

## CHAPTER 6

### Un/Staging White Beauty<sup>1</sup>

A glimpse into the diary of Thomas Viola Rieske

#### Preface

*Ever since my first drag performance, I've been dreaming of singing the song 'Downtown' at the beginning of a show and welcoming an audience with this wonderful piece of music. With the first tunes resounding, I'd hold back my big excitement and step gracefully onto the stage, smiling warmly and gently. As soon as I'd start singing 'when you're alone and life is making you lonely you can always go', the audience would recognise the song and a few of them would sing the first 'Downtown' along with me. Prior to the second 'Downtown', I'd smile at the audience, open my eyes wide and gesture them to be my choir which they'd naturally do. The rest of the performance would run as smoothly as my curls felt when I had washed them with conditioner. My gold sequin dress would reflect the stage lights in a thousand directions, and although I wouldn't be able to see anyone's face in the anonymous dark, I'd know for sure that everyone's eyes would be as sparkling as mine. I'd be wearing my high heels which would be especially cool after the show when I'd mingle with the audience, hovering above everyone like an angel. I'd have to watch that I pull my shoulders back and push my chest forwards in order to be really present. Otherwise, I'd be looking like a faded flower in the muddy water of a vase on a kitchen table that no one cares about, not even enough to throw it away. My make-up would*

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*be simple and I'd try out the nail polish trick that I've discovered on this great website for crossdressers: I wouldn't paint it on the whole nail, but I'd leave a little space on the sides so as to make the fingers look slender. Elegant and warm, the charming Viola.*

*A while ago, I noticed there's something wrong with this fantasy. In the following, I describe an attempt to bring on stage the problems I've recognised.*

## **Monday**

Last night I went to Lulu's monthly meeting, this time it was a beauty salon. While we put on an amateur face mask that looked like puke and rubbed avocado on our hands, we watched *Pretty Woman*. In spite of my critical studies of gender, I still loved many moments such as when Vivian is wearing that stunning red dress and Edward puts a dazzling necklace onto her soft skin. But there's so much paternalism in that movie, so much sexism, racism and classism. I noticed how much I, in my own performances, cite the image of femininity that Julia Roberts embodies in that film. I take up the role of a white beauty. I make up myself and I get admiration and compliments, and every now and then, when I'm wearing a tight skirt, someone grabs my butt. Just like the straighties. Why do I enjoy this role? Why did I never notice that problem, why has no one ever said anything? The only one who ever criticised me was Iris cos she was reminded of her own oppression when she saw a photo of me in a corset and fishnet stockings.

This morning, I went to Linda's farewell brunch. When I told everyone that there had been reports of muggers in Görliitzer Park, Zakari said he wouldn't go there at night anyway out of fear of a racist attack. Wham – his remark pointed the finger right at the particularity of my 'warning', at my assumption that everyone can pass through this park as safely as I do. In this situation, my performance at the Gender Studies party this Saturday came to my mind. I still don't know what to do there, but I recalled that 'Downtown'-performance I used to dream about. This fantasy is actually quite particular as well, I mean I'm a white generous woman in that plan, and I seem to invite everyone to 'forget all their troubles, forget all their cares, and go Downtown', but who's kept out of place there? Am I really speaking to everyone, regardless of any differences? Are the queer spots I



ausschließend  
(exclusive)

go out to really as inclusive as we delude ourselves? Does the assertion of the inclusiveness make an interrogation impossible?<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, one might argue that downtown is a 'being together of strangers'<sup>3</sup> where racism is suspended for a while. When Wayne King wandered the streets of New York, no one would call him 'Abo', and there were people from all around the world.<sup>4</sup> New York's Broadway is where Tony Hatch got the idea for the song 'Downtown' which he wrote with Ben E. King in mind.<sup>5</sup> Performed by a Black soul singer, it could have had a totally different meaning.

But still, if I sing that song as I used to imagine it, and a white audience responds to it enthusiastically, it's an unmarked, and that means white fantasy that's being enacted. I could sing the song and project images of white people onto the wall behind of me so as to make the white interpellation visible.

But how could I, parallel to that, criticise the position and codes of the white beauty? Maybe some horrifying photos could help, maybe photos of violence and while they are depicted, I destroy my own beauty. This, however, would link the abandoning of white beauty with horror and violence, and it would be an appropriation of the position of the harmed. The white beauty as the one who is harmed by white supremacy? No way.

I called Iris and asked for advice, cos if I use photos of whities only, no one will get the message. Iris suggested I use pictures of laughing white faces first and a photo of a Black street-sweeper at the end. We realised this allocates Black people a pitiable position so we thought about using a photo of refugees at a demonstration, holding a banner saying 'residency for everyone'. This, however, would express white leftist's desire for the subaltern's revolutionary impact. We couldn't come to a conclusion. As to the deconstruction of the white beauty, she suggested I cut my hair on stage, symbolising a

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<sup>2</sup> Sunil Menon (2005) argues that 'non-white people are not often part of this [punk, T.R.] community because we allow practices that are comfortable for white people to go unchallenged as if they are either comfortable for everyone, or if their not, then it's okay anyway because we have our struggle and they (the non-white 'other') have theirs'.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 319).

<sup>4</sup> King (1996). 'Abo' is an abusive word for Aboriginal people in Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Mick Patrick (2003).

rupture and non-conformity. When I told Zarah about this, she thought that'd be pretty cool.

It's Valentine's Day tomorrow. I'd be glad if Ron brought me some flowers for that reason, even though I'd find it politically problematic. There we are, Pretty Woman...

## Tuesday

Read the *Drag Queen Anthology*<sup>6</sup> today. Rhagan Rhyne analyses Divine's performance in John Waters' *Hairspray* concluding that anti-racist white drag queens can create an imbalance in whiteness through performing an imperfect femininity and imperfect class.<sup>7</sup> Ok, so now the trashy drag queen isn't only the origin of the queer revolution, but also of the anti-racist one.<sup>8</sup> Maybe Divine did a successful disidentification of whiteness, beauty and femininity but I doubt that I can do something similar in the context I perform in.<sup>9</sup> Besides that, I wonder who can recognise an impersonation of imperfect femininity as such and on top of that can build the link to whiteness. Most of the white gay men and women I see at drag shows wouldn't be surprised to learn that race and gender are socially constructed<sup>10</sup>, but they wouldn't draw conclusions for their own practices. And of those who are new to the critique of white heteronormativity, most wouldn't have the contextual knowledge necessary to understand a drag show in terms of a denaturalisation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Rhyne (2004, p. 189).

<sup>8</sup> See Marjorie Garber (1992, p. 17) for a similar perspective: 'Transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself'.

<sup>9</sup> See Carsten Balzer (2004), for an account of forms of drag within the gay subculture of Berlin, Germany.

<sup>10</sup> Here, I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003, p. 141) critique of the politics of 'revealing' the artificialness of social manifestations.

<sup>11</sup> See Moya Lloyd (1999) who points out the importance of the context to the understanding of a particular text or performance.

Actually, I don't wanna focus on denaturalising whiteness and its performative failure.<sup>12</sup> This strategy would leave aside my own position in the field of whiteness.<sup>13</sup> Many white drag queens use irony which distances themselves from their characters, as if they could escape the power relations they and their characters are entangled with. The permanent reiteration of drag show's critical potential are 'claims to performativity'<sup>14</sup>: they confer the attribute 'critical' on drag queens, their fans, and of course their academic advocates, thus giving them the authority to speak. But this is not performative, it's declarative.<sup>15</sup>

Someone once said that the 'drag' in 'drag queen/king' is an abbreviation for 'dressed-as-girl/guy'. Maybe I should call myself a drag performer then, i.e. 'dressed-as-queer'. This would include performances where I'm both or neither gender, and it opens up a discussion of queer performances as potentially merely declarative.

In the evening, I talked to Steph about my performance plans. In a nutshell, he said I wanted to 'interrogate the ideal world', so I could make poverty the theme of the photos exemplifying the excluded. Good idea, but that would leave whiteness unnamed again which I definitely want to avoid. Steph had some doubts as to whether it is possible to put everything I've read into a three-minute performance. Apart from this, I felt relieved that he didn't completely dismiss my ideas.

Steph had concerns about using photos of Black people as well. I'd appropriate them and turn their bodies into a capital that I use to my own ends.<sup>16</sup> He mentioned Felicitas who had spoken about similar issues in her

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Eske Wollrad (2005). According to her, understanding whiteness in terms of an 'identity that has to be reproduced performatively again and again' (418, my own translation) would exclude the experiences of Black women. In addition, whiteness wouldn't be interrogated in terms of its 'terrorising violence and its historical and contemporary dimensions' (ibid., my own translation).

<sup>13</sup> See Ghassan Hage (1998: 55 – 67) for the concept of 'field of whiteness'.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 54).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. bell hooks (1992, pp. 21 – 39).

seminar. I wrote her an email, asking for advice. I actually doubt she'll respond, cos at the end of the day I'm asking her to endorse a discussion amongst whites where Black people do not play a significant role. In theory, I'm aware of that problem, but in sending that email to her, I ignored it.

We also discussed cancelling the whole project. The increasing stress that I feel is detrimental to finding clarity about the problems that come up. Giving the paper at the Lancaster conference prompted me to do this performance, and I've ended up doing the same in both instances – performing alone. More and more, I think this issue would be safer in the hands of a collective of whites and non-whites. It would be hard to find a group, though. I couldn't just walk up to Paisley Dalton and say 'Hey, I'd like to do something about racism on stage', supposing she'd be interested because she's Black.<sup>17</sup> It's something that develops out of an existing social network. When I came to Sydney, I seemed to tumble into alliances of people of colour and white people straight away, but I've never found them in Berlin. Have I ever looked for them?

I felt less and less entitled to do my performance.<sup>18</sup> But I can't chicken out now; pulling out would be a withdrawal. Not wanting to reproduce the same old shit is one thing, but this mustn't turn into a fear of getting criticised that keeps me from at least making an attempt. At the same time, I don't want the only positive aspect of my performance to be the fact that I'm putting this issue on the agenda. Then the white leftists at the party would say: 'Ah, good that we've done this, thank you' and no more worries.

There was another thing Steph noticed. The photos remain in the background while I'm always in the centre.<sup>19</sup> I got the idea I could leave the stage before the song finishes. Thus I could express the idea of relinquishing the privilege of being in the centre. The audience would be left alone with the pictures running and I wouldn't be there to be applauded. Steph liked

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<sup>17</sup> Paisley Dalton founded Black Girls Coalition in Berlin, an organisation which offered information and help for Migrants.

<sup>18</sup> See Karen Brodtkin (1999) on feelings of entitlement as central to white privileges.

<sup>19</sup> See hooks (1992). She criticises films that 'make black culture and black life backdrop, scenery for narratives that essentially focus on white people' (32).

this a lot, and ultimately, I took his support as an authorisation as if he freed me from any possible critique.

Maybe I could use words instead of photos! A photo of a white woman singing could be followed by a word like 'beautiful', and then the word 'white'.

### Wednesday

Reading Ursula Wachendorfer's text on *Being White in Germany*<sup>20</sup>, I noticed that my thoughts about the photo show were based on an all too easy classification of people into Black and White. Jesus, I've read about this so often, but again I've treated racial boundaries as if they were distinct and stable. It's like I needed a permanent reminder of all the problems bound up with whiteness, something like a list of them attached to the wall of my toilet.

Wachendorfer also said that white people can feel all alone when they interrogate whiteness, cos they're breaking the consensus. I don't feel that danger cos the critique of whiteness should be quite established amongst the audience on Saturday. They'll be leftist and anti-racist, and they've had quite a few discussions on subtle forms of racism there.

I got more ideas for the performance. I could turn around in the middle of the song and look at the slide show behind of me, seeing a word like 'white beauty' which throws me. I'd falter and eventually stop singing. Realising it's a critique of my own position, I'd take off my dress and cut my hair, literally discarding the white beauty. Not sure about the hair thing though, cos it can be seen as a cool action which endows me with a new privilege through being punk and cool. Also, how can I do it without having to shave my whole head afterwards? I'm not gonna run the machine across the middle of my head. I've noticed that I tell everyone I discuss the performance with that I'm sick of my haircut anyway. This is precisely what we once said in our research group: I only relinquish those privileges I can live without anyway, while maintaining the position of having the choice<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Wachendorfer (2001).

<sup>21</sup> Forschungsgruppe Lebensführung (2004: 20).

Is it really Thursday tomorrow, not Saturday yet? I can't believe how much time is still left. I couldn't really concentrate on reading today, cos thousands of pictures and thoughts were going through my head. The decision to work with words instead of photos of Black people makes me feel relieved and proud in some way. Not proud as in arrogant, rather proud as in satisfied. I feel the satisfaction of having come to a consequent decision at last.

### Thursday

While I was taking a shower this morning, I was so lost in thoughts that I put the shower lotion into my hair, but in that moment I got a new idea: I could use photos of myself. More and more, the aim of my performance is to share my own anger about my entanglement with white supremacy. This would become clearer if I used photos of my own performances.

I went on the internet to find some additional photos of white people partying, but I got into trouble. Occasionally, there were photos of people of colour (mind you, in each case they were depicted together with white people). According to my new plan, I didn't want these photos, I had to exclude them. Isn't that silly? Because I am focussing on my own anger, I'm making the space whiter than it actually is, and there's no reference to the Black knowledge that informs my critique. How would people of colour read the performance, they might find it narcissistic. To them, there's probably no need to point out that this is a white space. They witness whiteness daily, as Sara Ahmed wrote<sup>22</sup>. I can only hope that the audience – shit. I mean the white members of the audience – will feel a little bit more uncomfortable in these kinds of spaces in future.

In the course of the evening, my mood slumped. On the way to the people's kitchen, I noticed that I'm repeating a pattern of the original performance: I deploy the figure of the white mtf crossdresser in order to be able to speak<sup>23</sup>. Aren't I using queerness as a tool to get out of whiteness, which brings me right into the centre of it?

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<sup>22</sup> Ahmed (2004: 15).

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Probyn (2004: 14) argues that 'the spiral of searching for a more recognisably disempowered subject position from which to begin' leads to a disavowal of complicity.

It got worse when I thought of that new book on Critical Whiteness Studies in Germany<sup>24</sup>. I'm afraid I'd be discouraged after reading the article entitled 'whites keep white spaces white'. I should know about the most recent publications but I can't get the book at the moment. I notice that I've developed something like a Black super-ego, a person of colour arguing from a postcolonial feminist perspective and telling me how problematic my project is. In a way, my projections onto people of colour show whom I feel responsible to, but they're objectifying and they show that I haven't really integrated the critique of whiteness, cos otherwise I wouldn't need this super-ego. A white guy who can't deal with the limitedness and shortcomings of his thinking and acting.

While I was eating, I noticed an unspecific disgust towards everything white. How the other guests were sitting there, their faces grinding the invisible food, swallowing it, incorporating it. Making it vanish to find harmony. With every minute, I more and more felt I needed to get away, a holiday to the sea, but then I thought back to Linda's farewell on Monday, when Zakari told someone how he's survived since he's been illegalised. How he's always in danger of getting caught, and then he'd be gone. My wish for a holiday looks absurd under this light. Zakari can't even go to a conference on residency issues in Hannover, cos there might be cops on the train. Your passport please, detention centre, 'your personal itinerary with Lufthansa' and then persecution in Togo. Meanwhile I am sitting on the seashore, the wind blows around my nose and at no point do I ever doubt my entitlement to travel, for example to Lancaster.

Some white people tell me I ruminate too much, they suggest I just do it and see what happens. But this is what white folks usually do, just doing it, and then all the problems come up. But maybe my brooding is a sign of the unwillingness to accept what is obvious, as in the 'melancholic rumination'<sup>25</sup> that preceded my decision about what photos I want to use. How ridiculous was last night's pride and satisfaction.

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<sup>24</sup> Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche and Susan Arndt (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Probyn (2004: 14).

## Friday

I went to Iris to rehearse. For the slide show, we took terms that Iris had written down in one of Felicitas' seminars, when she spoke about dichotomies. To me, they never seemed important enough to write them down, they clashed with my kind of learning, my aversion to taking notes. When I went through the show, my body told me what I wanted to do in the last part. I found myself leaving the imaginary stage somehow insecure and dissatisfied, not in the elegant and proud fashion that I start the performance with. After I've finished with cutting the hair, I'll turn back to the slide show which at this point displays the term 'white space' in conjunction with a photo of an audience that looks like the one I'm performing in front of. I'll realise that I'm part of this, and that discarding the white beauty didn't help. But I'm not leaving hanging my head, cos that would imply that I immerse myself into guilty feelings and run away from my responsibility. Rather, it shall look like a search for a space that challenges white dominance more. After I've left, words like 'cold' and 'exclusive' will appear, and at the end 'silent'. Meanwhile, the karaoke song will continue. That'll hopefully make the audience develop a feeling of 'there's something wrong here'.

In the underground, there were three guys sitting next to me. Initially I didn't notice them cos I was browsing through the Critical Whiteness Book which I have now managed to borrow from Steph. They called someone a faggot, a guy wearing a skirt whom I've seen at some parties recently. They weren't aggressive, so I just tried to stare at the homophobic bloke, but he wouldn't look back at me, and it was kind of ridiculous anyway. I probably wouldn't have done it if I hadn't known they were getting off the train somewhere else than I would.

That was a pretty big shock, I haven't heard that word for a long time. I had completely forgotten that I lack the privilege of not being affected by that word. There I was: insecure, voiceless, and invisible/hiding. I've come to overestimate my position. Is this an inevitable part of dealing with white privileges? Is it Critical Whiteness Studies that, while stressing the importance of an intersectional perspective, often discuss white privileges relatively homogeneously? Or do I have a limited understanding of the issue? I don't know.

## Sunday

So much happened last night, can't put it into words. Just a few points:

Insecurity at the arrival, cos the location is declaredly antiracist. Was I doing my critique in the wrong space?

Very tense after the final rehearsal; pretty bad singing in the first part. Kat, this stupid glamour queen, was making silly comments. All of a sudden, I felt surrounded by ignorant whites, all of a sudden, I did feel like a killjoy, like I was breaking the consensus.

When I took off the dress during the performance, only a few cheered, so they got it wasn't a strip. But afterwards, the mc said 'Thanks to the charming Viola'. I did not intend to be charming, for fuck's sake!

Not much feedback. Ron didn't understand the word white in relation to whiteness. But Luke, oh my goddess, he's understood everything. He said, I sent shivers down his spine, and he told me I had a talent for performing. To my surprise, Nick raised a lot of interested questions, it looks like our friendship is getting a totally new dimension and quality.

## Afterward

*Weeks later, people came up to me and asked me what this performance was about. I explained that I had been thinking about white dominance in queer spaces, and that there had been a call for papers for a conference encouraging me to think about this more. I told them that I had kept a diary in the days before the performance and that this diary would be the basis for a paper at that conference. Methodologically speaking, I did a qualitative experiment: I put myself into a particular situation and gathered data from the process I went through. I was genuinely interested in what would happen to me in that week and how others would react. With the data (the diary), I did what all researchers do. I changed it in order to make sense out of it. I wanted to produce a text of the kind that I like most in the field of critical whiteness studies: one that interests me, ashes me, unsettles me.<sup>26</sup> And one that teaches me about the experiences of others. But don't believe this text to be the exact diary I wrote*

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<sup>26</sup> With Anna Gibbs (2005), I would call this fictocriticism: writing as research in order to make a difference.

*in that week! I left out parts that I found either useless or not ready to be published. I also elaborated on some thoughts after finishing the performance, and I shuffled the sections so as to make the text more readable.*

*Only the Sunday entry was one I didn't change much. It expresses a kind of capitulation. All my thoughtful deliberations were supposed to make me stronger, more confident with what I was going to do. But the EVENT, with all its thousand particles that move around regardless of space, time, or subjects, is much stronger than any plan. The many ideas incorporated in my diary have been dispersed by these particles, and I am not able to trace them. Even though I can look at the original diary, I can barely find them in there because the dispersal affects present, future and past. What I do know is, at least for some moments and for some people, I have become someone new, and I have altered the situation. When I saw a video recording of the performance myself, I was really impressed by the impact the last words of the slide show had even on me: 'cold, exclusive, silent' – even a year later, these words moved me, and at once I feel as insecure as I did while I left the stage, awaiting the audience's final response.*

*Yet, how realistic were my feelings of insecurity? Did I articulate a critique that put my social and material position at risk?<sup>27</sup> Not really. I applied several techniques to stay on safe ground, one of which was the refusal to shave my complete head. I did this performance only twice, cos it was only in two situations that I felt it might make sense to present this show – but this was always also a decision about whether I felt safe enough to do it. Isn't it ridiculous to resort to a concept such as safety as a white person in a white space? I remember one of the questions that the white panel speakers at the Out of Place conference got: Had we been involved in alliance politics? In terms of queer performances, I have been part of shows that also had people of colour in them – but these were rare occasions, and there were no alliances. So, although the critique of whiteness is written on my body, I still have the privilege to decide when and where to present my critique, and I still have the privilege to deploy the position of a white drag beauty if I want to.*

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault (1983) calls this 'parrheisia', a form of truth-telling discussed in Greek Philosophy. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2003) suggest it as a political strategy in the context of postcolonial feminism. It is a form of self-critique without narcissism, and a form of confession not of sins but of the experience of power and the resistance to it.

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