Indexing Polyphonous Identity in the Speech of African American Drag Queens

In this chapter, I examine the presence and use of a “white-woman” style of speaking among African American drag queens (hereafter AADQs). I hope to demonstrate that a close examination of this language use suggests an ambivalent, sometimes critical, sometimes angry, view of whiteness that does not lend itself to a simplistic explanation of “wanting to be white.” After discussing the issue of drag itself, I will discuss the ways in which AADQs create a “white-woman” linguistic style. However, this style of speaking is only one voice used by AADQs. The complete set of linguistic styles together index a multi-layered identity that is sometimes strongly political with regard to issues of racism and homophobia.

Before discussing the issue of drag, it is important to distinguish drag queens from other transgender groups, such as transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, and female impersonators. Transsexuals are individuals who feel that their gender identity does not correspond to the sex that they were assigned at birth. Many (but not all) transsexuals undergo hormone treatment or “sex-reassignment” surgery as means of altering their physical appearance to match that typically associated with their gender identity. Transsexuality and homosexuality are independent issues, and transsexuals may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual (cf. MacKenzie 1994). In contrast, drag queens do not identify themselves as having female gender (that is, they do not see themselves as women).
Unlike transsexuals, transvestites identify with the gender corresponding to their assigned sex. The terms transvestite and cross-dresser refer to anyone who wears clothing associated with the other gender. The term transvestite does not necessarily refer to an individual who fully crosses gender roles, and it may be used for situations such as a man wearing women’s undergarments under traditional “male” clothing. Studies have suggested that between 72 and 97 percent of male transvestites are heterosexuals (Bullough & Bullough 1993). In contrast, drag queen refers almost exclusively to gay men (with drag king referring to lesbian cross-dressers).

The term female impersonator is very similar to drag queen, although (like transvestite and cross-dresser) it may be used to refer to heterosexuals. Female impersonators are professional cross-dressers who typically focus their performances on creating a highly realistic likeness of a famous woman (such as Diana Ross, Cher, Reba McEntire, or Madonna). Glamour-oriented drag queens (or “glam queens”) often produce a physical representation of hyperfeminine womanhood that is quite similar to that of female impersonators. The performances of female impersonators generally build on their ability to “pass” as women, however, and drag queens usually make no pretense about the fact that they are (gay) men, even though they may present a realistic image of a particular type of woman (cf. Fleisher 1996:14–15). Also, female impersonators generally perform for the amusement of heterosexuals, whereas drag queens perform for lesbian and gay audiences. Although both female impersonators and drag queens may produce highly similar external conceptions of femininity, the intent and attitude behind their performances are quite different.

All the drag queens in this study are glam queens. They typically go to great lengths to produce a highly feminine image. In addition to wigs, makeup, and “tucking” (hiding one’s genitals), drag queens often use duct tape to push their pectoral muscles closer together to give the impression of cleavage. Glam queens almost always wear high-heeled shoes and shave their arms, legs, chest, and (if necessary) back. The dresses worn by glam queens are quite extravagant, often covered in beads or sequins. Many dresses do not have sleeves or have high slits to make it clear that the wearer is not trying to hide masculine features under clothing. Jewelry is almost always worn, especially large earrings and bracelets. The overall goal is to produce an image of hyperfemininity that is believable—an image that could “pass” for a woman. The ideal of glam drag is to be “flawless,” or to have no visual hints of masculinity that could lead one open to being “read” (insulted; see also Morgan, chapter 1, this volume).

The drag queens I studied are professional entertainers who work primarily in gay bars. In order to become a full-time professional, a drag queen must achieve a certain degree of exposure, usually by working without pay or by winning beauty pageants. Thus, to become a professional, a drag queen must prove that she is sufficiently flawless. Drag queens who are not flawless may be viewed as “messy”: lacking professionalism both in the image produced and in the demeanor presented in the bar. Thus, a messy queen is often one who is unsuccessful at presenting an image of “proper” femininity (both in speech and poise). The term messy may also be used for queens who cause problems by spreading gossip or getting into trouble through drugs, alcohol, theft, or prostitution. A messy queen has little chance for success as
the producers of the program did not realize that there was no connection between her status as a drag queen and Berle’s use of women’s clothing to produce humor at women’s expense. As she describes it, “They didn’t get that my take on drag is all about love, saying that we are all drag queens. It’s certainly not about putting women down. And it’s not about being the butt of a bunch of cheap dick jokes” (1995:181).

In addition, drag queens sometimes see themselves as fighting against gender oppression in general, a cause that many feel should garner support rather than disdain from feminists. And despite the role of drag queens in the gay liberation movement (cf. Duberman 1993; Marcus 1992), many gay men openly express scorn for drag queens. Hapi Phace, a New York drag queen interviewed by Julian Fleisher (1996), points out, “The thing that you have to remember is that as drag queens we have a lot of the same issues as feminists in our own dealings with the gay community. To gay men, we’re considered ‘women.’ We get to see a lot of the misogyny in gay men” (Fleisher 1996:33–34). This view sees drag performers (both kings and queens) as part of a larger set of individuals persecuted by an intolerant society for their deviance from prescribed gender norms. As Leslie Feinberg argues, “it’s really only drag performance when it’s transgender people who are facing the footlights . . . the essence of drag performance is not impersonation of the opposite sex. It is the cultural presentation of an oppressed gender expression” (1996:115). In other words, drag is not intended as a negative portrayal of “women” but rather is an expression of a particular gender performance (cf. Butler 1990)—a performance by those who are themselves oppressed by the forces of patriarchy.

Part of the fascination with drag is its ability to cause such diverse reactions in different contexts and with different audiences. In some instances, cross-dressing is used as a weapon of misogyny and even homophobia. In other contexts, drag may serve to question the rigidity of prescriptive gender roles, acting as a tool of liberation. One of the main functions of drag performance is to expose the disunity between perceived or performed identity and underlying “authentic” biographical identity. The “meaning” of drag is often created by audience members in their individual attempts to reconnect their physical perceptions of the performance with their personal assumptions concerning social identity and gender categories. Many drag queens argue that they are not really trying to “achieve” any great social message but are merely expressing their personal identity (which happens to involve cross-dressing).

The celebration and even glorification of drag by queer theorists such as Butler might be seen as exploiting drag-queen identity for the sake of theoretical deconstruction of gender categories. Like the feminist view of drag as inherently misogynistic, the view that drag is inherently subversive imposes a unidimensional meaning on the personal identity of a particular group. But there are certainly cases in which drag-queen performances are clearly misogynistic. As Miss Understood, another of Fleisher’s interviewees, argues, “I think that men in general are pretty misogynist. Men are sexist all the time and if drag queens are men, of course there’s going to be sexist things coming out of their mouths” (Fleisher 1996:32). Although drag queens may be misogynistic at times, their personal identity as drag queens does not make them de facto sexist. In many cases, they may be viewed as highly subversive. Thus neither the view of drag as inherently subversive nor as inherently misogynistic is

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“correct.” Rather, drag queens are individuals whose social identity no more determines their political stance than any other aspect of their personal identities, such as gender, class, or ethnicity. Indeed, the performances by AADQs considered here generally focus on other aspects of identity (such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class) rather than on the issue of cross-dressing itself.

Polyphonic identity and acts of performed identity

Historically, sociolinguistic studies have tended to view identity monolithically, often assuming a one-to-one relationship between language use and membership in some identity category (usually based on class, race, or sex). Speakers were “allowed” only a single identity that was typically mapped onto a particular identity category. Those who did not fit the norms of language usage were implicitly viewed as possessing a “failed” identity, as with William Labov’s (1972) jama or Peter Trudgill’s (1983) concept of conflicting identity. Thus the fact that some speakers could not easily be classified into a particular identity category on the basis of their language usage was seen as a problem with the speaker rather than a problem in the research paradigm.

As Maryellen Morgan (chapter 1, this volume) points out, Labov’s focus on unemployed adolescent boys in his study of African American Vernacular English (hereafter AAVE) has contributed to stereotypes of what constitutes a “real” African American identity. Sociolinguistic research has typically perpetuated the myth that one must speak AAVE (and must usually be a heterosexual male) to qualify as a “true” African American, leaving many African Americans classified as “jama” or simply ignored. This myth of what constitutes African American identity is especially relevant to African American gay men. Because of the combined forces of racism in the white gay community (cf. Beame 1983; Boykin 1996; DeMarco 1983) and homophobia in the African American community (Boykin 1996; hooks 1989; Monteiro & Fuqua 1994), African American gay men are often pressured to “decide” between identifying with African Americans or with white gay men (Peterson 1992; Simmons 1991; Smith 1986; Tinney 1986). Due to the stereotypical view that AAVE is somehow tied exclusively to young heterosexual men and is a strong marker of masculinity (cf. Harper 1993; Walters 1996), the use of “Standard” English by African American gay men (including drag queens) contributes to the argument that they somehow abandoned the African American community by identifying themselves as gay. Thus simplistic conceptions of the relationship between language and identity in sociolinguistic research may serve to reinforce the racism and homophobia prevalent in American society.

More recently, as studies in language and gender have moved to a practice-based approach (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992), it has become clear that identities based on categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity are often enmeshed in very complex ways. Expressions of gender are simultaneously expressions of ethnicity (Bucholtz 1995; Hall 1995) and of class (Bucholtz, chapter 18, this volume; McElinnny 1995; Woolard 1995). Hence the concept of a prescriptive norm for “women’s language” is often a reflection of ideology concerning not only gender but also race and class.
Given the complex relationship between linguistic form and identity, performers often use specific language to communicate their identity to the audience. This can be achieved through various means such as the use of certain words, phrases, or even the structure of the speech itself. For example, African American performers often use certain linguistic features that are associated with their identity, such as the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This language can be used to create a sense of authenticity and can help the performer connect with the audience on a deeper level.

However, the use of language is not the only way to communicate identity. Performers also use body language, vocal intonation, and other nonverbal cues to convey their identity. This is known as nonverbal identity, and it is often used to reinforce the language-based identity. For example, a performer might use a certain posture or gesture to convey their identity, even if they do not say a word.

In conclusion, identity is a complex concept that can be communicated in many different ways. Performers use a variety of means to communicate their identity to the audience, and this can have a significant impact on how the audience perceives them. It is important for performers to be aware of the many ways in which they can communicate their identity and to use these tools effectively to create a meaningful and engaging performance.
pass as a woman, the audience must be occasionally reminded that the performer is indeed performing rather than claiming a female identity. Thus, although glam queens present an external image of exaggerated femininity, they also use language both to create and to undermine this surface image. For example, drag queens frequently use a stereotypically “feminine” speaking style, but a stereotypically “masculine” voice may break through during the performance, creating a polyphonic and often ambiguous performed identity.

Within the performances of AADQs in particular, a crucial aspect of communicative competence is the rhetorical device of signifyin(g) (Abrahms 1976; Gates 1988; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Smitherman 1977). In signifyin(g), the full intended meaning of an utterance does not rest solely on referential meaning. Rather, an utterance is valued because of its ability to index an ambiguous relationship between the signer and the signified. Thus the signer does not simply correspond to a particular concept but indexes a rhetorical figure or skill at verbal art. In signifyin(g), a speaker draws attention to language itself, particularly to her or his skill at using language creatively. Specific attention to language (rather than referential content) may be created through a variety of devices, including the creation of polysemy or ambiguity, the creative use of indirectness (Morgan 1991), and the contrastive use of a particular style, as in reading dialect (Morgan, chapter 1, this volume). Signifying relies on the listener’s ability to connect the content of an utterance to the context in which it occurs and specifically to sort through the possible meanings and implications of an utterance and realize both the proper meaning and the skill of the speaker in creating multiple potential meanings.

Successful performances by AADQs typically include cases of signifyin(g). A highly effective instance of signifyin(g) is sometimes picked up by other drag queens for use in their own performances. Example (1) has been used fairly widely by various AADQs in Texas:

(1) Drag queen: Everybody say “Hey!”
Audience: Hey!
Drag queen: Everybody say “Ho!”
Audience: Ho!
Drag queen: Everybody say “Hey! Ho!”
Audience: Hey! Ho!
Drag queen: Hey! How y’all doin’?

This example draws on the form of a call-response routine, a rhetorical trope sometimes associated with African American sermons and often used in drag performances. The example relies on the polysemy of the word ho as both an “empty” word frequently used in call-response routines by drag queens and as an equivalent of whore. After leading the audience into the chant and getting them to yell “Hey! Ho!” the drag queen reinterprets the word ho, taking the audience’s chanting of ho as a vocation. The polysemy is dependent on the connection between the utterance and the context. Performances of AADQs contain numerous examples of signifyin(g), in many of which the polysemy is achieved through the juxtaposition of language styles or social dialects.

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White women’s language among AADQs

Marjorie Garber (1992) notes that there is a long tradition of simultaneous movement across lines of both gender and race/ethnicity. For AADQs, the move to perform female gender is often accompanied by a simultaneous movement across lines of race and class. Sometimes an AADQ will openly state that she is actually white. For example, The Lady Chablis, a Savannah drag queen made famous in John Berendt’s (1994) Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, often refers to herself as a “white woman.” Berendt describes one of her performances as follows: “I am not what I may appear to be,’ she will say with apparent candor, adding, ‘No, child, I am a heterosexual white woman. That’s right, honey. Do not be fooled by what you see. When you look at me, you are lookin’ at the Junior League. You are lookin’ at an uptown white woman, and a pregnant uptown white woman at that!” (Berendt 1996:14). As a “pregnant uptown white woman,” The Lady Chablis moves from being a gay African American who is biologically male and from a working-class background to being upper-class, white, heterosexual, and female. In her autobiography, The Lady Chablis refers to herself and a close circle of friends as the Savannah League of Uptown White Women (or SLUWW). SLUWW was formed “to honor the belief that all of us [the league members] is entitled to spend our days sitting up under hairdressers, going to lunch, and riding around town shopping—all at somebody else’s expense” (1996:173; original emphasis). She defines an “uptown white woman” as “the persona of a classy, extravagant, and glamorous woman—big car, big rings, etc., adding parenthetically, “(This term can be used for all women regardless of color)” (1996:175; original emphasis). The term white woman refers primarily to a class rather than an ethnic distinction and also collapses the categories of “real” women and drag queens. Thus each of us has the potential to become an “uptown white woman,” no matter what our sexual, racial, ethnic, or gender identity may be. Instead of suggesting a category based on sex or race, white woman indexes a prevailing ideology of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity that enforces a particular view of what constitutes “femininity” in U.S. culture.

The combination of particular identity stances (white, rich, female, and heterosexual) works to produce a cultural conception of what constitutes the feminine ideal. This ideal femininity is often associated with the idea of being a “lady.” As Esther Newton (1979:127) notes, “Most female impersonators aspire to act like ‘ladies,’ and to call a woman a ‘lady’ is to confer the highest honor.” The “white-woman” style of speech as used by AADQs represents a stereotype of the speech of middle-class white women, of how to talk “like a lady.” This stereotype is closely tied to Robin Lakoff’s notion of “women’s language” (WL), which also depicts a stereotype of white middle-class women’s speech, a fact that Lakoff herself recognized (1975:59). Mary Bucholtz and Kim Hall (1995) have noted the pervasiveness of WL as a hegemonic notion of gender-appropriate language. Because it is such a strong symbol of ideal femininity, WL is a powerful tool for performing female identity. For example, Lillian Glass (1992) reports that she used Lakoff’s (1975) Language and Woman’s Place in speech therapy with a male-to-female transsexual to produce gender-appropriate language use. Similarly, Jennifer Anne Stevens (1990) presents many of the features of WL in her guidebook for male-to-female transgenders. In addition to discussing issues of hormones
and offering tips on choosing makeup and clothing. Stevens presents details about creating a feminine voice. Many elements of Lakoff’s WL are included in the features of feminine speech that Stevens suggests, including tag questions, hedges, the use of “empty” adjectives, the absence of obscenities, and the use of intensive so.

Because of the power of WL as a stereotype of how middle-class white women talk (or “should” talk), I will use it as a basis for discussing the “white-woman” style of AADQs’ speech. Here my use of the term white-woman style is intended to reflect this stereotyped representation rather than the real behavior of any actual white women.

Lakoff summarizes the main characteristics of WL as follows:

1. Women have a large stock of words related to their specific interests, generally relegated to them as “woman’s work”: magenta... dart (in sewing), and so on.
2. “Empty” adjectives like divine, charming, cute.
3. Question intonation where we might expect declaratives: for instance, tag questions (“It’s so hot, isn’t it?”) and rising intonation in statement contexts (“What’s your name, dear?” “Mary Smith?”).
4. The use of hedges of various kinds. Women’s speech seems in general to contain more instances of “well,” “y’know,” “kinda,” and so forth.
5. Related to this is the intensive use of “so.” Again, this is more frequent in women’s than men’s language.
6. Hypercorrect grammar: Women are not supposed to talk rough.
7. Superlative forms: Women don’t use off-color or indecent expressions; women are the experts at euphemism.
8. Women don’t tell jokes.
9. Women speak in italics [i.e., betray the fear that little attention is being paid to what they say]. (1975:53–56)

Of these nine elements of WL, AADQs utilize only the first six. Several of these, such as the use of precise color terms and “empty” adjectives, overlap with gay male speech. However, AADQs typically distinguish between the two styles. For example, the “empty” adjectives in the gay-male style of speaking are characterized “gay,” such as flawless, fierce, fabulous, and so on. In the “white-woman” style, the empty adjectives are more similar to those discussed by Lakoff. For example, in (2a) an AADQ asked why I was studying “drag language.” When told that I was a linguist, she responded with Oh, really, that’s cute, where cute seems fairly devoid of meaning. Example (2b), also from a Texas AADQ, provides further instances of intensifiers and “empty” adjectives (really and cute). (Note also the use of intensive so in example (2b).)

(2a) A: ... drag language? What is...
B: He’s a linguist ... linguistic.
A: (overlap) My brain is dead.
A: Oh really ... that’s cute.

(2b) Oh, my, my... I lost a ring y’all and I am vexed [= vexed]
Really vexed, because...
I have no idea where it is and I just bought that little ring and it’s so cute.

Example (3) is taken from an interview with RuPaul on “The Arsenio Hall Show.” This example demonstrates the use of final high intonation on declarative sentences (Lakoff’s second characteristic of WL):

(3) L H L H* L
You guys, I wish there was a camera so I could remember
H* L H
all the love you’re sending to me
L H
and the...
L H
the love energy from over here.
L H*
You’re absolute the best.

In these examples, AADQs use careful, “Standard” English phonology. In other words, they use “correct” prescriptive pronunciations as opposed to phonological features stereotypically associated with AAVE. This “white-woman” style is the most common speaking style among AADQs, and the ability to use this style is considered vital to the success of AADQs’ performances. The use of this style also distinguishes AADQs from other African American gay men. Thus it functions both to index stereotypes of white femininity and to construct a unique drag-queen identity that appropriates and reworks the symbols of “ideal” femininity.

Performing polyphonal identity

Although the use of the white-woman style of speaking is closely tied to ideals of expected feminine behavior, AADQs do not use it exclusively. If such speakers actually wanted to be white, one would expect them to use white women’s speech in an attempt to gain the social standing afforded to white women. Frequently, however, they use the “white-woman” style as a type of dialect opposition (Morgan, chapter 1, this volume) in which this style is contrasted with other styles of speaking, primarily AAVE, to highlight social difference. In fact, the use of white women’s speech among AADQs is itself a type of signifying. It indexes not only the social status or identity of white women but also the ability of a particular AADQ to use the “white-woman” style effectively. Most of the remaining examples are cases of polysemy created through dialect opposition, reflecting the ambiguity of signifying. These examples demonstrate that although the “white-woman” style is a vital characteristic of AADQs’ identity, its use does not imply an underlying desire to be white. Rather, the white-woman style is one of numerous stylistic voices related to drag-queen identity and is used to create specific personas and changing identities throughout the course of a performance. Other stylistic choices, such as AAVE or gay male speech, are used to “interrupt” the white-woman style, to point out that it reflects a performed identity that may not correspond to the assumed biographical identity of the performer.
As noted earlier, AADQs do not adopt the last three characteristics of WL (avoiding off-color expressions, not telling jokes, and speaking in italics). Although all of the features of WL are related to "acting like a lady," these three are perhaps the most important keys to "ladylike" behavior. Lakoff notes that they may indicate that women realize "that they are not being listened to" (1975:56). One major difference between the "ladylike" behavior represented by WL and the behavior of AADQs is that "ladies" do not make themselves the center of attention, whereas drag queens often do little else. AADQs sometimes flaunt the fact that they do not meet the standard of proper middle-class women's behavior by using obscenities strategically. In example (4), a drag queen points out that she is not supposed to use words like fuck and shit, accentuating the fact that she deviates from the prescribed linguistic behavior of middle-class white women:

(4) Are you ready to see some muscles? [audience yells] . . . Some dick? Excuse me I'm not supposed to say that . . . words like that in the microphone . . . Like shit, fuck, and all that, you know? I am a Christian woman. I go to church. I'm always on my knees.

The statement I'm always on my knees is an instance of signifying in that it conveys double meaning. In the context of the utterance, it suggests that the speaker prays all the time. Because it is spoken by a drag queen in a gay bar, however, it also insinuates that she frequently performs oral sex on other men. The failure to have an ideal "ladylike" way of speaking (the use of obscenities) is paralleled in the failure to have appropriate "ladylike" sexual behavior. Here, the white woman style co-occurs with obscenities that suggest the "falseness" of the performed white-woman identity. By creating two contrasting voices within a single discourse, the performer plays off of the disjuncture between performed ("female") and biographical ("male") identity.

In example (5), a Texas AADQ moves from speaking fairly "Standard" English in a high-pitched voice to using an exaggerated low-pitched voice to utter the phrase Hey what's up, home boy to an African American audience member. This monologue occurred in a gay bar with a predominantly white clientele. The switch serves to reaffirm the fact that the AADQ is African American and biologically male while simultaneously creating a sense of solidarity with the audience member to whom it is addressed. (Note: a butt-fucking tea is anything that is exceptionally good.)

(5) Please welcome to the stage, our next dancer. He is a butt-fucking tea, honey He is hot. Masculine, muscled, and ready to put it to ya, baby. Anybody in here (hot) as (fish) grease? That's pretty hot, isn't it? (Switch to low pitch) Hey what's up, home boy? (Switches back) I'm sorry that fucking creole always come around when I don't need it.

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The speaker apologizes with that fucking creole always come around when I don't need it, but the word creole is pronounced with a vocalized /l/, and the verb come is spoken without the "Standard" English /s/ inflection. Thus, in apologizing for her use of AAVE (or "creole"), she continues to include features characteristic of AAVE in her speech (just as the apology for using an obscenity in example (4) involved the continued use of obscenities). This helps shape the statement as a form of signifying by implying that what is spoken does not really convey the full meaning of the utterance. The speaker's continued use of AAVE suggests that she has no intention of actually switching totally into "Standard" English (or of totally giving in to the performed white-woman identity symbolized by that variety of English).

Unlike the previous examples, example (6) is not typical of AADQs' performances. I include it here because it deals with a complex set of issues revolving around white stereotypes of African Americans. In this example, performed in an African American gay bar, an AADQ uses the "white-woman" style in acting out an attack on a rich white woman by an African American man. Acting out the rape of any woman is a misogynistic act; yet although this misogyny should not be excused, it is important to note that the main impetus for this piece of data is anger concerning the myth of the African American rapist. As Angela Davis has pointed out (1983), fraudulent charges of rape have historically been used as excuses for the murder (by lynching) of African American men. Because it is based on the racist stereotype of African Americans as having voracious sexual appetites, the myth of the African American rapist operates under the false assumption that rape is a primarily sexual act (and not primarily an act of violence). It assumes that all African American men are desirous of white women and are willing to commit acts of violence in order to feed this desire. The fact that this assumption has no basis is especially heightened in the context of African American gay men, who may not be desirous of any women. Nevertheless, the patrons of the bar must continuously deal with the ramifications of the myth of the Black rapist, including unfounded white fears of violence. Lines 1 through 21 present the attack on the white woman, in which the AADQ, in interaction with a male audience member who assists in the scene, uses the "white-woman" style alternating with AAVE as she moves in and out of the persona of a white woman:

(6) 1 I'm a rich white woman in {name of wealthy white neighborhood} 2 and you're going to try to come after me, OK? 3 And I want you to just . . . 4 I'm going to be running, OK? 5 And I'm gonna fall down, OK? OK? 6 And I'm just gonna . . . look at you . . . 7 and you don't do anything. 8 You hold the gun . . . 9 Goddamn- he got practice. [audience laughter] <obscured> 10 I can tell you're experienced. [The audience member holds the gun, but so that it faces down, not as if he were aiming it] 11 OK hold it.
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In the examples discussed above suggest that the use of white women’s speech by AADQs cannot be interpreted as simply reflecting a desire to be white. The femininity associated with speaking like a “white woman” simultaneously indexes a set of class, gender, and ethnic identities associated with the ideology of what constitutes “ideal” feminine behavior. Although the “white-woman” style is sometimes emblematic of status, it is also used in combination with other stylistic choices to highlight a variety of more critical attitudes toward whiteness. Thus the appropriation of aspects of dominant culture need not necessarily indicate acceptance of its dominating force. Rather, this appropriation can serve as a form of resistance (Butler 1993:137). Indeed, in some cases the appropriation of white women’s language does succeed in undermining racist and homophobic assumptions associated with the dominant culture. But arguments concerning the misogyny of drag cannot be brushed aside simply because drag is sometimes subversive. Although the examples in this chapter suggest a form of resistance toward racism and homophobia, they do little to call into question the sexism in American society. The performances of AADQs should not be understood simply as “subversive” or “submissive” with regard to dominant hegemonic culture. The polyphony of stylistic voices and the identities they index serve to convey multiple meanings that may vary across contexts and speakers. A full understanding of a phenomenon such as drag requires that we follow the advice of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and “attend to all potential meaning-carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse” (1972:166).

NOTES

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1. The terms transgenderist and transgender(ed) person are often used as umbrella terms for members of these different groups. They are sometimes seen as alternatives to terms with medical connotations, such as transvestite and transsexual.

2. Following community norms for polite reference, I use she to refer to drag queens when they are in drag.

3. Transcription conventions are as follows:

<> obscured material
[] text-external information
segment removed from data to ensure anonymity

italics

emphasis

H

high intonation (see McLemore 1991)

L

low intonation

H*/L*

pitch accent

( )

short pause forming separation between words

... longer pause (more periods indicate greater length)

underlining

material under discussion

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