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## “They lived their life and they didn’t bother anybody”: African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh’s Hill District, 1920–1960

*Laura Grantmyre*

Two photographs taken in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, probably in the late 1940s, and currently archived in the Carnegie Museum of Art’s Teenie Harris collection capture the prominence African American female impersonators once had in the neighborhood’s nightclubs and streets.<sup>1</sup> In one scene from the Pine Room at the Granville Hotel, the female impersonator Gilda flings her arms above her head and sings, as Sonny Hines, a local jazz crooner, stands behind the drum set with his back to the wall, enjoying her act (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In the other, families line Wylie Avenue’s parade route and watch at least one female impersonator dressed in a satin clown costume and high heels ride atop the Little Paris Cabaret’s limousine. One holds a sign beckoning spectators to “Meet me at Little Paris” (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

Similar scenes linger in Hill residents’ memories. Remembering the floor shows hosted by neighborhood nightclubs, Thelma Lovette, a social worker whose family founded black elite institutions like the Aurora Reading Club, explained, “That was quite popular at the time, attractive men who dressed like women. They could sing and dance.”<sup>4</sup> Ramon Woods, who worked at Hill District bars, remembers female impersonators participating in the community’s parades. Woods described parade participants in the 1940s as a “mixed group” including female impersonators and Elks Lodges.<sup>5</sup> According to these photographs and to Lovette’s and Woods’s memories, African American female impersonators visibly participated in the Hill District’s entertainment and street life during the 1940s.

My finding that the Hill’s social milieu visibly included female impersonators complicates popular and scholarly accounts of queer U.S. history.<sup>6</sup> According to one popular discourse, before New York City’s 1969 Stonewall uprising, gays, lesbians, and gender rebels were invisible and isolated.<sup>7</sup> Numerous historians challenge this myth by illustrating queer visibility and community forma-



**Figure 1.** Cross-dresser, “Gilda,” wearing feather boa and hat with feather performing with band, including Joni Wilson on drums, Edgar “Chandu” Thomas on bass, Jim Swann on trumpet, and Sonny Hines standing behind drums, in Granville Hotel, ca. 1946–53; b&w Kodak Safety Film; Charles “Teenie” Harris, American, 1908–1998; © 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive.

tions in earlier eras, primarily in New York City and San Francisco.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have expanded this initiative to queer communities in Buffalo; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Memphis; New Orleans; and Macon, Georgia.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, my research adds to this scholarly

revision by setting Pittsburgh’s Hill District alongside New York’s and San Francisco’s gay communities.

Documenting female impersonators’ visible integration in the Hill District, a predominantly African American neighborhood, also enhances a scholarly literature that refutes stereotypes of hyperhomophobic black communities.<sup>10</sup> The studies on Buffalo, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, and Macon show black neighborhoods as relatively hospitable environments for gay men and lesbians. According to Kevin Mumford’s “interzone” concept, city authorities in Chicago and New York during the 1920s pushed vice out of white neighborhoods by corralling it in discrete sections of African American



constituted part of the saloon's bawdy entertainment.<sup>13</sup> New Orleans's concert saloons dotted the city's main commercial thoroughfares and catered primarily to white audiences. In the early twentieth century, as city officials across the United States pushed vice and bawdy entertainments into black neighborhoods, black entertainment districts began hosting gender impersonators. By the 1920s and 1930s Harlem's male impersonator and blues singer, Gladys Bentley, famously performed in a tuxedo and top hat in front of a chorus line of female impersonators.<sup>14</sup> Buffalo's male impersonator, Jacki Jordan, performed at Mandy's, a bar in the city's black entertainment district that "drew a steady Black and white lesbian crowd."<sup>15</sup> The African American traveling variety shows that played in southern cities from Macon to New Orleans featured female impersonators from the classic blues era into the 1950s, including Princess Lavonne, later known as Little Richard.<sup>16</sup>

Although male and female impersonators' presence as performers in interzone and black entertainment districts has been well documented, scholars disagree about the degree to which African American gender rebels were integrated into larger black communities. Writing about "drag queens who performed before an overwhelmingly heterosexual audience" in Washington, D.C.,'s black entertainment districts, Brett Beemyn notes that "while they may have received a certain level of acceptance . . . [,] it was only as long as they remained a form of exotic entertainment."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Mumford queries whether Harlem's often-cited "examples of tolerance" such as Bentley and her chorus line "were exceptional." Mumford cites the "antivice rhetoric among black reformers and religious leaders" to suggest that Harlem's queer interzone "perhaps represented the relative powerlessness of black Harlemites to rid their neighborhoods of institutions they viewed as harmful."

Yet Mumford also considers whether "the greater number of clubs" that catered to queer sexual liaisons and gender-crossing "in Harlem might also suggest a tolerance for the marginalized among people with a long history of exclusion."<sup>19</sup> Along this line, Daneel Buring's research on Memphis embeds female impersonators in the black community. Peaches, Memphis's foremost African American female impersonator, marched through "black neighborhoods on Saturdays" as a majorette-in-drag and participated in the black community's citywide Cotton Carnival Jubilee Parade.<sup>20</sup> Finally, when conducting oral histories with black gay men in the South, E. Patrick Johnson asked each respondent, "Why do you think there are so many gay men in the churches, particularly in the choir?" Here Johnson assumes a gay presence in the church and in the choir even though, as Mumford notes, black religious leaders had explicitly vilified homosexuality for decades.<sup>21</sup>

The photographs, oral history interviews, and newspaper coverage my research utilizes nuance this scholarly conversation because they document female impersonators' relationships with the Hill's larger culture. We cannot get at the complexity of a neighborhood like the Hill District, with its constantly shifting yet consistently permeable racial, sexual, and gender boundaries, if we rely only on teleological and binary narratives of segregation and integration, narratives that are challenged by the Hill's female impersonators. According to these three sources, female impersonators carved out a space for themselves in the Hill by performing in local nightclubs; by being themselves as they meandered down the neighborhood's streets, shopped in its stores, and drank in its bars; and by forging personal relationships that helped transcend stereotypes. First, the Harris collection features multiple images of African American female impersonators performing, parading, and casually socializing in the Hill District. Although these snapshots do not disclose their intended audience's interpretations and reactions,<sup>22</sup> as bell hooks attests, snapshots are "shot spontaneously" and capture moments when African Americans were not "attempting to perfect the image for the white supremacist gaze."<sup>23</sup> Therefore collections of snapshots historically "announced" African Americans' "visual complexity."<sup>24</sup> The snapshots from the Harris collection, then, embed the Hill's female impersonators into hooks's visual complexity. Second, while oral histories of gay and lesbian communities have been a key source for queer histories, I have expanded this methodology by interviewing a broad range of Hill District residents and revelers to gauge how the whole community, not just the queer community, viewed female impersonators.<sup>25</sup> Third, the Hill District's historic black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, ran articles, short stories, reviews, and advertisements about female impersonators in the Hill that ranged from celebration to ambivalence to condemnation. The *Courier's* coverage, then, helps delineate the divergent attitudes that coexisted in the neighborhood.

According to these three sources, a "live and let live" ethos permeated Pittsburgh's Hill District during its heyday, the 1920s through the 1950s. This relaxed ethos enabled female impersonators to perform in nightclubs, participate in parades, socialize in beauty parlors, sing in church choirs, and gather in neighborhood bars. In these public spaces the Hill's female impersonators encountered a spectrum of attitudes more complex than either Beemyn's characterization of female impersonators as exotic entertainment or Buring's depiction of Peaches as a community symbol. Most Hill residents expressed a "live your life and I'll live mine" attitude toward female impersonators, accepting them as part of the community without necessarily befriending them. Some residents, however, developed close personal bonds with female impersonators, while a

minority lashed out at them with verbal or physical harassment. The Hill's female impersonators answered harassment with a verbal and physical agility that won them respect from onlookers and made some into local folk heroes.

### The Hurdy-gurdy Hill

In the 1920s when Phil Black, Pittsburgh's first prominent female impersonator, began performing at the Little Paris Cabaret, the Hill District's residents had a history of interacting with culturally diverse people. The Hill was settled in the 1820s when black and white elites moved to the hills east of downtown to escape industrializing Pittsburgh.<sup>26</sup> From the 1850s to the 1880s Irish and German immigrants, followed by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, African American migrants from the Upper South, and Syrian and Chinese immigrants, made the Hill the city's primary newcomer neighborhood and completed its ethnic mosaic.<sup>27</sup> During World War I a new wave of black migrants left the Deep South, particularly Alabama's steel and coal towns, to take advantage of the city's wartime labor shortage.<sup>28</sup> By the 1930s African Americans were a majority in the neighborhood, but even then the census showed that almost half the Hill's population included a variety of nationalities, including Italians, Chinese, Hungarians, Syrians, Russian Jews, Irish, and Germans.<sup>29</sup>

This patchwork of ethnic groups living side by side lent itself to interracial interaction. Children in the Hill went to multiracial elementary and high schools. Constance Brooks moved to the Hill District in the 1950s and remembers, "We all played together and we went to school together."<sup>30</sup> Unlike the segregated theaters and nightclubs downtown, the Hill's commercial amusements drew racially mixed crowds, particularly its jazz clubs. In 1934 Earl Morris's review of Derby Dad's Harlem Jungle Club for the *Courier* named it the only "black and tan that the iron city affords."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, two years later, the Javo Jungle Club claimed it was "where the best of both races go for diversion and 'different' amusement."<sup>32</sup> Doris Atkins, wife of a local grocer, fondly remembers the "everybody loved everybody" attitude that still permeated the Hill's nightlife in the 1950s: one night "back in the day" at the Hurricane nightclub, "I met a white guy and I fell in love with him and he fell in love with me."<sup>33</sup> Clearly, the Hill attracted interracial social and sexual mingling, much as Harlem's interzone had.

Considering the Hill's interracial conviviality within the city's larger racial context underscores the neighborhood's uniqueness. After World War I, the "last hired, first fired" policy of local industrialists eroded African Americans'

wartime economic gains. According to the historian Laurence Glasco, although 17,224 African Americans had jobs in Pittsburgh's seven major industries in 1923, when the economy dipped into recession in 1924, employers fired nearly ten thousand black workers.<sup>34</sup> Even during the war years, industry executives relegated 95 percent of their black workers to dangerous, unhealthy, and unskilled positions, and many white steelworkers displayed such animosity toward their black coworkers that the city's African Americans refused to join them when they struck in 1919.<sup>35</sup> In addition to economic discrimination and interracial tensions in the region's heavy industries, downtown department stores refused to hire African American salesclerks, and the local construction union refused to admit blacks, barring them from construction jobs.

Many African Americans in Pittsburgh responded to such economic discrimination and to Pittsburgh's de facto racial segregation with protests. In the 1940s the Urban League began picketing downtown department stores, urging African American consumers to boycott stores that would not hire them.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in the late 1960s the Black Construction Coalition used direct action to halt racially exclusive construction projects across the city.<sup>37</sup> Bridging these two eras of economic protests, sit-ins and swim-ins challenged segregation in Pittsburgh's restaurants, theaters, parks, and pools during the 1950s.<sup>38</sup> Yet desegregation protests never erupted at the Hill District's restaurants, theaters, parks, or pools, because they always boasted interracial crowds.

In addition to nurturing racial and ethnic diversity, the Hill District encompassed a broad spectrum of black cultural institutions. "Connie" Dorsett, a prominent drag queen from the 1960s, described the neighborhood's cultural diversity and its influence: "Everything used to go on in that Hill, so nothing was unusual."<sup>39</sup> This "everything" included a lively vice culture, again echoing Mumford's "interzone."<sup>40</sup> Brooks remembered "several houses of prostitution" in the Hill during the 1950s and had a cousin who "was a very high class prostitute."<sup>41</sup> In Brooks's experience, pimps and madams did not hide in crumbling bordellos. Rather, they gave away "food and money" on holidays and donated to fund-raisers organized by neighborhood children. She recalls, "If anything was going on and we were collecting for anything they would participate."<sup>42</sup> R.C. explained why the Hill accepted pimps and prostitutes as part of the community:

They go into the same stores you go into. They go into the same bars you go into. They go into the same barber. . . . Plus you know them. They weren't strangers who blew in out of Chicago. They're your cousins. They're your brother, the girls you went to school with, the boys you went to school with.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, people usually marginalized by respectable society were simply viewed as part of the neighborhood. Brenda Tate's mother taught her to respect the neighborhood's prostitutes as she respected all adults: "We had women in the community that were prostitutes but you called that woman 'Miss So-and-So.' . . . A child was made to respect that woman."<sup>43</sup>

For the most part, the Hill District's residents viewed the neighborhood's purveyors of vice as part of the community, but a handful of residents resented having the city's sex industry corralled in black neighborhoods. According to Dr. Curtiss Porter, who grew up in Braddock, a steel town east of Pittsburgh, in the 1940s and 1950s, it was widely understood that "the way the white boys lost their virginity was at a certain age they would all go to some section of some black community and engage prostitutes." Porter cites two examples: in "McKeesport . . . Brick Alley was famous for being a place where prostitution thrived and most of the customers were white," and in Braddock "it was where I lived, the Bottom." Porter remembers, "My [white] friends in high school would start talking about 'take us down to the Bottom' as in they could go out and get their rocks off." Ultimately, whites looking to buy sex in black neighborhoods "came to be seen as very disrespectful to black people and black culture."<sup>44</sup>

By the 1960s a subsection of Pittsburgh's Black Power movement, frustrated with the city's unwillingness to police vice in black communities, began policing their neighborhoods themselves. According to the Black Power and Black Arts activist L. Kiburi, there were "different people who would go on patrol" in the Hill District. Knowing "all the different places where the johns would frequent," these activists "would go and get into cars and make it uncomfortable for the johns to procure women."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in the summer of 1968 the Society to Promote Educational and Economic Development (SPEED) launched a campaign against bars in the Hill such as Hartzberg's, a bar popular with female impersonators, and the Ringside Bar, a renowned jazz bar.<sup>46</sup> SPEED compiled a list of "ghetto bars" in the Hill that maintained unsanitary conditions and sheltered "traffic in narcotics, prostitution, [and] habitual drunkenness" and picketed them, closing Hartzberg's tavern for a day.<sup>47</sup>

Yet according to Porter, moralistic antivice arguments failed to resonate with most neighborhood activists. Most people in the Hill, like Porter, understood prostitution in economic rather than moral terms: "You are talking about immorality and the woman who's working in prostitution is saying 'that's taking food out of my mouth.'"<sup>48</sup> Porter recollects a consensus among the city's Black Power and Black Arts activists that "these women ought to be trained and employed" so prostitution would cease to be "one of their easier

options or more viable options.”<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, some Black Power activists recruited rather than demonized pimps. For example, one of Porter’s friends “engaged one of the guys who was a fairly well known pimp to begin to try to help improve the community.”<sup>50</sup> Clearly, the antivice morality that flowered during the Black Power era remained a small element of the Hill’s activist culture. Most residents and activists continued to see sex workers as part of the community, which underscores how consistently the neighborhood eschewed traditional mores of respectability and offers a more complex picture of how the Hill was an interzone.

Moreover, socioeconomic distinctions roughly segregated the Hill District into multiple distinct communities with varying conceptions of respectability. The middle-class Upper Hill, known as “Sugar Top,” differentiated itself from the Lower Hill, which was known for its boarding houses and bordellos. According to Kiburi, “stereotypically” the Upper Hill was where “you would have . . . a lot of doctors . . . , a lot of quote ‘more middle class type people,’ and preachers, a number of preachers were up there.”<sup>51</sup> The socioeconomic differences between the Upper and Lower Hill echoed the cultural conflicts that erupted when migrants from the Deep South poured into the Hill during and after World War I. In the Upper Hill, elite and established African American families, who had mostly migrated to Pittsburgh from the Upper South before the twentieth century, bemoaned the influx of migrants from the Deep South and established exclusive social clubs like the Frogs, the Loendi Club, and the Aurora Reading Club.<sup>52</sup> These clubs hosted teas and lectures, and, according to local legend, refused to admit anyone whose skin tone was darker than a paper bag.<sup>53</sup>

Although class tensions separated the Hill into multiple, separate, and distinctive black communities, geographic and cultural overlaps knitted these multiple Hills together. In the Upper Hill, Kiburi remembers, “people had a little bit better income perhaps than over the Hill generally,” yet “there were poor people within that area, and I happened to be one of those.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, even though the Hill’s bordellos, boardinghouses, and nightclubs were concentrated in the Lower Hill, the area also encompassed highly respectable institutions. The Loendi Club, for example, stood at the center of the Lower Hill, a block away from clubs that hosted female impersonators such as the Little Paris, Bambola, and Hartzberg’s. Similarly, walking from Bambola and Hartzberg’s down Wylie Avenue toward downtown would have led one right by the elite Bethel AME Church.<sup>55</sup> According to Porter, a founder of the University of Pittsburgh’s black studies department and now chancellor of a branch of Penn State University, an “easy to-ing and fro-ing” characterized the Hill

District's social milieu during the 1940s and 1950s: "Blacks of all stripes, like the hard working men, the pimps and the street people, the studied and the educated, all basically hung out together."<sup>56</sup> Clearly, the Hill District's culture, even the famously seedy Lower Hill, encompassed more than a "black/white sex district," or interzone.

The Hill's black entertainment subculture helped foster this "easy to-ing and fro-ing." The Lower Hill boasted a multitude of jazz clubs such as the Crawford Grill, the Hurricane, Derby Dad's, the Little Paris, and the Bambola, which nurtured nationally renowned artists such as Billy Strayhorn, Lena Horne, and Earl "Fatha" Hines. As noted above, blues and jazz clubs in Harlem, Buffalo, Memphis, New Orleans, and Macon featured female impersonators starting in the 1920s.<sup>57</sup> The Hill's blues and jazz musicians also shared stages with female impersonators in the same era. In October 1924 the female impersonator Phil Black, "a well known Pittsburgh boy" and "a real bohemian dancer," appeared at the Little Paris Cabaret with the Little Paris's jazz orchestra.<sup>58</sup> When the Bambola opened in the mid-1940s, Gilda shared its stage with the blues singers Jo Jo Thompson and Andrew Tibbs.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, during the 1940s and 1950s Sonny Hines, whom the *Courier* called the city's "top crooner," played numerous shows with such female impersonators as Gilda, Michael Fields, and Maurice.<sup>60</sup> Female impersonators, therefore, blended into the "easy to-ing and fro-ing" Porter described in the Hill District, particularly on nightclub stages.<sup>61</sup>

Although the Hill's "easy to-ing and fro-ing" and popular entertainment life made the neighborhood's social lines permeable, people understood and experienced such line-crossing in highly complex ways. While the Hill's markets, theaters, nightclubs, and ballparks catered to extraordinarily diverse cultural mingling, its residents differentiated between public and private social interactions and made choices about whom to admit into their private lives. Tate's memories encapsulate these nuanced interactions. Although as a child she greeted prostitutes as "Miss So-and-So" when she saw them running errands on the street, she also remembered that "the vice did not come in contact with the better part" of the neighborhood.<sup>62</sup> So Tate knew these women as prostitutes, but the neighborhood's culture was organized so that even though "it was diverse, everything had its own place and you didn't bleed into it."<sup>63</sup> The Hill's female impersonators navigated this highly complex culture to claim a public presence for themselves.

## On the Stage: Female Impersonators as Entertainers

Like nightclubs in Harlem, Buffalo, Memphis, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Macon, 1920s and 1930s Hill District nightspots regularly featured African American female impersonators. Black's emergence at the Little Paris in the 1920s marked the beginning. During the 1930s, a local impersonator, Beulah, "held sway" on the floors of Derby Dad's, the city's prime bar for interracial mingling, where, according to the *Courier* writer William Nunn, she regularly "received orchids from big downtown butter and eggs men."<sup>64</sup> When Derby Dad's closed in 1939, Beulah joined Billie McAllister, a female impersonator from Chicago, at the El Congo.<sup>65</sup>

Performing as part of the El Congo's floor shows, Beulah and McAllister proved popular. A 1939 *Pittsburgh Courier* article titled "The El Congo Too Hot for Mere Words" promised its readers that "Billie McAllister, premier female impersonator, will present a new show titled 'Swing in Swing Time'" as part of the elite FROGS annual social classic, Frog Week.<sup>66</sup> The *Courier* added that McAllister would be appearing "with the Congo Darlings . . . doing the fancy steps; Harry Gibbs forcing smiles through the blues, Erlyne Pamplin and Lucille Grace in vocals—and the great Beulah, as usual."<sup>67</sup> Further, the article included full-length photographs of five evening-gown-clad divas captioned with their names and specialty. Here "Beulah Mae Wong: Female Impersonator" and "Billie McAllister: Female Impersonator" stood alongside "Erlyne Pamplin: Singer," "Wynetta Wayne: New Sensation in Song," and "Lucille Grace: Torch Singer."<sup>68</sup> By the end of the 1930s, then, female impersonators performed at an array of Hill nightclubs; alongside blues singers, dancers, and torch singers; and for audiences that included Pittsburgh's black elite.

During the 1940s Gilda took Beulah's place as the Hill's premier female impersonator, and the popularity of female impersonation began to peak. Gilda appeared as a regular part of the floor show at the Bambola club beginning with its grand opening in November 1946.<sup>69</sup> According to photographs of various Hill District floor shows from the Harris collection and to descriptions of floor shows in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, as part of local floor shows Gilda sang and danced alongside jazz bands, erotic shake dancers, comedians, blues singers, crooners, and torch singers sometimes as the top billed artist and sometimes as one supporting entertainer among many.<sup>70</sup> This snapshot (fig. 3) spontaneously captures one of Gilda's floor show performances.<sup>71</sup> Here Gilda is getting dipped by a muscular male partner in a straw hat and striped vest. Wearing a flower in her hair, Gilda expertly balances mid-dip, on her bent right leg with



**Figure 3.** Man in Caribbean costume, and cross-dresser “Gilda” performing, with audience in background in club, ca. 1930–70; b&w Kodak Safety Film; Charles “Teenie” Harris, American, 1908–1998; © 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive.

her left foot gracefully extended. The dancers’ thematic dress exemplifies the Caribbean-themed wardrobes popular in Hill District floor shows, and their position so close to the crowd illustrates the floor shows’ spatial flexibility. A young white man slouches in a chair directly behind the dancers, his pointed right foot forming a triangle with Gilda’s left foot. Just as Beulah performed before interracial crowds at Derby Dad’s in the 1930s, Gilda performed before an interracial crowd in this snapshot.

So many clubs hosted Gilda and other female impersonators at this time that a *Courier* columnist, E. M. Plummer, complained to nightclubs in 1941, “Don’t you think the public has had its fill of female impersonators . . . ? You’re running it into the ground.”<sup>72</sup> Despite Plummer’s griping, eleven years later another *Courier* writer exclaimed that the Pine Room’s “female impersonators really put on a sizzling show” and “have gained a big following.”<sup>73</sup> By the mid-1950s, then, not only did Hill District clubs fail to heed Plummer’s complaints, but their female impersonators continued to draw crowds.

Moreover, the 1950s saw even more local female impersonators joining the nightclub scene, as Michael “Bronze Adonis” Fields, Maurice, Riley Pleasant, and Coco joined Gilda performing at Hill District venues like the Musicians Club and the Pine Room.<sup>74</sup>

Although female impersonators performed at an array of Hill nightspots in the 1950s, the Bambola Club was their hub (fig. 1). Residents such as Lillian Allen associated the Bambola with female impersonators who, she remembers, “all went to the Bambola. . . . That’s where I met a lot of them.”<sup>75</sup> According to the gospel singer Wyatt Woods, several female impersonators such as Coco, Michael Fields, and Riley Pleasant clustered together at the Bambola: “It was a gay club and we’d go down. [Coco] always did shows there and that’s when I first met Michael Fields and Riley Pleasant.”<sup>76</sup> Finally, Ramon Woods, who regularly hung out at the Bambola, characterized the bar as “where all the gays was mostly. They run that club down there . . . all the entertainers was mostly gays,” including female impersonators, “tap dancers and guys that told jokes.”<sup>77</sup>

Even though Woods recollects the Bambola catering to gay men, the bar’s floor shows drew large and diverse crowds. As a testament to the crowds’ magnitude, Wyatt Woods recalls Coco regularly warning him that “you have to be down there at the Bambola at seven o’clock because they got a big show so you got to get in so you can get you a seat.”<sup>78</sup> Woods further characterized the crowds he competed with for seats at the Bambola as interracial.<sup>79</sup> The Bambola’s audience also reflected the black community’s diversity. Thelma Lovette, whose family counted itself among the city’s black elite and whose father prohibited her from going to the neighborhood’s seedier bars “because the family was well known,” remembered patronizing the Bambola once with her uncle.<sup>80</sup> Lovette recalled, “Uncle Frank took us into the Bambola Club, that was my mother’s brother and . . . a baseball player, but he was a well-known figure in the Hill.”<sup>81</sup> Finally, Sonny Hines performed regularly at the Bambola with the impersonators.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, not only did the female impersonators draw large racially mixed crowds, but they also performed with the neighborhood’s entertainment elite and in front of audiences that included Pittsburgh’s black social elite.

Female impersonators’ wide appeal broadened even more in the mid- and late 1950s when conventional social clubs outside the Hill District hired them to perform. For example, in March 1954 the Elks Lodge in Coraopolis, a western suburb of Pittsburgh, hired Gilda to perform with Sonny Hines and Johnny Wilson’s Combo.<sup>83</sup> The *Courier’s* social editor selected the performance as one of the paper’s four “Seagram’s Social Calendar” listings and encouraged its readers to “Bring your friends out” to the Coraopolis Elks Lodge “for an

evening of wholesome fun.”<sup>84</sup> A few weeks later, Gilda returned to Coraopolis for the Easter Sunday Gala where the Elks had her “present prizes to the ladies with the most beautiful Easter Bonnets.”<sup>85</sup> The Elks Lodge and the *Courier* clearly saw female impersonators, at least when they were working as entertainers, as “wholesome fun” and suitable to interact with respectable ladies and their Easter bonnets. At this point, then, female impersonators’ appeal extended beyond the Hill’s interzone, indicating a degree of cultural integration that echoes Buring’s description of Memphis and Peaches’s centrality to black neighborhood culture.

African American female impersonators’ broad appeal in the Hill District and satellite black neighborhoods such as Coraopolis diverged from downtown nightspots’ tendencies to segregate and veil drag acts. According to oral history interviews conducted for the Pitt Men’s Study by a public health expert, Tony Sylvestre, bars that catered to a gay clientele during the 1940s and 1950s and featured female impersonators sporadically popped up in downtown Pittsburgh. According to one gay black man, though, “there was no point in going” to downtown drag shows because the bars were segregated and he “wouldn’t be admitted anyway.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, in contrast to such Hill District bars as the Bambola that drew a cross section of the city’s races, sexualities, and social classes, downtown’s racially segregated bars catered to either gay or straight crowds. Advertising or a lack thereof marked another difference between downtown’s segregated show bars and show bars in Hill District. Over a hundred and twenty articles published in the *Courier* from 1920 to 1960 mentioned female impersonators. The majority of these advertised and reviewed Hill District female impersonator shows. In contrast, only seven *Pittsburgh Press* articles mentioned female impersonators during the same decades, and none of these seven advertised or reviewed a local show.<sup>87</sup> In Pittsburgh the Hill District and the outlying black entertainment districts it influenced marked a clear exception from downtown’s segregated and compartmentalized nightlife.

### **Off the Stage: Female Impersonators out in the Community**

The Hill’s black female impersonators carved out a public presence off the stage as well. City streets were one of the most important spaces where female impersonators made their presence felt. Their participation in Hill District parades introduced even those who avoided nightclubs to men who expressed themselves with femininity. The Harris collection contains a snapshot of at least one female impersonator dressed in a silk clown costume riding on the Little Paris limousine in a Hill District parade (fig. 3). Some Hill parade-goers verify

the impersonators' presence. Ramon Woods remembers female impersonators in the neighborhood's 1930s and 1940s Halloween parades that traveled on Centre Avenue and were known as "gay Christmas" even though they also included local Elks Lodges.<sup>88</sup> Gearial Singletary recollects that by the 1950s "Riley Pleasant and Bobby Huey and Coco and all of them would be in the parade."<sup>89</sup> Singletary attributes female impersonators' inclusion in parades to their integration into the neighborhood's culture; they constituted "part of the Hill District life" and naturally represented that life in parades and snapshots of parades.<sup>90</sup>

Female impersonators also had a more casual presence on the Hill's streets. Although some like Michael Fields and Coco generally wore men's clothes outside the nightclubs, others, like Gilda, cross-dressed in public with such panache they attracted admiring onlookers. As Wyatt Woods described Gilda, "You never seen her without her full dress on. . . . If she was going to the grocery store, you would think she was going to do a show."<sup>91</sup> Female impersonators' presence on daytime streets made people who did not attend their shows aware of cross-dressing. Kiburi, for example, never sought out female impersonators' shows, but remembers their presence because "I'd just see them on Centre Avenue walking up and down the street."<sup>92</sup> This presence also made children aware that men could identify and present themselves with femininity. For example, as an eleven-year-old in 1950, Constance Brooks saw a man dressed in women's clothes for the first time as she explored the Hill with some friends.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to seeing female impersonators on nightclub stages, in parades, and on the streets, Hill District residents interacted with them in public and semiprivate spaces like sidewalks, beauty shops, churches, and neighborhood bars. When Brooks saw her first female impersonator on the Hill's streets in 1950, what started as observation turned into personal interaction. According to Brooks, because she and her friends "knew there was something different" about the female impersonator, they "followed him." Brooks recalls, "After a while he must have got wise to the fact that we were back there." "He turned around and said 'are you girls following me?'" Caught, Brooks and her friends confessed. Realizing the girls were curious, "he started explaining . . . that he was a female impersonator" and that "he was a dancer" at a nightclub. Moreover, Brooks remembers that after his explanation, "I never bothered about it because they were what they were. They lived their life and they didn't bother anybody."<sup>94</sup>

Although many female impersonators performed onstage, their low wages necessitated extra employment. Such jobs created more opportunities for female impersonators to interact with their neighbors. For impersonators like Pleasant,

hairdressing became a viable trade.<sup>95</sup> According to Singletary, Pleasant “was one of the prominent hair dressers in the Hill,” and because she “was known for doing it all,” her salon “would be packed out during the week.”<sup>96</sup> Female impersonators also visited beauty salons as customers. Another hairdresser, Lillian Allen, recalls doing a female impersonator’s hair, or as she explains it, “the man that I did his hair and I didn’t know he was a man” at first.<sup>97</sup> Beauty parlors provided a public space where people could traverse the social distance created by the performer-audience divide at show bars such as the Bambola.

Female impersonators also participated in Pittsburgh’s church activities. According to Singletary, who attended Willow Way Baptist Church in Braddock, a female impersonator named Purcell “sang right in the church choir at Willow Way Baptist Church.”<sup>98</sup> As a choir member, Purcell “wore female’s clothes” and was accepted by both the pastor and the congregation. Singletary recalls that “the Reverend J. C. McLaughlin . . . had no problems about it,” and “my mother and them was all members of the church and they didn’t have no problems with it.”<sup>99</sup> Coco also bridged gay entertainment and church life by performing in church choirs with the renowned gospel singer Wyatt Woods. In later decades, Coco even toured with Woods’s gospel group, the Wyatt Woods Specials.<sup>100</sup> According to Woods, during the 1980s the gospel group performed at Pegasus, a gay bar in downtown Pittsburgh.<sup>101</sup> As a singer in church choirs and in the Wyatt Woods Specials, then, Coco not only moved comfortably within the city’s churches but also bridged the city’s gospel and gay scenes.

The Hill’s female impersonators also informally interacted with their neighbors at nightclubs and bars. As noted above, Lillian Allen and Wyatt Woods met several female impersonators who congregated at the Bambola. Spontaneous snapshots from the Harris collection render such interactions and their quotidian casualness visible. For example, this snapshot taken at an unidentified bar captures three female impersonators, dressed in varying degrees of glamour (fig. 4).<sup>102</sup> The female impersonator in the center wears a sequined bodice, full skirt, and above-the-elbow gloves. The friends who surround her, on the other hand, appear primed for a day at the office. While these three momentarily paused from their night of drinking and socializing to pose for the photo, the bar’s social world casually unfurled around them.

Although female impersonators visited numerous clubs in the Hill, Hartzberg’s was a favorite. Ramon Woods, who began working at the bar around 1953, remembers the bar attracting a gay crowd “before I got there.”<sup>103</sup> R.C., a retired mechanic and police officer, remembered “talking about female impersonators, not because they were featured to be female impersonators, but there was a lot of them in there, and that was Hartzberg’s, yeah, tons of



**Figure 4.** Three cross-dressers, one in dark evening dress with sequined bodice, posed in bar, possibly Crawford Grill, ca. 1959; b&w Kodak Safety Film; Charles “Teenie” Harris, American, 1908–1998; © 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive.

them.”<sup>104</sup> Yet prior to recollecting the “tons of” female impersonators who frequented Hartzberg’s, R.C. primarily remembered the bar for its food.<sup>105</sup> R.C.’s immediate association with food rather than female impersonators implies that they blended into the bar’s

milieu. Similarly, Brenda Tate, a police officer, noted Hartzberg’s fried foods and recollected that she “went in there quite a bit” and socialized with female impersonators at the bar because “everybody was interacting; it was like one big scene, one big bar.”<sup>106</sup> Doris Atkins remembers the Hartzberg’s crowd as “white and black,” highlighting the overlap between interracial mingling and gender-crossing that characterized Hill District bars since Beulah’s days at Derby Dad’s. Snapshots from the Harris collection further illustrate female impersonators’ casual presence at Hartzberg’s. A visual slice of one moment at Hartzberg’s, this photograph (fig. 5) captured Riley Pleasant as she wrapped her left arm around an unidentified grinning man and Sonny Hines smiled on her right.<sup>107</sup>



**Figure 5.**

Cross-dresser wearing light-colored evening dress, posed with arm around man, possibly including Sonny Hines on left, at bar with sign reading “No Dancing, Don’t spit on the floor . . .,” ca. 1959; b&w Kodak Safety Film; Charles “Teenie” Harris, *American*, 1908–1998; © 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive.

Female impersonators clearly had a presence on as well as off the Hill District’s stages. In beauty shops, bars, and churches and on the neighborhood’s streets, they mingled with gospel singers, children, hairdressers, police officers, and jazz singers. Thus their social lives seeped beyond the confines of the Hill’s sex district and

counted as more than “exotic entertainment,” or rare exceptions. Yet female impersonators’ public presence also reflected the Hill’s economic and cultural complexities. It is likely, for example, that female impersonators remained scarce in the Hill’s more elite residential areas. According to Lovett, whose family belonged to the FROGS and the Aurora Reading Club and lived in the Upper Hill, female impersonators were mostly “in the Lower Hill.” In fact, Lovett remembered, “I don’t recall seeing any of them in the area where we lived.”<sup>108</sup>

## Private Interactions and Attitudes

In the last photograph the exuberant grin on the unidentified man's face as Pleasant embraced him further captures the ambiguity that enveloped female impersonators' social interactions (fig. 5). The man's smile and taut posture could be read as an uneasiness that broadcasted his aversion to physical intimacy with men, or he could simply be rigid because he is nervous about spilling his two drinks. His grin is impossible to decipher based on the photograph, but attitudes expressed by oral history informants help nuance the degrees of acceptance and tolerance people felt toward female impersonators in their private lives and private thoughts.

People who invited female impersonators into their private lives got to know them as multidimensional humans. For example, Ramon Woods, who got to know many female impersonators when he worked at Hartzberg's, learned about Michael Fields's life outside the bars. When explaining why Fields moved to a house on the Hill's Granville Street, Woods remembered, "I think his mother owned that house. She got sick; that's why he came up there . . . so he could help her take care of that house."<sup>109</sup> Porter, who grew up in Braddock in the 1940s and 1950s, knew Purcell as a child. Porter reminisced that "I knew all the members of his family and . . . he knew all the members of my family."<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Purcell and Porter socialized in private spaces: "When people had the card party, everybody played cards, if Purcell played cards, you sat there and played cards." Likewise, according to Porter, "people weren't afraid to have [Purcell] around their children or anything like that." This indicates that at least some people's private relationships with Purcell resisted negative stereotypes that equated homosexuality with pedophilia.<sup>111</sup>

Such tolerance forged through intimate friendships endured over decades. Therefore, the friendships that female impersonators nurtured in the 1940s and 1950s made life easier for drag queens who came of age in the 1960s. Laneer Allen, who danced in Coco's drag revue, the Lavender Lads, in the late 1960s, described his mother's youthful interactions with the Hill's gay life. Allen's mother befriended female impersonators like Gilda, Michael Fields, and Coco at Hartzberg's and chatted with them on Hill District streets: "When I was a kid, if we happened to be out and she ran into one of them, they talked." Moreover, these relationships helped Allen's mother see past stereotypes. While other kids "heard all these things about what drag queens do to little boys" from their parents, Allen remembers, "My mother wasn't like that."<sup>112</sup>

Doris Atkins's relationship with D.C., a drag performer from the late 1960s, exemplifies this enduring tolerance. Atkins went to the Bambola every

weekend during the 1950s and visited Hartzberg's regularly where she met Michael Fields and Maurice. Atkins also knew D.C. during his childhood in the 1950s because he regularly played with her daughter. Atkins remembers that "when he was little he used to play with my daughter . . . as a little bitty thing he wanted to play with dolls." Atkins taught her daughter to share her dolls with D.C., who "would take my daughter's dolls home with him." Years later, when she lived across the street from D.C., she retained this positive attitude. Atkins remembers how "he would come down, him and his girlfriends, you know, and they'd be all dressed up in fancy clothes and he was beautiful."<sup>113</sup>

In contrast to these examples of intimate interaction and acceptance, most respondents expressed a "live and let live" attitude. According to Constance Brooks, the community's tolerance hinged less on embracing the impersonators' lifestyle than on their ability to stay out of people's way: "They weren't bothering anybody . . . even if you don't agree with what they were doing, just let them live their life."<sup>114</sup> Although Porter's comfortable relationship with Purcell exemplifies an intimate acceptance, the tolerance he described in the larger community had a mind-your-own-business flavor. Porter explained that an individual's sexuality "was only the business of people who wanted to consort with them or who didn't."<sup>115</sup> Although these "mind your own business and I'll mind mine" attitudes facilitated female impersonators' public presence by reining in hostility, they also limited female impersonators' abilities to openly discuss or publicly celebrate their sexual desires and relationships.

This conditional tolerance also influenced many Hill District residents and revelers to limit their interactions with female impersonators to particular impersonal contexts. According to Tate, female impersonators "stayed where they were," in bars like Hartzberg's, and "people just didn't interact [with them] through the day."<sup>116</sup> Moreover, even many people who appreciated them as performers never attempted to get to know them personally. Tate recalls, "You kind of looked at them as entertainers. . . . They were just there to entertain."<sup>117</sup> Because of this social distance, Tate, who interacted with Michael Fields for decades, thoughtfully reflected on the limits to their relationship: "I don't know anybody that was related to Michael Fields. I don't know any of his relatives out of all them years I knew that man."<sup>118</sup>

Complicating this pattern of indifferent restraint, some locals who understood female impersonators as part of the neighborhood nevertheless made them the butt of jokes that marked and mocked newcomers. Kiburi shared an excellent example of this humor: "I remember people . . . saying to somebody who might not know what Hartzberger's [*sic*] was . . . 'come on I'm going to take you down to Hartzberger's,'" which "would be a joke because they didn't

know” that Hartzberg’s was a gay bar.<sup>119</sup> The *Courier* provides another example of this humor in Chester Washington’s fictional 1940 tale about “Dorothy Dale,” a female impersonator who lures, drugs, and then robs “Happy Harry.” Happy Harry, a newcomer to the city, gets rich off the stock market and goes to a bar where “one could rub elbows” with “the gambler, the snitch,” and the “Sheeza-hee.” At the bar, Harry boastfully buys a round of drinks, but one “gorgeous creature” refuses his offer, responding to his advances by “blowing the scented smoke of the perfumed ‘weed’” she is smoking into his face and flirtatiously walking out the door. Harry follows and the woman, Dorothy, invites him to her apartment. While Dorothy fetches some Scotch, Harry thinks to himself, “So they call me a ‘square’ eh? Just a hick . . . Well I’ll show them . . . and when they hear about this they’ll respect me.”<sup>120</sup>

However, Dorothy spikes Harry’s drink, and the last thing he remembers is “a sinewy hand at his hip pocket where his money was.” When he comes to the next morning, Harry makes plans to report Dorothy to the police but notices “a large picture” of Dorothy with an autograph that reads, “Dorothy Dale, female impersonator.” The story ends with Harry pondering his reputation as “the Hill’s biggest ‘square’” and concluding “it cost him \$300 to realize that they had named him right.”<sup>121</sup> In the tale Harry is the greenhorn trying to prove himself to the guys on the avenue. Dorothy, on the other hand, is a regular character around the Hill and symbolizes city life’s cutthroat trickery. Dorothy constitutes a thread in the Hill’s cultural fabric in contrast to Harry, who remains “the Hill’s biggest ‘square’” partly because he was unaware of Dorothy. When Kiburi’s friends mocked newcomers to the city by steering them toward Hartzberg’s, they employed a similar subtext. In both Kiburi’s joke and the Dorothy Dale tale, female impersonators and their beaus might be cast as oddities, but they are oddities who reflect the city and demarcate newcomers as outsiders.

Female impersonators further embedded themselves in Pittsburgh’s black culture by verbally answering taunts with taunts. According to Kiburi, female impersonators “didn’t tend to just ignore” insults: “If somebody said something smart to them, they would say something back.”<sup>122</sup> Kiburi elaborated on the impersonators’ retaliations: “They would say something graphic and sexual.” This turned the joke back on the bully: “The person who had said it, their friends would laugh at them because [the female impersonator] came back on them pretty strong.”<sup>123</sup> When locals taunted female impersonators, they were attempting to verbally mark female impersonators as oddities through a ritual of witty insult. By verbally sparring with their harassers, indeed exceeding their tormentors’ wit, female impersonators wove themselves deeper into the street’s culture and stymied attempts to alienate them.

Finally, although oral history respondents recollected few instances of physical hostility toward female impersonators, some female impersonators' reputations as fighters made them local folk heroes. In fact, the existence of physical harassment can be verified more by their tough reputations than by specific memories of attacks. Porter, for example, remembers the tales that built Purcell's reputation more than specific incidents: "There are lots of stories of people who . . . violated that unwritten code of respect that says that Purcell's a cross-dressing homosexual male and that's his life . . . by calling him out of his name or aggressing him." In these stories, the aggressors always "found out that [Purcell] also would whoop your ass."<sup>124</sup> Of all oral history respondents, Ramon Woods detailed the only specific instance of a female impersonator getting into a physical altercation, but the tale boosts the impersonator's tough reputation more than it illustrates systematic harassment. According to Woods, "one night at the Granada bar," Fields "put twenty on the bar" to pay for a drink, and "the guy [next to Fields] picked his change up." Fields said, "Don't make me take this skirt off," and "the next thing you know, he done thrown the man and his stool out the door."<sup>125</sup> Woods rounded out his story by concluding that Fields "was a bad dude."<sup>126</sup>

The legacy the 1940s and 1950s female impersonators left for their successors illuminates the effectiveness of these self-defense strategies. According to Allen, the older generations facilitated his entrance into the gay life:

Most of us were accepted because, well, the first thing about drag queens, it was a multi-generational thing. It was a group ahead of me, which would have been Coco and them and then ahead of them would have been a group, Michael Fields and their group. . . . So it was a multi-generational thing.<sup>127</sup>

Most notably, by patronizing Hartzberg's year after year, Coco's and Field's generations provided their heirs a safe public space. According to Allen, "If you went to a club where there were older queens, a lot of the robbings, beatings, and things that happened didn't happen."<sup>128</sup> This protection led Connie Dorsett, who performed with the drag revue *Pink Fantasy* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to describe Hartzberg's as "our place" and explain that although "many straight people came in there," "they knew what they were coming into" and "not to go in there if you're not into it."<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholars have aptly documented female impersonators' eminence as performers in jazz and blues clubs in Harlem; Buffalo; Chicago; Washington, D.C.;

Memphis; New Orleans; and Macon, Georgia from the 1920s to the 1950s. According to Mumford's "interzone" concept, the blues and jazz floor shows that hosted female impersonators existed as part of "black/white sex districts," or interzones, which resulted from city officials corralling vice in black neighborhoods. These interzones, with their black-and-tans and sexually transgressive blues scenes, in turn, fostered interracial and queer sexual experimentation, including female and male impersonation. Yet the existing scholarship has not been able to document the degree to which female impersonators integrated into and influenced their neighborhoods, because most studies only gauge their influence on local queer communities. Asking how female impersonators interacted with larger communities broadens this scope and points to a grander influence.

In this Pittsburgh case study, snapshots, oral histories, and *Courier* articles document both the Hill District's social complexity and female impersonators' multifaceted relationships with the neighborhood. The Hill's "live and let live" attitude and "easy to-ing and fro-ing" across ethnic, class, sexual, and racial lines facilitated female impersonators' social integration. By maintaining a social presence in the neighborhood's parades, beauty parlors, card games, churches, and nightclubs, female impersonators' influence seeped beyond the figurative borders of the Hill's interzone vice district. Some people embraced female impersonators and the possibility that "boys" will not always be "boys," while most accepted female impersonators' presence as just another part of the neighborhood. A minority mocked or bullied them, but such reactions illustrate how female impersonators' public presence introduced *everyone* in the Hill to the possibility that "men" could dress, dance, sing, walk, talk, and even feel like "women."<sup>130</sup>

As a result, the bars, churches, and streets where Phil Black, Beulah, Gilda, Michael Fields, and Coco pioneered a presence from the 1920s through the 1950s continued welcoming drag queens like Connie Dorsett and Laneer Allen in the 1960s. As Connie Dorsett remarked, "Everything used to go on in that Hill, so nothing was unusual."<sup>131</sup> The Hill District was exceptional in this respect; walking in drag through downtown Pittsburgh still meant risking harassment or arrest.<sup>132</sup> Historical narratives bound to binary and formulaic conceptualizations of sexuality, gender, race, and respectability obscure the Hill's rich complexity. The Hill's female impersonators and the audience members, beauticians, and neighbors they interacted with traversed boundaries of sexual and racial respectability in their professional performative lives and in their personal ones. As such, they exemplify the constant negotiations that took place in mid-twentieth-century urban interzones.

## Notes

I would like to thank the Rev. Deryck Tines, whose *Carryin' On* photography exhibit sparked my interest in this topic. Cornelius "Connie" Dorsett, who gave two illuminating interviews and connected me to insightful interviewees such as Laneer Allen, Tonnette Johnson, Gearial Singletary, and Wyatt Woods, was indispensable to this research. Larry Glasco, Maurine Greenwald, and Jacob Richards helped me clarify my ideas through ongoing conversations and drafts.

1. I use the term *female impersonator* to describe men who wore women's clothes from 1920 to 1960 because it was the term used to advertise their performances and by the majority of oral history interviewees. Moreover, I want to avoid anachronistic phrases that would make assumptions about how people identified. While Gilda *seems* to have identified fully with femininity, the term *transgendered* overreaches the evidence.
2. Carnegie Museum of Art Teenie Harris collection, accession number 2001.35.1831.
3. *Ibid.*, accession number 2001.35.4719.
4. Thelma Lovette, interview with author, February 19, 2009, Pittsburgh.
5. Ramon Woods, interview with author, April 23, 2008, Pittsburgh.
6. Unlike many famous vaudeville female impersonators who cross-dressed only to entertain and pursued sexual relationships with women, the Hill's female impersonators identified with the gay life. For example, after Phil Black made a name for himself at the Hill's Little Paris in the 1920s, he moved to New York and became one of "the major personalities in gay society." Moreover, a later generation of drag queens and gay men identified them with their multigenerational gay social world and reported that they had well-known romantic relationships with men. Michael Fields, for example, ran an after-hours speakeasy with his male partner for decades. On female impersonators in vaudeville, see "Susie Sutton of 'Follow Me' Fame Brings Snappy Revue Here, For Week at Elmore," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 18, 1925, 10; "Susie Sutton Here Second Time, Pleases," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1925, 10; "Jack Johnson and All-Star Cast Go Big," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 24, 1925, 10; "At Roosevelt Next Week," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 27, 1933, A6. For an example of a vaudeville female impersonators' romantic ardor for women, see the female impersonator Alfonso Ziegfeld's wedding announcement in "No Title," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 4, 1935, A8. On Phil Black, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 297. On Fields and Black, see Cornelius "Connie" Dorsett, interview with author, February 22, 2008, Edgewood, Pennsylvania. Finally, for more on female impersonators and drag queens as physical symbols of queerness, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 4; Patricia Gagné, Richard Tewksbury, and Deanna McGaughey, "Coming Out and Crossing Over: Identity Formation and Proclamation in a Transgender Community," *Gender and Society* 11.4 (1997): 501; Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Chicks with Dicks, Men in Dresses: What It Means to Be a Drag Queen," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46.3–4 (2004): 113–33.
7. For example, writing before these photographs were archived, Michael Snow claimed Pittsburgh's gays and lesbians lived "under so deep a disguise as to render them invisible." Snow, "Dreams Realized and Dreams Deferred: Social Movements and Public Policy in Pittsburgh, 1960–1980" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2004), 57, 58, 59.
8. Two especially influential studies are Chauncey, *Gay New York* and John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
9. On Buffalo, see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); on Chicago, see Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Mumford, "Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay," *American Quarterly* 48.3 (1996): 395–414; Allen Drexel, "Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935–1960," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 119–44; and Joanne Meyerowitz, "Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The Furnished-Room Districts of Chicago, 1890–1930," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-cultural Reader in American History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 307–18; on Washington, D.C., see Brett Beemyn, "A Queer Capital: Race, Class, Gender, and the Changing Social Landscape of Washington's Gay Communities, 1940–1955," in *Creating a Place for*

- Ourselves*, 183–210; on Memphis, see Daneel Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Communities behind the Magnolia Curtain* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997); on New Orleans and Macon, see Marybeth Hamilton, “Sexual Politics and African-American Music; or, Placing Little Richard in History,” *History Workshop Journal* 46 (Autumn 1998): 161–76.
10. In addition to the studies cited above on Harlem, Buffalo, Chicago, Memphis, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Macon, notable rebuttals to this myth also include bell hooks, “Homophobia in Black Communities,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 120–26; Marlon B. Ross, “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 161–89; Roderick A. Ferguson, “Sissies at the Picnic: The Subjugated Knowledges of a Black Rural Queer,” in *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson, and Jennifer L. Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 188–96; and the introduction to E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Thaddeus Russell’s article “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” *American Quarterly* 60.1 (2008): 101–30, <http://lion.chadwyck.com/display/print View.do?area=abell> (accessed August 21, 2010) provides an excellent summary of queer black visibility and integration across regions prior to the civil rights movement.
  11. Mumford, *Interzones*, 20. See also Chauncey’s discussion of Harlem as a “cultural zone” with similar characteristics (*Gay New York*, 248). D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman also discuss the concentration of vice in African American, immigrant, working-class enclaves as a response to Progressive Era antiveice agitation in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 181.
  12. According to Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke’s study of turn-of-the-century New Orleans, the link between interracial commercialized sex and queer sexuality in New Orleans’s famed Storyville vice district predates Mumford’s Harlem interzone. In Storyville many of the African American and mixed-race prostitutes who sold sex to the city’s white elite engaged in lesbian sexual practices both professionally, for their clients’ voyeuristic pleasure, and privately, for their own pleasure. For more on Storyville, see Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke, “Sex Smashing, and Storyville in Turn-of-the-Century New Orleans: Reexamining the Continuum of Lesbian Sexuality,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 54–72.
  13. Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865–1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 72.
  14. On Gladys Bentley, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 318–31; Hamilton, “Sexual Politics and African-American Music”; and Carmen Mitchell, “Creations of Fantasies/Constructions of Identities: The Oppositional Lives of Gladys Bentley,” in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Contantine-Simms (New York: Alyson Books, 2000), 211–25.
  15. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 73.
  16. Hamilton, “Sexual Politics and African-American Music.” For elaboration on the ties between blues culture and sexual and gender queerness, see Hazel Carby, “‘It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in *Unequal Sisters*, 238–49; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
  17. Beemyn, “Queer Capital,” 194.
  18. Mumford, *Interzones*, 84. A lawsuit filed by a black church against the City of New Orleans in the late nineteenth century provides an early and illuminating example of such powerlessness. In 1897 New Orleans city officials quarantined commercialized sex in what became known as the Storyville district. Officials created the district so respectable society could avoid coming into contact with vice, yet they included an African American church and school in the district’s boundaries. The church sued, demanding that the city redraw the vice district’s borders, but ultimately lost its suit and watched its congregation dwindle in the ensuing decades. For more on the Union Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church’s lawsuit, see Long, *Great Southern Babylon*, 128–39.

19. Mumford, *Interzones*, 84.
20. Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis*, 107–8.
21. E. Patrick Johnson, “Church Sissies and the Black Church,” in *Sweet Tea*, 182–255.
22. These photographs come from the Carnegie Museum of Art’s Teenie Harris collection, but Dennis Morgan owned and organized the Harris collection prior to the CMA’s creation of the archive. When the Harris family and the CMA sued Morgan for the Harris photographs, he handed over his entire collection, including photographs he had collected by other photographers. According to Morgan, a photographer named Walter Allen took the photographs of female impersonators. Sadly, little is known about Allen, and Morgan crediting Allen rather than Teenie Harris renders well-known insights into Harris’s style such as his “One Shot” talent for capturing candid scenes, inapplicable to this study. Also, the female impersonator photos never appeared before the public until a local artist, Deryck Tines, exhibited them at the Warhol Museum in 2007. Therefore the photos did not come into dialogue with a viewing public in any measurable way until very recently. Information from Morgan about the Harris collection comes from interviews conducted by Tines and forwarded to the author.
23. bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: Norton, 1994), 50–51.
24. *Ibid.*
25. One drawback of oral history, especially in regard to the time period I have chosen to study, is that none of the female impersonators from the 1940s and 1950s are still living. Important questions about how they understood their relationships to local black communities, how they experienced and resisted racial oppression, and how they dealt with pressures to adhere to gender and sexual norms, sadly, remain unanswerable.
26. On the Hill District’s pre–World War I history, see Laurence Glasco, “The Hill District,” unpublished manuscript; Glasco, “Double Burden: The Black Experience in Pittsburgh,” in *City at the Point: Essays in the Social History of Pittsburgh*, ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 69–109; Glasco, *A Legacy of Bricks and Mortar: African American Landmarks in Allegheny County* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, 1995); and Glasco, “Taking Care of Business: The Black Entrepreneurial Elite in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh,” *Pittsburgh History* 78.4 (1995–96): 177–82.
27. Glasco, “Hill District,” 1–2.
28. *Ibid.*, 2; see also John E. Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 71; and Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks’ Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
29. Glasco, “Double Burden,” 80.
30. Constance Brooks, interview with author, February 20, 2008, Pittsburgh.
31. Earl J. Morris, “Grand Town: Day and Night,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 20, 1934, A8.
32. “Manhattan,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 14, 1936, A7.
33. Doris Atkins, interview with author, February 20, 2008, Pittsburgh.
34. Glasco, “Double Burden,” 77.
35. *Ibid.*, 76, 78. For more on racial discrimination in the steel industry, see Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).
36. Glasco, “Double Burden,” 93.
37. *Ibid.*, 90.
38. *Ibid.*, 93. For more on racial discrimination after World War II and Pittsburgh’s civil rights movement, see Laurence Glasco, “The Civil Rights Movement in Pittsburgh: To Make This City ‘Some Place Special.’” Freedom Corner Web site, <http://www.freedomcorner.org/downloads/glasco.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2011); and Joe Trotter and Jared Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
39. Cornelius “Connie” Dorsett, interview with author, Laurence Glasco, and Deryck Tines, October 23, 2007, Pittsburgh.
40. For more on prostitution, see Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, *Lives of Their Own*, 227.
41. Brooks interview.
42. *Ibid.*

42. R.C., interview with author, February 13, 2008, Pittsburgh.
43. Brenda Tate, interview with author, April 23, 2008, Pittsburgh.
44. Curtiss Porter, interview with author, June 11, 2008, McKeesport, Pennsylvania. While Kevin Mumford has adeptly documented that city officials in New York and Chicago purposefully herded vice into African American neighborhoods and Alecia Long has shown that New Orleans's city council chose to officially segregate sexual commerce in a district shared by a black church and black school, further research is necessary to determine whether city authorities in Pittsburgh intentionally pushed commercial sex into black neighborhoods. Regardless of intentionality, though, Porter's recollections illustrate that the end result was similar for Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, and New Orleans.
45. Lee Kiburi, interview with author, June 6, 2008, Pittsburgh.
46. "Speed Members Say They Will Appeal Conviction," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 14, 1969, 3.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Porter interview. Kiburi's interview also brought up this contradiction, noting, "And of course the black prostitutes, I don't think they liked it too much."
49. Porter interview.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Kiburi interview.
52. Lovette interview.
53. For example, Tines, Glasco, and Dorsett debated the veracity of the Loendi Club's "paper bag test" legend during Dorsett's October 23, 2007, interview.
54. Lovette interview.
55. Brooks interview.
56. Porter interview.
57. In particular, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Mumford, *Interzones*; Garber, "Spectacle in Color," Hamilton, "Sexual Politics and African-American Music"; Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime"; Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*; Harrison, *Black Pearls*; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Articles from the *Pittsburgh Courier* also document this relationship between jazz and female impersonators. For example, the following articles document ties between the New Orleans female impersonator Patsy Valdele and Louis Armstrong: "Louis Armstrong, Native New Orleans Boy, Gets Homecoming Welcome Sunday," *Courier*, October 21, 1945, 14; "Display Ad 1—No Title," *Courier*, October 21, 1945, 2; and "Armstrong Hot as Good Gumbo in N.O.," *Courier*, May 1, 1948, 15.
58. Ted Moss, "At the Cabarets," *Courier*, October 25, 1924, 8; see also "Gertrude Sanders and Clarence E. Muse at the Grand," *Courier*, February 13, 1926, 10, and "Popular Old Ritz Club Has Gala Re-Opening," *Courier*, July 22, 1939, 5.
59. "Bambola to Rock on Holiday . . . Plus Saturday, Sunday," *Courier*, November 30, 1946, 20; "Bambola Club Bounces for Holiday Season," *Courier*, December 21, 1946, 22.
60. "Hines, Wilson Stay at Pine Room," *Courier*, March 22, 1952, 24; see also "Display Ad 126—No Title," *Courier*, December 8, 1945, 23; "Sonny Hines Tops New Bill at E. E. El Cabana," *Courier*, October 14, 1950, 18; "Cotton Club Revue Hits El Cabana Nov. 23–24–25," *Courier*, November 25, 1950, 16; "Sonny Hines, Bronze Adonis Still on El Cabana Boards," *Courier*, October 21, 1950; "Gene Walker, Sonny, Michael, at Musicians Club on Aug. 19," *Courier*, August 21, 1954, 19.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Tate interview.
63. *Ibid.*
64. William Nunn, "Favorite 'Hot Spot' of Celebs of Stage and Screen So-o-o Naughty It's Closed Forever," *Courier*, March 30, 1935, 1.
65. "The El Congo Too Hot for Mere Words," *Courier*, August 5, 1939, 21.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. "Club Bambola Hypos Local Nightlife," *Courier*, November 2, 1946, 22; and "Bambola to Rock on Holiday . . . Plus Saturday, Sunday," *Courier*, November 30, 1946, 20; "Bambola Club Bounces for Holiday Season," *Courier*, December 21, 1946, 22.
70. For photographs of floor shows, see Harris collection accession numbers: 2001.35.4743, 2001.35.6229, 2001.35.2118, 2001.35.16505, 2001.35.2078; *Courier* articles with exemplary descriptions of floor

- shows include “Bambola Club Bounces for Holiday Season” and “Breckenridge Show Stay at Pine Room” (January 5, 1952, 21).
71. Harris collection, accession number 2001.35.2077.
  72. E. M. Plummer Jr., “Upper Valley,” *Courier*, November 8, 1941, 22; for advertisements of female impersonators shows in 1941, see display ad 97, *Courier*, November 8, 1941, 21; classified ad 2, *Courier*, December 13, 1941, 21; “‘One Big Night’ at Calanthean Hall Will Feature Two Bands, Entertainers,” *Courier*, November 22, 1941, 20; classified ad 2, *Courier*, December 6, 1941, 21.
  73. “Breckenridge Show Stay at Pine Room.”
  74. Ibid.; “Gene Walker, Sonny, Michael at Musicians Club on August 19,” *Courier*, August 21, 1954, 19; “Glamour Boys Appear Weekly at Musicians,” *Courier*, March 3, 1956, A31. See also Wyatt Woods, interview with author, February 11, 2009, Pittsburgh.
  75. Lillian Allen, interview with author, February 14, 2008, Pittsburgh.
  76. Ibid.
  77. R. Woods interview.
  78. W. Woods interview.
  79. Ibid.
  80. Lovette interview.
  81. Ibid.
  82. “Sonny Hines Tops New Bill at E. E. El Cabana.”
  83. Display ad 57, *Courier*, March 20, 1954, 16.
  84. “Seagrams Social Calendar,” *Courier*, March 20, 1954, 17; “Little Bea Featured at Coraopolis Elks April 4,” *Courier*, April 3, 1954, 17.
  85. Display ad 65, *Courier*, April 17, 1954, 17. Similarly in 1958 Maurice performed at the Jolly Seven Club’s tenth anniversary gala: “Big Cabaret Dance at Paramount Sat.,” *Courier*, July 19, 1958, A14. The event was organized by Louise Pamplin, a prominent Pittsburgh social organizer: “Club Organized,” *Courier*, January 22, 1955, 10.
  86. “Alfred,” interview with Tony Silvestre, September 24, 1989, Pitt Men’s Study, University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health.
  87. These data came from entering the search term “female impersonator” in the *Courier’s* Ethnic News Watch ProQuest database for the years 1920–60 and entering the same search term in the *Pittsburgh Press’s* Google Advanced News Archive Search for the same years.
  88. R. Woods interview.
  89. Gearial Singletary, interview with the author, January 25, 2009, Pittsburgh.
  90. Ibid. See also W. Woods interview, who also remembers Coco and Riley Pleasant in parades.
  91. W. Woods interview.
  92. Kiburi interview.
  93. Brooks interview; Laneer Allen also remembered female impersonators in the Hill as a child. They “did not exist in my memory prior to my going to the Hill.” Laneer Allen, interview with author, May 16, 2008, Edgewood, Pennsylvania.
  94. Brooks interview.
  95. Laneer Allen, Milton Austin, Cornelius Dorsett, Herman Hill, Wyatt Woods, conversation with author, December 15, 2007, Pittsburgh; Singletary interview; W. Woods interview.
  96. Singletary interview.
  97. Allen interview.
  98. Singletary interview.
  99. Ibid.
  100. W. Woods interview. See also Laneer Allen, telephone interview with author, August 5, 2009. For more on the Wyatt Woods Specials, see Mattie Trent, “Women’s Meetings’ Pastoral Programs, Gospel Songfests Feted,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, April 12, 1980, 15; Trent, “Men and Youth’s Day Highlighted,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 31, 1980, 9; and “National NAACP Meets Here,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, April 11, 1981, 3.
  101. W. Woods interview.
  102. Harris collection, accession number 2001.35.3195.
  103. R. Woods interview.

104. R.C. interview. See also Kiburi (interview) who remembered Hartzberg's as "a place that homosexuals were known to be at" and described the link between gays and Hartzberg's as "a commonly known thing" that people knew "by reputation."
105. R.C. interview.
106. Tate interview.
107. Harris collection, accession number 2001.35.5799. On identity of Riley, see Singletary interview; and W. Woods interview.
108. Lovette interview.
109. R. Woods interview.
110. Porter interview.
111. Ibid.
112. Laneer Allen interview.
113. Atkins interview.
114. Brooks interview.
115. Porter interview.
116. Tate interview.
117. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
119. Kiburi interview.
120. Chester Washington, "Up and Down the Avenue," *Courier*, July 6, 1940, 7.
121. Ibid.
122. Kiburi interview.
123. Ibid.
124. Porter interview.
125. R. Woods interview.
126. Ibid. Fields's well-known reputation for toughness came up repetitively in oral history interviews. Kiburi: Fields "had a reputation of being able to fight," and friends told each other, "don't nobody mess with Michael Fields"; Tate: Fields "was big and strong, he had muscles. And he'd tell you in a minute, 'I might be a faggot, but I ain't no punk'"; and Atkins: "When somebody would really harass [Fields], he would fight them. He could fight too. He'd beat them up."
127. Laneer Allen interview.
128. Ibid.
129. Dorsett et al. interview.
130. One avenue for further research arises from this idea. In addition to introducing their neighbors to the possibility that "men" could dress, dance, sing, walk, talk, and even feel like "women," to what degree did the Hill's female impersonators' influence local femininities? Did Gilda influence how local songstresses sang? To what degree did local women borrow stylistically from female impersonators? For example, how did hairdressers such as Pleasant influence feminine styles? How did female impersonators' influence on femininities vary across race and class? Was their influence greater on black women or white women, on working-class, middle-class, or elite women? Finally, to what degree did female impersonators' performance of femininity influence local heterosexual male desires?
131. Dorsett et al. interview.
132. Ibid.