story of a white female protagonist who had to leave Los Angeles because she started to hate "every nigger and Jew, every Mexican who gave her a lot of shit, every homosexual and the idle rich." Today, the song reads for me like a fairly standard tale of white flight from the multiethnic metropolis. Yet I can't pretend to have had access to this reading back then, since I had no contexts or reading skills for any such interpretation.

Contemplating these lyrics today leaves me with a disturbed feeling. When I was a teenager growing up in South Florida, X occupied the hallowed position of favorite band. As I attempt to situate my relation to this song and my own developmental history, I remember what X meant to me back then. Within the hermetic Cuban American community I came of age in, punk rock was not yet the almost-routine route of individuation and resistance that it is today. Back then it was the only avant-garde that I knew, the only cultural critique of normative aesthetics available to me. Yet there was a way in which I was able to escape the song's interpellating call. Though queerness was already a powerful polarity in my life, and the hissing pronunciation of "Mexican" that the song produced felt very much like the epithet "spic," with which I had a great deal of experience, I somehow found a way to resist these identifications. The luxury of hindsight lets me understand that I needed X and the possibility of subculture it promised at that moment to withstand the identity-eroding effects of normativity. I was able to enact a certain misrecognition that let me imagine myself as something other than queer or racialized. But such a misrecognition demands a certain toll. The toll is one that subjects who attempt to identify with and assimilate to dominant ideologies pay every day of their lives. The price of the ticket is this: to find self within the dominant public sphere, we need to deny self. The contradictory subjectivity one is left with is not just the fragmentary subjectivity of some

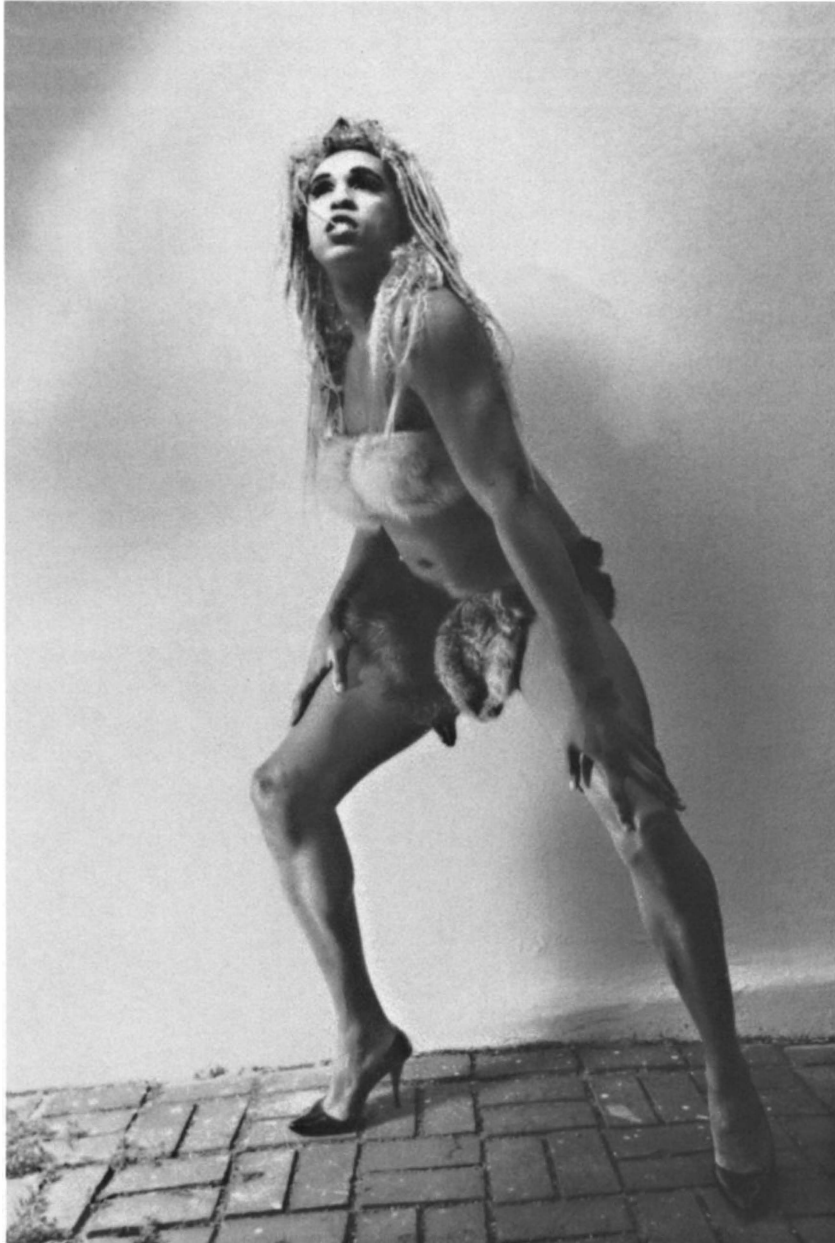


Figure 1: Glamour shot of Dr. Davis by Rick Castro. Reprinted with permission.

unspecified postmodern condition; instead, it is the story of the minoritarian subject within the majoritarian public sphere. Fortunately, this story does not end at this difficult point, this juncture of painful contradiction. Sometimes misrecognition can be *tactical*. Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by dominant culture.

In this paper I will discuss the cultural work of an artist who came of age within the very same L.A. punk scene that produced X. The L.A. punk scene worked very hard to whitewash and straighten its image. While many people of color and queers were part of this cultural movement, they often remained closeted in the scene's early days. The artist whose work I will be discussing in this paper came of age in that scene and managed to resist its whitewashing and heteronormative protocols.

The work of drag superstar Vaginal Creme Davis, or, as she sometimes prefers to be called, Dr. Davis, spans several cultural production genres. It also appropriates, terroristically, both dominant culture and different subcultural movements. Davis first rose to prominence in the L.A. punk scene through her infamous zine *Fertile Latoya Jackson* and through her performances at punk shows with her Supremes-like backup singers, the Afro Sisters. *Fertile Latoya Jackson's* first incarnation was as a print zine that presented scandalous celebrity gossip. The zine was reminiscent of *Hollywood Babylon*, Kenneth Anger's two-volume tell-all history of the movie industry and the star system's degeneracy. The hand-stapled zine eventually evolved into a video magazine. At the same time as the zine became a global subcultural happening, Davis's performances in and around the L.A. punk scene, both with the Afro Sisters and solo, became semilegendary. She went on to translate her performance madness to video, starring in various productions that include *Dot* (1994), her tribute to Dorothy Parker's acerbic wit and alcoholism; *Voodoo Williamson: The Dona of Dance* (1995), her celebration of modern dance and its doyennes; and *Designy Living* (1995), a tribute to Noel Coward's *Design for Living* and Godard's *Masculine et Feminine*.

According to Davis's own self-generated legend, her existence is the result of an illicit encounter between her then forty-five-year-old African American mother and her then twenty-one-year-old Mexican American father. Davis has often reported that her parents only met once, when she was conceived under a table during a Ray Charles concert at the Hollywood Palladium in the early 1960s.

While her work with the Afro Sisters and much of her zine work deal with issues of blackness, Davis explores her Chicana heritage with another one of her musical groups, ¡Cholita!, a band that is billed as the female Menudo. This band consists of both men and women in teenage Chicana drag who sing Latin American bubblegum pop songs with titles like "*Chi-*

cas de hoy” [“Girls of today”]. ¡Cholita! and Davis’s other bands all produce socially interrogative performances that complicate any easy understanding of race or ethnicity within the social matrix. Performance is used by these theatrical musical groups to, borrowing a phrase from George Lipsitz, “rehearse identities”² that have been rendered toxic within the dominant public sphere but are, through Davis’s fantastic and farcical performance, restructured (yet not cleansed) so they present newly imagined notions of the self and the social. This paper focuses on the performance work done through *The White to Be Angry*, a live show and a compact disc produced by one of Davis’s other subculturally acclaimed musical groups, Pedro, Muriel, and Esther. (Often referred to as PME, the band is named after a cross section of people that Davis met when waiting for a bus. Pedro was a young Latino who worked at a fast-food chain, and Muriel and Esther were two senior citizens.) This essay’s first section will consider both the live performance and the CD. The issue of “passing” and its specific relation to what I am calling the cultural politics of *disidentification* will also be interrogated. I will pursue this question of “passing” in relation to both mainstream drag and a queerer modality of performance, which I will be calling Davis’s *terrorist drag*. In the paper’s final section I will consider Davis’s relation to the discourse of “antigay.”

Who’s That Girl?

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse. In an interview in the magazine *aRude*, Davis offers one of the most lucid explications of a modality of performance that I call *disidentificatory*. Davis responds to the question “How did you acquire the name Vaginal Davis?” with a particularly elucidating rant:

It came from Angela Davis—I named myself as a salute to her because I was really into the whole late ’60’s and early ’70’s militant Black era. When you come home from the inner city and you’re Black you go through a stage when you try to fit the dominant culture, you kinda want to be white at first—it would be easier if you were White. Everything that’s negrified or Black—you don’t want to be associated with that. That’s what I call the snow period—I just felt like if I had some cheap white boyfriend, my life could be

perfect and I could be some treasured thing. I could feel myself projected through some White person, and have all the privileges that white people get—validation through association.³

The “snow period” Davis describes corresponds to the assimilationist option that minoritarian subjects often choose. Though sanctioned and encouraged by the dominant culture, the snow period is not a viable option for people of color. More often than not, snow melts in the hands of the subject who attempts to acquire privilege through associations (be they erotic, emotional, or both) with whites. Davis goes on to describe her next phase:

Then there was a conscious shift, being that I was the first one in my family to go to college—I got militant. That’s when I started reading about Angela and the Panthers, and that’s when Vaginal emerged as a filtering of Angela through humor. That led to my early 1980’s acapella performance entity, Vaginal Davis and the Afro Sisters (who were two white girls with afro wigs). We did a show called “we’re taking over” where we portrayed the Sexualese Liberation Front which decides to kidnap all the heads of white corporate America so we could put big black dildos up their lily white buttoles and hold them for ransom. It really freaked out a lot of the middle class post-punk crowd—they didn’t get the campy element of it but I didn’t really care.⁴

Thus the punk rock drag diva elucidates a stage or temporal space where the person of color’s consciousness turns to her or his community after an immersion in white culture and education. The ultramilitant phase that Davis describes is a powerful counteridentification with the dominant culture. At the same time, though, Davis’s queer sexuality, her queerness *and* effeminacy, kept her from fully accessing Black Power militancy. Unable to pass as heterosexual black militant through simple counteridentification, Vaginal Davis instead disidentified with Black Power by selecting Angela and *not* the Panthers as a site of self-fashioning and political formation. Davis’s deployment of disidentification demonstrates that it is, to employ Kimberle Crenshaw’s term, an *intersectional strategy*.⁵ *Intersectionality* insists on a critical hermeneutics that registers the copresence of sexuality, race, class, gender, and other identity differentials as particular components that exist simultaneously with each other. Vintage Black Power discourse contained many homophobic and masculinist elements that were toxic to queer and feminist subjects. Davis used parody and pastiche to remake Black Power, opening it up via disidentification to a self that is simultaneously black and queer. (Elsewhere, with her group ¡Cholita!, she performs a similar disidentification with Latina/o popular culture. As Graciela Grejalva, she is not an oversexed songstress, but instead a teenage Latina singing sappy bubblegum pop.)

Davis productively extends her disidentificatory strategy to her engagement with the performative practice of drag. With the advent of the mass commercialization of drag—evident in suburban multiplexes, which program such films as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* and *The Bird Cage*, or in VH1’s broadcasts of RuPaul’s talk show—it seems especially important at this point to distinguish different modalities of drag. Commercial drag presents a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption, representing a certain strand of integrationist liberal pluralism. The sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance. Unfortunately, this boom in filmic and televisual drag has had no impact on hate legislation put forth by the New Right or on homophobic violence on the nation’s streets. Indeed, I want to suggest that this “boom” in drag helps one understand that a liberal-pluralist mode of political strategizing only eventuates a certain absorption, but nothing like a productive engagement, with difference. So while RuPaul, for example, hosts a talk show on VH1, one only need click the remote control to hear about the new defense-of-marriage legislation that “protects” *the* family by outlawing gay marriage. Indeed, the erosion of gay civil rights is simultaneous with the advent of higher degrees of queer visibility in the mainstream media.

But while corporate-sponsored drag has to some degree become incorporated within the dominant culture, there is also a queerer modality of drag that is performed by queer-identified drag artists in spaces of queer consumption. Felix Guattari, in a discussion of the theatrical group the Mirabelles, explains the potential political power of drag:

The Mirabelles are experimenting with a new type of militant theater, a theater separate from an explanatory language and long tirades of good intentions, for example, on gay liberation. They resort to drag, song, mime, dance, etc., not as different ways of illustrating a theme, to “change the ideas” of spectators, but in order to trouble them, to stir up uncertain desire-zones that they always more or less refuse to explore. The question is no longer to know whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse, but to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the “social body.”⁶

Guattari’s take on the Mirabelles, specifically his appraisal of the political performance of drag, assists in the project of further evaluating the effects of queer drag. I don’t simply want to assign one set of drag strategies and practices the title of “bad” drag and the other “good.” But I do wish to emphasize the ways in which Davis’s *terroristic drag* “stir[s] up uncertain desire[s]” and enables subjects to imagine a way of “break[ing] away from

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the . . . restraints on the ‘social body,’” while sanitized corporate drag and even traditional gay drag is unable to achieve such effects. Davis’s political drag is about creating an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric. The “social body” that Guattari discusses is amazingly elastic and able to accommodate scripts on gay liberation. Drag like Davis’s, however, is not easily enfolded in that social fabric because of the complexity of its intersectional nature.

There is a great diversity within drag. Julian Fleisher’s *Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* surveys underground drag and differentiates two dominant styles, “glamour” and “clown.”⁷ New York drag queens like Candis Cayne or Girlina, whose drag is relatively “real,”⁸ rate high on the glamour meter. Other queens like Varla Jean Merman (who bills herself as the love child of Ethel Merman and Ernest Borgnine) and Miss Understood are representative of the over-the-top parody style of clown drag. Many famous queens, like Wigstock impresario and mad genius The “Lady” Bunny, appear squarely in the middle of Fleisher’s scale.⁹ On first glance Vaginal, who is in no way invoking glamour or “realness” and most certainly doesn’t *pass* (in a direct sense of the word), seems to be on the side of clown drag. I want to complicate this system of evaluation and attempt a more nuanced appraisal of Vaginal Davis’s style.

Vaginal Davis’s drag, while comic and even hilarious, should not be dismissed as just clowning around. Her uses of humor and parody function as disidentificatory strategies whose effect on the dominant public sphere is that of a counterpublic terrorism. At the center of all of Davis’s cultural productions is a radical impulse toward cultural critique. It is a critique that, according to the artist, has often escaped two groups who comprise some of drag’s most avid supporters: academics and other drag queens.

I was parodying a lot of different things. But it wasn’t an intellectual-type of thing—it was innate. A lot of academics and intellectuals dismissed it because it wasn’t smart enough—it was too homey, a little too country. And gay drag queens hated me. They didn’t understand it. I wasn’t really trying to alter myself to look like a real woman. I didn’t wear false eyelashes or fake breasts. It wasn’t about the realness of traditional drag—the perfect flawless make-up. I just put on a little lipstick, a little eye shadow and a wig and went out there.¹⁰

It is the innateness, the homeyness, and the countryness of Davis’s style that draw this particular academic to the artist’s work. I understand these characteristics as components of the artist’s guerrilla style, a style that functions as a ground-level cultural terrorism that fiercely skewers both straight culture and reactionary components of gay culture. I would also like to link these key words—*innateness*, *homeyness*, and *countryness*—

that Davis calls upon with a key word from the work of Antonio Gramsci that seems to be a partial cognate of these other terms: *organic*.

Gramsci attempted to both demystify the role of the intellectual and, at the same time, reassert the significance of the intellectual's role to a social movement. He explained that "Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."¹¹ Davis certainly worked to bolster and cohere the L.A. punk scene, giving it a more significant "homogeneity"¹² and "awareness." At the same time, her work constituted a critique of that community's whiteness. In this way, it participated in Gramsci's project of extending the scope of Marxist analysis to look beyond class as the ultimate social division and consider *blocs*. Blocs are, in the words of John Fiske, "alliance[s] of social forces formed to promote common social interests as they can be brought together in particular historical conditions."¹³ The Gramscian notion of bloc formation emphasizes the centrality of class relations in any critical analysis, while not diminishing the importance of other cultural struggles. In the lifeworld of mostly straight white punks, Davis had, as a black gay man, a strongly disidentificatory role within that community. I will suggest that her disidentifications with social blocs are productive interventions in which politics are destabilized, permitting her to come into the role of "organic intellectual." While Davis did and did not belong to the scene, she nonetheless forged a place for herself that is not *a* place, but instead the still important *position* of intellectual.

A reading of one of Davis's spin-off projects, *The White to Be Angry*, a live show and CD by her hard-core/speed metal band, Pedro, Muriel, and Esther, will ground this consideration of Vaginal Davis as organic intellectual. While I focus on this one aspect of her oeuvre, it should nonetheless be noted that my claim for her as organic intellectual has a great deal to do with the wide variety of public performances and discourses she employs. Davis disseminates her cultural critique through multiple channels of publicity: independent video, zines, public access programming, performance art, anthologized short fiction, bar drag, the L.A. punk-rock club Sucker (for which she is a weekly hostess and impresario), and three different bands (PME and ¡Cholita! as well as the semi-mythical Black Fag, a group that parodies famous North American punk band Black Flag). In the PME project she employs a modality of drag that is neither glamorous nor strictly comedic. Her drag is a terroristic send-up of masculinity and white supremacy. Its focus and pitch are political parody and critique, anchored in her very particular homey-organic style and humor.

“The White to Be Angry” and Passing

It is about 1:30 in the morning at Squeezebox, a modish queercore night at a bar in lower Manhattan. It is a warm June evening, and PME’s show was supposed to start at midnight. I noticed the band’s easily identifiable lead singer rush in at about 12:30, so I had no expectation of the show beginning before 1:00. I while away the time by watching thin and pale go-go boys and girls dancing on the bars. The boys are not the beefy, pumped-up white and Latino muscle boys of Chelsea. This, after all, is way downtown where queer style is decidedly different from the ultramasculine muscle drag of Chelsea. Still, the crowd here is extremely white, and Vaginal Davis’s black six-foot-six-inch frame towers over the sea of white post-punk club goers.

Before I know it Miss Guy, a drag performer who exudes the visual style of the “white trash” Southern California punk waif,¹⁴ stops spinning her classic eighties retro-rock, punk, and new wave discs. Then the Mistress Formika, the striking leather-clad Latina drag queen and hostess of the club, announces the band. I am positioned in the front row, to the left of the stage. I watch a figure whom I identify as Davis rush by me and mount the stage.

At this point, a clarification is necessary. Vaginal is something like the central performance persona that the artist I am discussing uses, but it is certainly not the only one. She is also the Most High Rev’rend Saint Salicia Tate, an evangelical church woman who preaches “Fornication, no! Theocracy, yes!”; Buster Butone, one of her boy drag numbers who is a bit of a gangsta and womanizer; and Kayle Hilliard, a professional pseudonym that the artist employed when she worked as an administrator at UCLA.¹⁵ These are just a few of the artist’s identities; I have yet to catalog them all.

The identity I will see tonight is a new one for me. Davis is once again in boy drag, standing on stage in military fatigues, including camouflage pants, jacket, T-shirt, and hat. The look is capped off by a long gray beard, reminiscent of the beards worn by the 1980s Texas rocker band Z Z Top. Clarence introduces himself. During the monologue we hear Vaginal’s high-pitched voice explain how she finds white supremacist militiamen to be *really hot*, so hot that she herself has had a race and gender reassignment and is now Clarence. Clarence is the artist’s own object of affection. Her voice drops as she inhabits the site of her object of desire and identifications. She imitates and becomes the object of her desire. The ambivalent circuits of cross-racial desire are thematized and contained in one body. This particular star-crossed coupling, black queen and white supremacist, might suggest masochism on the part of the person of color, yet such a reading would be too facile. Instead, the work

done by this performance of illicit desire for the “bad” object, the toxic force, should be considered an active disidentification with strictures against cross-racial desire in communities of color and the specters of miscegenation that haunt white sexuality. The parodic performance works on Freudian distinctions between desire and identification; the “to be or to have” binary is queered and disrupted.

When the performer’s voice drops and thickens, it is clear that Clarence now has the mike. He congratulates himself on his own woodsy militiaman masculinity, boasting about how great it feels to be white, male, and straight. He launches into his first number, a cut off the CD *Sawed Off Shotgun*. The song is Clarence’s theme:

I don’t need a ’zooka
Or a Ms. 38
I feel safer in New York
Than I do in L.A.

You keep your flame thrower
My shotgun is prettier

Sawed off shot gun
Sawed off
Shotgun

My shot gun is so warm it
Keeps me safe in the city
I need it at the ATM
Or when I’m looking purdy
In its convenient carrying case
Graven, initialed on the face
Sawed off shot gun
Sawed off
Shotgun
Yeah . . . wow!

The singer adopts what is a typical butch, hard-core stance while performing the song. The microphone is pulled close to his face, and he bellows into it. This performance of butch masculinity complements the performance of militiaman identity. The song functions as an illustration of a particular mode of white male anxiety that feeds ultra-right-wing movements like militias and that is endemic to embattled straight white masculinity in urban multiethnic spaces like Los Angeles. The fear of an urban landscape populated by undesirable minorities is especially pronounced at privileged sites of consumerist interaction like the ATM, a public site where elites in the cityscape access capital as the lower classes

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stand witnesses to these mechanical transactions that punctuate class hierarchies. Through her performance of Clarence, Vaginal inhabits the image of the paranoid and embattled white male in the multiethnic city. The performer begins to subtly undermine the gender cohesion of this cultural type (a gender archetype that is always figured as heteronormative), the embattled white man in the multiethnic metropolis, by alluding to the love of “purdy” and “prettier” weapons. The eroticizing of the weapon in so overt a fashion reveals the queer specter that haunts such “impenetrable” heterosexualities. Clarence needs his gun because it “is so warm” that it keeps him “safe in the city” that he no longer feels safe in, a city where growing populations of Asians, African Americans, and Latinos pose a threat to the white majority.

Clarence is a disidentification with militiaman masculinity—not merely a counteridentification that rejects the militiaman, but a *tactical misrecognition* that consciously views the self as a militiaman. This performance is also obviously not about passing inasmuch as the whiteface makeup that the artist uses looks nothing like real white skin. Clarence has as much of a chance passing as white as Vaginal has passing as female. Rather, this disidentification works as an *interiorized passing*. The interior pass is a disidentification and tactical misrecognition of self. Aspects of the self that are toxic to the militiaman—blackness, gayness, and transvestism—are grafted on this particularly militaristic script of masculinity. The performer, through the role of Clarence, inhabits and undermines the militiaman with a fierce sense of parody.

But Davis’s disidentifications are not limited to engagements with figures of white supremacy. In a similar style Clarence, during one of his other live numbers, disidentifies with the popular press image of the pathological homosexual killer. The song “Homosexual Is Criminal” tells this story:

A homosexual
Is a criminal
I’m a sociopath, a pathological liar
Bring your children near me
I’ll make them walk through the fire

I have killed before and I will kill again
You can tell my friend by my Satanic grin
A homosexual is a criminal

A homosexual is a criminal

I’ll eat you limb from limb
I’ll tear your heart apart

Open the Frigidaire
There'll be your body parts
I'm gonna slit your click
Though you don't want me to
Bite it off real quick
Salt'n peppa it too.

At this point in the live performance, about halfway through the number, Davis has removed the long gray beard, the jacket, and the cap. A striptease has begun. At this point Clarence starts to be undone and Davis begins to reappear. She has begun to interact lasciviously with the other members of her band. She gropes her guitarist and bass players as she cruises the audience. She is becoming queer, and as she does so she begins to perform homophobia. This public performance of homophobia indexes the specters of Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, and an entire pantheon of homosexual killers. The performance magnifies images from the homophobic popular imaginary. Davis is once again inhabiting phobic images with a parodic and cutting difference. In fact, while many sectors of gay communities eschew negative images, Davis instead explodes them by inhabiting them with a difference. By becoming the serial killer, whose psychological profile is almost always white, Vaginal Davis disarticulates not only the onus of performing the positive image, which is generally borne by minoritarian subjects, but also the Dahmer paradigm where the white cannibal slaughters gay men of color. The performance of “*becoming* Dahmer” is another mode of hijacking and lampooning whiteness. Drag and minstrelsy are dramatically reconfigured; performance genres that seemed somewhat exhausted and limited are powerfully reinvigorated through Davis’s “homey”-style politics.

By the last number Vaginal Davis has fully reemerged, and she is wearing a military fatigue baby-doll nightie. She is still screaming and writhing on the stage, and she is soaked in rock'n'roll sweat. The Clarence persona has disintegrated. *Long live the queen*. During an interview Davis explained to me that her actual birth name is Clarence.¹⁶ What does it mean that the artist who negotiates various performance personas and uses Vaginal Creme Davis as a sort of base identity reserves her “birth name” for a character who represents the nation’s current state of siege? Davis’s drag, this reconfigured cross-sex, cross-race minstrelsy, can best be understood as *terrorist drag*—terrorist insofar as she is performing the nation’s internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality. It is also an aesthetic terrorism: Davis uses ground-level guerrilla representational strategies to portray some of the nation’s most salient popular fantasies. The fantasies she acts out involve cultural anxieties around miscegenation, communities of color, and the queer body. Her dress does not attempt to

index outmoded ideals of female glamour. She instead dresses like white supremacist militiamen and black welfare queen hookers. In other words, her drag mimesis is not concerned with the masquerade of womanliness, but instead with conjuring the nation's most dangerous citizens. She is quite literally in "terrorist drag."

While Davis's terrorist drag performance does not engage the project of passing as traditional drag at least partially does, it is useful to recognize how passing and what I am describing as disidentification resemble one another—or, to put it more accurately, how the passing entailed in traditional drag implicates elements of the disidentificatory process. Passing is often not about bald-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality, where a dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form. In traditional male-to-female drag "woman" is performed, but one would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how "real," as an actual performance of "woman." Drag performance strives to perform femininity, and femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women. Furthermore, the drag queen is disidentifying—sometimes critically and sometimes *not*—not only with the ideal of woman but also with the a priori relationship of woman and femininity that is a tenet of gender-normative thinking. The "woman" produced in drag is not a woman but instead a public disidentification with woman. Some of the best drag that I have encountered in my research challenges the universalizing rhetorics of femininity.

Both modalities of performing the self, disidentification and passing, are often strategies of survival. (As the case of Davis and others suggests, often these modes of performance allow much more than mere survival, and subjects fully come into subjectivity in ways that are both ennobling and fierce.) Davis's work is a survival strategy on a more symbolic register than that of everyday practice. She is not passing to escape social injustice and structural racism in the way that some people of color might. Nor is she passing in the way in which "straight-acting queers" do. Her disidentification with drag plays with its prescriptive mandate to enact femininity through (often white) standards of glamour. Consider her militiaman drag. Her dark brown skin does not permit her to pass as white, the beard is obviously fake, and the fatigues look inauthentic. Realness is neither achieved nor is it the actual goal of such a project. Instead, her performance as Clarence functions as an intervention in the history of cross-race desire that saturates the phenomenon of passing. Passing is parodied, and this parody becomes a site where interracial desire is interrogated.

Davis's biting social critique phantasmatically projects the age-old

threat of miscegenation, something that white supremacist groups fear the most, onto the image of a white supremacist. Cross-race desire spoils the militiaman's image.¹⁷ It challenges the coherence of his identity, his essentialized whiteness, by invading its sense of essentialized white purity. The militiaman becomes a caricature of himself, sullied and degraded within his own logic.

Furthermore, blackface minstrelsy, the performance genre of whites performing blackness, is powerfully recycled through disidentification. The image of the fat-lipped Sambo is replaced by the image of the ludicrous white militiaman. The photographer Lyle Ashton Harris has produced a series of elegant portraits of himself in whiteface. Considered alongside Davis's work, Harris's version of whiteface is an almost *too literal* photonegative reversal. By figuring the militiaman through the vehicle of the black queen's body, Davis's whiteface interrogates white hysteria, miscegenation anxiety, and supremacy at their very core. Eric Lott, in his influential study of minstrelsy in the dominant white imagination, suggests that

The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them.¹⁸

Harris's photography replicates traditional whiteface so as to challenge its tenets in a different fashion than Davis does. Harris's technique addresses the issue of "symbolic control," but does so in the form of a straightforward counteridentification. And while counteridentification is certainly not a strategy without merits, Davis's disidentification with minstrelsy offers a more polyvalent response to this history. Davis's disidentificatory take on "whiteface" both reveals the degraded character of the white supremacist and wrests "symbolic controls" from white people. The white supremacist is forced to cohabit in one body with a black queen in such a way that the image loses its symbolic force. A figure that is potentially threatening to people of color is revealed as a joke.

The dual residency in Davis's persona of both the drag queen and the white supremacist is displayed in the CD's cover art. The illustration features Clarence cleaning his gun. Occupying the background is a television set broadcasting a ranting white man reminiscent of right-wing media pundit Rush Limbaugh, a monster-truck poster titled "Pigfoot," a confederate flag, a crucifix, assorted pornography, beer bottles, and a knife stuck in the wall. Standing out in this scene is the framed photo of a black drag queen: Vaginal Davis. The flip side of the image is part of the CD's interior artwork. Vaginal sits in front of a dressing mirror wearing a show-girl outfit. She is crying on the telephone as she cooks heroin on a spoon

By figuring
the militiaman
through the
vehicle of the
black queen's
body, Davis's
whiteface
interrogates
white hysteria,
miscegenation
anxiety, and
supremacy at
their very core.

and prepares to shoot up. A picture of Vaginal in boy drag is taped to the mirror. Among the scattered vibrators, perfume bottles, and razors is a picture of Clarence in a Marine uniform. These images represent a version of cross-racial desire (in this instance the reciprocated desire between a black hooker/showgirl and a white supremacist gun nut—militiaman) that echoes what Vaginal, in her 1995 interview, called “the snow period” when “some cheap white boyfriend” could make one’s life perfect, permitting the queen of color to feel like “some treasured thing,” who hopes for “the privileges that white people get—validation through association.” The image of the snow queen, a gay man of color who desires white men, is exaggerated and exploded within these performances. It is important to note that this humor is not calibrated to police or moralize against cross-racial desire. Instead, it renders a picture of this desire in its most fantastic and extreme form. By doing so it disturbs the coherence of the white militiaman’s sexual and racial identity, an identity that locates itself as racially “pure.” Concomitantly, sanitized understandings of a gay identity, which is often universalized as white, are called into question.

Davis has remarked that academics and intellectuals have dismissed her work as “homey” or “country.” I have attempted in this section to point to the ways in which these low-budget performances intervene in different circuits of publicity: predominantly white post-punk queercore spaces like Squeezebox and, further, the spaces of predominantly white masculinity that are associated with hard-core and speed metal music. I want to suggest that Davis’s signature “homeyness,” which I have already linked to an *organic* and terroristic politics, also permits us to further understand her as an “organic intellectual,” that is, an intellectual who possesses a “fundamental connection to social groups.”¹⁹ These social groups include but are certainly not limited to various subcultural sectors: punks, queers, certain communities of color. In the wake of deconstruction the word *organic* has become suspect, implying a slew of essentialist and holistic presuppositions. By linking *organic* to Davis’s notion of “homey” and “country” I wish to take some of the edge off the word. My invocation of *organic intellectual* is meant to foreground the importance of cultural workers to ground-level politics of the self while avoiding the fetishizing of the minoritarian intellectual.

Gramsci’s work offers a view of Davis not only as organic intellectual but also as philosopher. Gramsci contended that philosophy was

a conception of the world and that philosophical activity is not to be conceived solely as the “individual” elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also and above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular “mentality” and to diffuse the philosophical innovations which will demonstrate themselves to be “historically true” to the extent that they become concretely—i.e. . . . historically and socially—universal.²⁰



Figure 2: Dr. Davis in hooker showgirl outfit by Rick Castro. Reprinted with permission.

Davis's work fits in with this Gramscian model of philosophy insofar as her cultural production attempts to dismantle universals within both the dominant public sphere and various subcultures, both of which are predominantly white. The Gramscian notion of "a philosophy of praxis" helps transcend a more traditional Marxian binary between praxis and philosophy.²¹ Vaginal Davis's performance attempts to unsettle the hegemonic order through *performance* of praxis (a performance that imagines itself as praxis). The performances that are produced are rooted within a deep critique of universalism and the dominant power bloc.

The cultural battle that Davis wages is fought with the darkest sense of humor and the sharpest sense of parody imaginable. Her performances represent multiple counterpublics and subjects who are liminal within those very counterpublics. She shrewdly employs performance as a modality of counterpublicity. Performance engenders, sponsors, and even *makes* worlds. The scene of speed metal and post-punk music is one which Davis ambivalently inhabits. Her blackness and queerness render her a freak among freaks. Rather than be alienated by her freakiness, she exploits its energies and its potential to enact cultural critique.

Antigay?

A close friend of mine and I have a joke that we return to every June. Upon the occasion of Gay Pride, a celebration of lesbian and gay visibility and empowerment held early in the summer in many major North American cities, we propose a *gay shame day parade*. This parade, unlike the sunny Gay Pride march, would be held in February. Participants would have certain restrictions to deal with if they were to properly engage the spirit of gay shame day. First of all, loud colors would be discouraged. Gays and lesbians would instead be asked to wear drab browns and grays. Shame marchers would also be asked to carry signs no bigger than a business card. Chanting would be prohibited. Parade walkers would be asked to maintain a single file. Finally, the parade would not be held in a central city street but in some back street, preferably by the river. We've gotten a lot of laughs when we narrate this scenario. Like many gags it is rooted in some serious concerns. While we cannot help but take part in some aspects of pride day, we recoil at its commercialism and hack representations of gay identity. When most of the easily available and visible gay world is a predominantly white and male commercialized zone (the mall of contemporary gay culture), we find little reason to be "proud."

Some of these sentiments have recently been taken up in an anthology edited by Mark Simpson titled *Anti-Gay*.²² With its minimalist black courier print on a plain safety-yellow cover, the book makes a very low-key visual statement that would be appropriate for our aforementioned

gay shame day. Simpson's introduction focuses on the failure of "queers' grandiose ambitions." He claims that

by focusing on the shortcomings of gay and refusing to be distracted by how terrible heterosexuality is supposed to be, *Anti-Gay* may even offer the beginnings of a new dialectic, a new conversation with the world, one that is rather more interesting than the current ones.²³

I am in accord with some of Simpson's remarks. The gay communities we live in are often incapable of enacting any autocritique that would engage the politics of gender, racial diversity, and class. But rather than being critical about the *politics* of the mainstream gay community, Simpson merely seems to be bored by a conversation that he feels has ceased to be "interesting."

At one point in his discussion, Simpson mentions the homogeneity of the book's contributors: "It [*Anti-Gay*] doesn't promise to be more inclusive than gay (contributions by only two women, only one bisexual and none from people of colour.)"²⁴ Simpson's attack on "gay" is not concerned with "gay's" exclusivity, its white normativity, or its unwillingness to form coalitions with other counterpublics, including feminist (both lesbian and straight) and other minoritized groups. My own playful critique of the gay community, manifested in the gay-shame-day joke, emanates from a deep frustration on my part toward what I call *mainstream* or *corporate homosexuality*. By contrast, to be "antigay" in Simpson's sense of the word is to offer criticism in a "been-there-done-that" style whose main purpose is to register tedium.

The forms of "antigay" thinking put forth in Vaginal Davis's work are vastly different in origin and effect than Simpson's *Anti-Gay*. Davis's brand of antigay critique offers something more than a listless complaint. This additional something is a sustained critique of white gay male normativity and its concomitant corporate ethos.

"Closet Case," another track on PME's album, is, upon first glance, a critique of closeted homosexuality. Further analysis also reveals that the song critiques an aesthetic, rather than a type of individual. The song's lyrics depict a mode of living that is recognizable (especially from Davis's perspective as a working-class gay man of color) as a bourgeois Southern California brand of urban gay male style.

"Closet Case"

She drives a Trans Am
And she lives in the Valley
Everynight she cruises
Gasoline alley

Davis's brand of	Salon tan
antigay critique	Ray Ban
offers something	All buff
more than a	Acts tuff
listless complaint.	Big Dick, heavy balls
This additional	Nice peccs, that ain't all
something is a	Y'know she's a closet case
sustained critique	Got blow dried hair, wears a lot of cologne
of white gay male	Call her own condo on her cellular phone
normativity and	She's 38 but thinks she's 21
its concomitant	Covers those wrinkles in collagen
corporate ethos.	Old enough to be Richard Harris
	Facial Scrub: plaster of Paris
	You know she's a closet case
	(Salon Tan!)
	You know she's a closet case
	(Ray Ban!)

The closet here is not necessarily the one inhabited by those who engage in homosexual acts but deny a gay identification. Instead, the queen depicted in this song is more recognizably in the closet about his age, appearance, and quotidian habits. Davis satirizes the closet queen whose style is easily recognizable on a map of urban Southern Californian homosexualities. A quick review of the particular type of queen being delineated is useful here. Brand names like Ray Ban and Trans Am, as well as cellular phones and condos and the price tags associated with these commodities are integral to this queen's identity. Equally important is the leisure-time salon tan, facial scrubs, and collagen injections. Most important of all is the "buff" gym-built body. Davis's song offers the anatomy (physical, behavioral, and socioeconomic) of the normative and corporate homosexual. The closet case of the song is an elite within a larger spectrum of gay communities, and Davis's satirical parody atomizes this cultural type. Humor is used to mock and degrade this mode of apolitical gayness, disrupting its primacy as a universal mold or pattern. Antigayness here is used as a way of lampooning and ultimately disrupting a modality of white gay male hegemony.

This same renunciation of elite gay male style is narrated in "No Thank You Please," in which Davis recants the snow queen's desire for elite white gay males. The song's narrator manifests her displeasure for these gay elites by employing the raunchiest of vernaculars:

“No Thank You Please”

So you want to lick my pussy?
Well you can't cuz you're a sissy
Can't get into my bed
I won't give you head
Say, no thank you please
I don't eat head cheese

I can't get involved
Bang your head against the wall
Take me to the king of hearts
There they have bigger parts
Chandelier hanging
Sexy gangbanging
Say no thank you please
I don't eat head cheese

You better take me to the rack
I'm looking for my bladder snack
He feels on my crotch
It's not worth the notch
Say no thank you please
I don't eat head cheese

LA water polo team
All the men are hot and lean
Get into your tub
A rub-a-dud-dud
A splishing a splashing
A urine reaction
I can't get involved
Bang your head against the wall.

The one-minute-and-five-second song's tempo is relentlessly fast. Davis/Clarence snarls the lyrics. Her deep and husky voice booms in the tradition of classic punk rock rants. There is a powerful juxtaposition between lyrics that indicate she will not let the sissy addressee “lick her pussy” and the actual butch vocal style. The lyrics themselves map out the snow queen's desire, “LA water polo team/All the men are hot and lean,” and then resist that desire, “I can't get involved.” The last line of the song, “Bang your head against the wall,” does the work of performing both butch masculinity and, at the same time, the general frustration that characterizes the snow queen's desire—the desire for white men who almost exclusively desire other white men.

The above reading and its emphasis on Davis's snow queen disidentification is not meant to dismiss the song's antigayness. Indeed, the snow queen herself, or at least a snow queen with some degree of reflexivity, understands the "antigay" position from the vantage point of a gay man who has been locked out of the elite white gay male sphere of influence.

According to Stuart Hall, who has adapted Gramsci's theorizations for race analysis, the notion of the *war of positions* (as opposed to an outdated orthodox Marxian *war of maneuver*) "recognizes the 'plurality' of selves or identities of which the so-called 'subject' of thought and ideas is composed."²⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe a war of maneuver as "a situation in which subordinate groups seek to preserve and extend a definite territory, to ward off violent assault, and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system."²⁶ In contrast, a war of positions is predicated on the understanding that diverse sites of institutional and cultural antagonism must be engaged to enact transformative politics. While the war of maneuver was a necessary modality of resistance at a moment when minoritarian groups were directly subjugated within hegemony, the more multilayered and tactical war of positions represents better possibilities of resistance today, when discriminatory ideologies are less naked and more intricate.

Gramsci offers an expanded understanding of both the individual subject and the collective subject. He does not permit any pat definitions of group identity or the role of any individual within such a collective matrix to hold. Within Gramsci's writing on the ideological field, we come to glimpse that subordinated ideologies are often rife with contradictory impulses, that "subordinated ideologies are necessarily and inevitably contradictory."²⁷ Thus Gramsci lets us understand not only working-class racism, but also gay racism or homophobia within communities of color.

Cornel West has also turned to Gramsci's work in emphasizing the need to forge a microstructural analysis of African American oppression where traditional Marxian hermeneutics can only offer us macrostructural analysis.²⁸ Readings that posit subordinate groups as unified entities fail to enact a multivalent and intersectional understanding of the various contingencies and divergencies within a class or group. Thus Gramsci offers us an extremely appropriate optic through which to evaluate the disidentificatory work that Davis performs within subordinated classes like "gays" and liminal groups like the hard-core/punk rock community. Hall explains that Gramsci

shows how the so-called "self" which underpins these ideological formations is not a unified but a contradictory subject and a social construction. He thus helps us understand one of the most common, least explained features of "racism": the "subjection" of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideologies which imprison and define them. He shows

how different, often contradictory elements can be woven into and integrated within different ideological discourse; but also, the nature and value of ideological struggle which seeks to transform popular ideas and the “common sense” of the masses.²⁹

“Queerness” and “blackness” need to be read as ideological discourses that contain contradictory impulses within them—some of them liberatory, others reactionary. These discourses also require hermeneutics that appraise the intersectional and differential crosscutting currents with individual ideological scripts. Davis’s work is positioned at a point of intersection between various discourses (where they are woven together); and from this point she is able to enact a parodic and comedic demystification, and the potential for subversion is planted.

Disidentification, as a mode of analysis, registers subjects as constructed and contradictory. Davis’s body, her performances, and all her myriad texts labor to create critical uneasiness and, furthermore, to create desire within uneasiness. This desire unsettles the strictures of class, race, and gender prescribed by what Guattari calls the “social body.” A disidentificatory hermeneutic permits a reading and narration of the way in which Davis clears out a space, deterritorializing it and then reoccupying it with queer and black bodies. The lens of disidentification allows us to discern seams and contradictions and ultimately to understand the need for a war of positions.

Notes

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1. Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 307.
2. George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossings: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Space* (New York and London: Verso, 1994), 17.
3. Tommy Gear and Mike Glass, “Supremely Vaginal,” *aRude* 1 (fall 1995): 42.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Kimberle William Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda et al. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993), 111–32.

6. Felix Guattari, *Soft Subversions*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet and Chet Wiener (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 37.
7. Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide* (New York: Riverhead, 1996).
8. "Realness" is mimetic of a certain high-feminine style in standard realist terms.
9. Many of the performers I have just mentioned appear in the film documentation of New York's annual drag festival, *Wigstock: The Movie*.
10. Gear and Glass, "Supremely Vaginal," 77.
11. Antonio Gramsci, "The Formation of Intellectuals," in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. Louis Marks (New York: International, 1959), 181.
12. Here I do not mean *homogeneity* in its more quotidian usage, the opposite of *heterogeneous*, but, instead, in a Gramscian sense that is meant to connote social cohesion.
13. John Fiske, "Opening the Hallway: Some Remarks on the Fertility of Stuart Hall's Contribution to Critical Theory," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 213–14. Also see Dick Hebdige's classic analysis of subcultures for an analysis that uses what is in part a Gramscian lens to consider group formations, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).
14. Miss Guy's image was featured in designer Calvin Klein's CK One ad campaign. Her androgynous, nontraditional drag was seen all over the nation in print and television advertisements. This ad campaign represented a version of gender diversity that was not previously available in print advertising. Yet, once again, the campaign only led to a voyeuristic absorption with gender diversity and no real engagement with this node of difference.
15. Queercore writer Dennis Cooper, in an attempt to out the "real" Davis in *Spin* magazine, implied Hilliard was the artist's true identity. The joke was on Cooper, since Davis's professional identity as Hilliard was another "imagined identity." Davis has explained to me that her actual birth name is Clarence, which will be an important fact as my reading unfolds.
16. An alternate yet complementary reading of the name Clarence that I am offering here would link this white militiaman and the act of cross-race minstrelsy to the Bush-appointed Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, an African American who has contributed to the erosion of civil rights within the nation.
17. Here I risk collapsing all antigovernment militias with more traditional domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazis. Not all militiamen are white supremacists, and the vast majority of white supremacists are not in a militia. But Davis's Clarence is definitely concerned with racist militias whose antigovernment philosophies are also overtly xenophobic and white supremacist.
18. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 25.
19. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), 14.
20. *Ibid.*, 348.
21. For an example of this divide in classical Marxism, see Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), 145.
22. Mark Simpson, ed., *Anti-Gay* (London: Freedom Editions, 1996).

23. Ibid., xix.
24. Ibid.
25. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in Morley and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 433.
26. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 81.
27. Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance," 439.
28. Cornel West, "Afro-American Oppression and Marxism," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
29. Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance," 440.