

# The \$10,000 Woman

## *Trans Artifacts in the Pittsburgh Queer History Project Archive*

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**Abstract** The Pittsburgh Queer History Project (PQHP) began as an urban archaeological dig of an abandoned after-hours social club. The detritus collected helped construct a history of working-class Pittsburgh, including the lives and labor of trans bodies in the Steel City. A recent exhibition by the PQHP, *Lucky after Dark*, presented a cross-section of this archive, including a newly acquired slide collection from social clubs between 1967 and 1990. Amounting to several thousand photographs taken at three clubs owned by Robert “Lucky” Johns, as well as hundreds of hours of video, it is a uniquely rich documentation of a subcultural community spanning over thirty years. The author discusses a critical shift in my handling of these archival materials, beginning with a slide show entitled “The \$10,000 Woman.” The incorporation of oral histories by trans women in the photograph archive turned what was originally indexed as a record of gay entertainment into a nuanced narration of transsexual history in 1970s Pittsburgh.

**Keywords** sex work, oral history, drag, social clubs, Pittsburgh

### *Lucky after Dark*

The House of Tilden was the crown jewel in a series of private social clubs that doubled as after-hours gay bars for twilight citizens in Pittsburgh proper and the rest of southwestern Pennsylvania. With a membership list of seven thousand people, the House of Tilden’s clientele drew from beyond Allegheny County to parts of West Virginia, Ohio, and New York.

One night in 1976, this sign appeared in the stairwell: “We are proud to announce the coming of one of the most EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS of this spring!!! Brenda Dott (formerly known as ‘Bobby’) is the \$10,000.00 Dollar Woman with her ‘Sister’ Barry (WonderWoman) Dott.” In a burlesque ecdysis, Brenda shed outfit after outfit until only a G-string remained (see fig. 1).

Moments like these were documented in the photographs taken by Robert “Lucky” Johns, a popular gay proprietor of three social clubs: the Transportation

Club (1967–70), the House of Tilden (1970–81), and Travelers (1980–90). From 2012 to 2014, Lucky generously offered me his time, friendship, and personal collection of several thousand photographs that he had kept for over fifty years. In June of 2014, the Pittsburgh Queer History Project held its inaugural exhibit, *Lucky after Dark*, at the Carnegie Mellon Future Tenant Gallery, featuring photographs and ephemera that made up the world of working-class after-hours gay clubs. The response to our exhibition was overwhelming, attracting over one thousand visitors and favorable press notice, but most striking was the ability of visitors to reanimate the slide shows and contribute to the archive from a variety of perspectives. This article is driven by the responses of trans women, whose contributions to our oral history collection help remap hundreds of images. In particular, their narration reveals an archive of trans history previously illegible in the photographs.

### Background

The Pittsburgh Queer History Project (PQHP) is an oral history and media archive collection that I began in 2012 and now codirect with Dr. Tim Haggerty at Carnegie Mellon University. The inspiration for the PQHP was an archeological dig of an abandoned Pittsburgh nightclub at 6119 Penn Avenue, last known as “Cabarets.” After shutting its doors in 2003, the club remained untouched until the space was slotted for renovation amidst an uptick of urban redevelopment. During the remodeling, I was allowed to take anything and everything from the heaps of trash couched between layers of plywood and carpet.

This collection of club ephemera (a six-hundred-item collection including used cigarette packs, bingo tickets, and police reports) told a largely unknown history of the building and its role in after-hours queer nightlife. In a windowless second-floor unit, a series of after-hours bars, chartered as fraternal organizations, offered a place to go when the lights went out in all the local taverns. For over fifty years, 6119 Penn Avenue had many names, including “The Perry Social Club,” the “Republican Club,” the “American Legions Club,” “Upscale Private Night Club,” “La Familia,” and “Cabarets”; these were the licensed organizations whose membership cards opened the door to a smoky den, inconspicuously perched above Isaly’s, a local dairy and deli franchise. This long-forgotten urban detritus hinted at the role of social clubs in Pittsburgh’s working-class communities and, in particular, the development of queer and trans lives in 1970s Pittsburgh. The materials found in this space led us to Lucky, his photographs, and—eventually—the story of Brenda Dott. Thousands of slides labeled as “drag shows” in Lucky’s collection first appear to be documents of gay entertainment history; but through a process of photo identifications and oral history interviews, transgender participants used the archive to reanimate a nuanced history of



**Figure 1.** Brenda Dott, House of Tilden, 1976. Still from video, 720 × 576. Robert “Lucky” Johns archive, Pittsburgh Queer History Project



**Figure 2.** Dana Brown. House of Tilden, 1975. Still from video, 720 × 576. Robert “Lucky” Johns archive, Pittsburgh Queer History Project



**Figure 3.** Hazel Van Horn, House of Tilden, 1977. Still from video, 720 × 576. Robert “Lucky” Johns archive, Pittsburgh Queer History Project

becoming a woman in the working-class world of Pittsburgh. Their journeys were affected by the city's redevelopment, the politics of gay nightlife, and one's ability to negotiate the shifting circumstances of surviving as a trans woman in the Steel City.

### **Indexing the House of Tilden**

The House of Tilden photo archive was donated by Lucky as a shoebox of forty DVDs with up to five hours of video slide shows on each. As audio-visual technology advanced, the slides that were once projected on the walls and ceilings of his clubs were transferred to VHS tapes and later onto DVDs. The transfer from VHS to DVD was particularly detrimental to the film's original quality, squeezing multiple tapes onto single discs. Nonetheless, faces are still recognizable, and the occasional title card, a thick plastic Dymo label adhered to manila board, provided organization to an enormous collection. I spent nearly a year ripping the mpeg2 footage, dissecting chapters, and, frame by frame, exporting what turned out to be over twelve thousand individual photographs and hundreds of video-taped performances for a comprehensive catalog of Lucky's clientele.

To form a methodology for analyzing the photographs, Dr. Haggerty and I consulted with Louise Lippincott, a curator at the Carnegie Museum of Art, whose remarkable work with the Teenie Harris Archive helped to revive priceless documentation of the Pittsburgh Hill District before its demolition by the city. She recommended we handle our materials through a process of photo-identification sessions, a method that had helped to identify thousands of subjects in the Teenie Harris Archive. Over several months, we organized small gatherings of former bar owners and employees to scroll through slide shows and identify people they recognized on corresponding contact sheets. In groups of five or six at a time, we managed to identify over two hundred individuals. These sessions jump-started our indexing process, helped to narrow down the photo selections for our exhibition, and engaged members of the bar community with their own visual record.

The photo-identification process also made it possible to expand our network of oral history narrators. By demonstrating for our volunteers the importance of personal papers, photographs, and ephemera in constructing a rich social history, we've worked to develop an archive of primary source materials, often from personal collections kept in closets, basements, and dusty boxes. We are particularly focused on these materials from the "archival closet," ephemeral archival materials that provide one-of-a-kind documentation from their day-to-day lives. By focusing on these materials, I see the Pittsburgh Queer History Project as part of a larger archival movement, functioning in a manner similar to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Brooklyn, New York), the Pop-Up Museum of

Queer History (Brooklyn), and the Queer Newark Oral History Project (Newark, New Jersey), all of which engage in these ephemeral archival materials to develop nuanced historical records of LGBT lives. Accessing these primary source materials is a collaborative process that has encouraged our narrators to take an active role in their own history making. As Douglas Rehrer, a former bartender at Lucky's House of Tilden, remarked after one of the first sessions, "I used to see myself as living through history, but now I can see I was making it" (Rehrer 2013). Our volunteers contributed names, anecdotes, and personal effects that connect the House of Tilden and other clubs to the broader social history of Pittsburgh as an industrial city experiencing both the sexual revolution and the out-migration of a collapsing steel industry. However, the small numbers and similar careers of our initial volunteers limited the kinds of stories they could tell. In particular, the information provided in these early photo-identification sessions constructed a narrative of "gay life" that, while sometimes populated by diverse characters, centered on the experiences of gay white men, prompting reconsideration of the diversity in our research participants and the flexibility of the archive's typology.<sup>1</sup>

### Rereading the \$10,000 Woman

While postering the city, bar to bar, to advertise for *Lucky after Dark*, I met a trans woman who was photographed at the House of Tilden. As a frequent performer there, Dana Brown was one of the few people to have her name stamped out in plastic, though the title card indicated only two things about her: "drag show" and "1976" (see fig. 2). Thirty-eight years had passed since her stage days, but she looked the same. When I explained my reason for approaching her, she was happy to tell me more about herself than the photographs could manage on their own. Hanging out at the Real Luck Cafe, Lucky's last bar and namesake, we planned to get together for a more impromptu photo-identification session at the gallery. Dana came to see me the very next Sunday. With her trans sister Angela, we tore through carousel after carousel, cackling and recounting memories from the 1970s. Slide shows that previously offered a predilection for Bette Midler, bicentennial parties, and a nod to the Six Million Dollar Man, became rich histories of gender, performance, and labor. While the former set of interpretations are available to any viewer with a boilerplate knowledge of late twentieth-century US pop culture, the latter are available only to the performers who lived out these scenes. Much like our early photo-identification participants, Angela and Dana retrieved memories and experiences to narrate beyond the title "drag show."

We paused on the \$10,000 Woman. Brenda Dott's poster lit up the screen. Dana explained that in the spring of 1976, Brenda traveled to New York City to undergo *the change*, a slang term she and her friends used for sex-reassignment surgery, and, upon returning to Pittsburgh, put on a show to rival the concurrent

television premiere of Lindsay Wagner in *The Bionic Woman* (Johnson 1976). With hundreds of club members for an audience, Brenda stripped bare to reveal her \$10,000 prize. Performing alongside Brenda that night, Dana witnessed the crowd standing in fascination as Brenda signaled the finale by pulling off her G-string. Whispering, “we have the technology,” Brenda played on the expectations of her audience and offered them an illusion of instant transformation to an uproar of applause (Rae and Brown 2014).

The House of Tilden advertised her in the local gay paper as “Pittsburgh’s only ‘sex-change,’” though this was an obvious exaggeration (House of Tilden 1976). While I can neither confirm nor deny that her surgeon rebuilt her “better, faster, [and] stronger,” the success of her event does suggest that her audience had some sophisticated knowledge of transsexuality, or TS, the oral abbreviation used by Dana and Angela. The audience understood the procedure that Brenda had undergone, could pin it to the physical rebuilding of their television action heroes, and could even understand the financial punch line. Brenda paid a tangible amount of money to become the person standing in front of them. Not quite the Six Million Dollar Man, but close enough for applause. But it is another question entirely whether they could distinguish between prime-time TV and real-time TS.<sup>2</sup>

As Dana and Angela continued to talk about Brenda’s performance and TS life, my lens on Lucky’s archive began to shift. As the archive’s creator, Lucky stamped out titles for the surviving ephemera from this bygone era. Perhaps unknowingly, his categorization of “drag show” flattened a rich history of transsexuality, situating TS representation as a product of gay entertainment. We are fortunate to have Angela and Dana become archivists of their own lives by using Lucky’s images to narrate a transsexual history from the snapshots of a nightclub performance.

In fact, there is no discrete record of transsexuality in Lucky’s archive. As Anjali Arondekar described her search for criminalized sexuality in India’s colonial archives in *For the Record*, it “circulate[s] without a trace, against the consoling mystifications of ‘papers’ and the verifiable certainties of archival discovery” (Arondekar 2009: 4). Records that suggest—but do not explicitly state—the existence of transsexuality, like the \$10,000 Woman, became the tool by which we reindexed a photographic history of their youth. Juxtaposing their narration against Lucky’s organizational system, we revealed the multitude of processes by which Brenda and others became the women we see in the pictures. We engage, in Arondekar’s terms, with the photographs as a “recalcitrant event . . . mov[ing] beyond the territory of the contested fact, the unseen record, from the history of evidence and into the realm of narration” (5).

Those who knew Brenda as a “drag queen” were invited to enjoy an illusion of transformation—an illusion that lasted only mere minutes in one dark nightclub, but one that was predicated on a long negotiated process of self-transformation that occurred in spaces Lucky’s camera could not see. Dana and Angela emphasized that the beginning of one’s transformation took place downtown, miles away from Lucky’s gay demimonde. This transformation was inextricably linked to the city’s geography. Angela pointed out that the pizza shop next to the gallery hosting *Lucky after Dark* was once a gay bar named the “El Greco,” and she remembered standing on the opposite corner working as a prostitute, alongside other TS women for whom sex work was an elemental part of growing up. She points to the landscape of Pittsburgh’s downtown, simultaneously pointing back at herself as a product of this geography (Rae and Brown 2014).

### Changing Shape Downtown

Dana and Angela—who enter our history in the mid-1970s as young self-identifying gay men—both visited downtown Pittsburgh as high school students, where they found cruise areas and a network of gay individuals who led them to clubs and bars, like the House of Tilden, as a guest. Those who began to experiment with gender presentation, including makeup, bleached hair, and drag, found social and labor opportunities in the vibrant network of sex work downtown (Rae and Brown 2014).

Virtually every contributor to our oral history project who left their family home between the ages of sixteen and twenty spent a period of their lives in sex work. Hustling downtown provided financial and sexual independence. A variety of pick-up spots, adult book stores, porn theaters, bathhouses, and twenty-four-hour newsstands provided ample opportunities to make money turning tricks. The ubiquity of sex work did not hamper the violence sustained by hustlers at the hands of police, clients, and occasionally, the general public. Between the stories of self-determination and financial independence, Dana and Angela recall everyday physical attacks on hustlers, many of which were fatal. In this way, Dana’s and Angela’s survival is anomalous to the fate of many of their peers, whose lives were cut short. Dana emphasized how important it was to know how to defend yourself, but even with her large stature and reputation as a vicious street fighter, she could still be caught off guard (Rae and Brown 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Gay male contributors usually differentiate between hustling as a short-term economic strategy (combined with entrée to the gay social world) and hustling as a primary occupation. Working-class gay men have described their time hustling as a means to an end, providing enough sustained income until another job came around, at which time they would promptly drop their

connection to prostitution. Other jobs still marked as “gay labor,” including retail workers, decorators, hair dressers, and bar employees, offered a transformation to a growing gay identity that continually distanced itself from sex work. However, the accounts of TS women offer a nuanced description of the social world of hustling and emphasize the ongoing overlap of “gay life” and sex work that was part of the TS identity. In fact, for many TS women engaged in sex work, the possibility of other sorts of “gay labor” was slim. The overlap, then, was more of a long-term feature of the social landscape than a temporary one.

Downtown development provided new social centers that were essential to learning how to live as a TS woman. One of these, Mellon Square, was a place where gay youth came after leaving their homes, and where young hustlers were likely to meet clients who might bring them to a bar, or perhaps one of Lucky’s clubs. There, they would meet older TS women who could help them learn to paint their face, pick the right drag, find work, and, sometimes, a place to live. Dana described Mellon Square as “the great meeting place.” She arrived at the open courtyard in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh, aged sixteen, after being kicked out of her family home. It wasn’t long before she met Brian White, a downtown regular and friend of Lucky’s, who promptly invited her to the House of Tilden, where she would meet other women like her (Rae and Brown 2014).

One such woman was Hazel Van Horn, who was well remembered by visitors to *Lucky after Dark*. A prostitute, renowned hair dresser, drag performer, and (upon meeting Dana at the club) drag mother, Hazel taught Dana not only to pass but also to become a part of the lucrative sex trade that would afford her pocket money and a place to live. She had years more experience than Dana, equipping her to become a woman, and a working one at that. Hazel, and others like her, shared their connections to doctors and retailers who provided amenities for TS women such as clothing, wigs, and hormones. A sister of theirs, Frankie DiRoss, eventually got a job at the Army Navy Surplus store and was known for throwing free blue jeans out the back door to the younger girls. Dr. Fisher, a pharmacologist sometimes known as “the original free clinic,” could take care of access to hormones. Taking hormones to develop a more feminine physique in the 1970s was a nuanced decision in relationship to becoming a woman. Access to hormones and the decision to take them was part and parcel with certain niches of the sex trade. The more experienced TS women who hustled were crucial guides to their younger counterparts, who were adjusting themselves socially and physically to their roles in sex work and gay life. Connie Dorsett, a former roommate and friend of Hazel, recalls being coached through the process of hormone therapy (Dorsett and Huey 2013).

Dana’s and Angela’s experiences in downtown changed along with their bodies, and so did the johns who desired them. When Dana was “punking,” her

place was among the mostly gay male Mellon Square cruisers. But as she began to show interest in drag, makeup, and passing as a woman, her access to partners as a “boobie queen” widened and revealed to her the demand for TS prostitutes. At this point in her life, older women like Hazel guided her through the expectations placed on TS bodies, including the use of hormones. Dana recalls one of these older TS women quipping, “Here honey, take these pills. They’ll give you titties” (Rae and Brown 2014). Levity aside, this step toward passing as a woman rather than what Dana and Angela label a “drag queen” offered a wider clientele who frequented downtown for female prostitutes. Passing also provided protection from the physical violence that came with being read as a “man in a dress.” These familial networks of information literally shaped bodies of TS women, assembling an arsenal of skills to be shared with another generation.<sup>4</sup>

This overlap of the gay social life and sex trade, which developed in downtown, was also fostered by Lucky’s clubs in the city’s eastern neighborhoods. Lucky claimed his initial interest in opening clubs was to provide a place for “his people,” under his paternalistic protection. After-hours clubs were the destination for cruisers who would arrive downtown by 8:00 p.m. and head back east across the city to the doors of the House of Tilden by 11:00 p.m. or later, often stopping at bars in between. TS women of downtown were regular patrons of Lucky’s clubs, and occasionally employees as well. This proximity to Lucky provided a steady job in a social world that could appreciate and make space for the embodiment of gay life and labor that Dana and Angela represented. Dana, Angela, and others said the club was one of the most promising places to catch tricks in the wee morning hours, as well as a meeting place. Angela and Dana fondly remember their family breakfast with Lucky after the club closed, piling into his Cadillac and cruising to the all-night Contis’s Diner. Lucky’s clubs were, for many, a family affair.

This kind of dense social networking meant that women like Hazel were salient not only in the lives of the TS girls they mentored but also in the memories of non-TS, nonsex-worker club members. Hazel herself appears several times in Lucky’s photo archive. A personal favorite of mine is a portrait of Hazel posing with a black-and-white cut-out from a gay porn magazine (see fig. 3). Hazel had been a mother and sister to many, and her popularity as a nightlife character and guide to the TS life is undeniable. When her picture came across the projection screen at *Lucky after Dark*,” veterans of the House of Tilden shouted her motto: “Bourbon and Squirt, Bitch” — “Squirt” being a popular grapefruit soda (Rae and Brown 2014). As Brenda Dott is rendered down to a “drag show,” Hazel is rendered down to a drink order. While these visitors could recognize Hazel, only trans women like Connie, Angela, and Dana used her image to tell stories of downtown, the sex trade, and the complex networks through which TS girls became TS women.

### Articulating Absence

Lucky's photo archive from the House of Tilden has obvious demographic gaps, particularly, the absence of African American patrons. The overwhelming white representation clashes with inclusive language that Lucky used to describe his clubs as a product of cultural revolutions taking place in the 1970s—he considered himself among the first to racially integrate nightclubs in Pittsburgh (Johns 2012). Despite the oral history contributions of trans women of color who have richly described themselves and their sisters as a part of the club's social network, few have been identified in the photographic archive. This archival absence became conspicuous, calling attention to the politics of the club's membership, which translates to the archive.

While Lucky distanced himself from vocal racial prejudice, his clientele has described the club as having a primarily white membership, despite their locations in multiple African American neighborhoods. Some attributed aggression toward customers of color to the public uprisings in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. His doorman at the Transportation Club explained that during the height of riots in the predominantly African American Hill District, he kept a shotgun at the club's door, fearing antiwhite violence (Reddinger 2013). While the riots would eventually end, the clubs would continue to be a hostile place to people of color. Members of the Transportation Club recall having to ask Lucky's permission before bringing an African American guest, to avoid being denied admission. The few members of color who are captured on film, there and at the House of Tilden, were recognized by many as fixtures of the nightclub: in other words, a select group who were exceptions to an unspoken rule.

In conversation with Connie Dorsett and Tonette Johnson, both TS women of color, Tonette described her discomfort by saying, "You know how Miss Lucky was. . . . She didn't want black queens in her club" (Dorsett and Johnson 2013). Tonette recalled multiple occasions when she was asked for a higher cover, or treated rudely by the doorman. Her memories suggest an unspoken door policy that reflected a ubiquitous whiteness while it denied connections to "racism," much like the litany of excuses—capacity limits, ID requirements, and so on—recorded in Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). Connie herself did not recall feeling uncomfortable at the House of Tilden; however, her mapping of the city's nightclubs differed drastically from that of her white counterparts. She continued to explain that the time she spent at the House of Tilden was as a performer in a number of drag troupes. She carried social currency as an entertainer, unlike Tonette, who might have been denied admission for lack of a nightclub act (Dorsett and Johnson 2013). As is the case with Brenda, Dana, and Angela, Lucky's archive is incapable of demonstrating the process through which Connie and Tonette come to identify as TS women, as their gender and race gave

doormen pause. In fact, despite reporting that she performed in Lucky's clubs and frequented them as a patron, no photos of Connie can be found in the archive. Connie's narration of life at the House of Tilden renders her absence in the photographs highly visible. As with the flattening title of "drag show," the politics of her absence insists that the archive must continue to be narrated beyond the visible record.

### Conclusion

The identities of transsexual working-class women are constructed through a lifetime of grey areas—navigating multiple maps of the city's sexual subcultures for work and social life, and adapting their bodies to access those opportunities, while struggling against systems of violence and incarceration that target TS bodies. We used the contestable record of "drag slide shows" to juxtapose the narratives of the archive's creator and the trans women whose bodies are captured on film. We consider the organization of the archive as an object with its own politics. While Lucky did not create discrete records of transsexuality, the narrations of these materials have reindexed a host of images as artifacts of trans history. Cross-referenced with the original slide shows, these narrations demonstrate the mutability of the archival lens by highlighting important vacancies in the archive's photographic record and allowing these vacancies to articulate their own narration of the archive.

This critical shift in the handling of our archive's collections would not be possible without the exceptional support of the women mentioned in this article. They are the ones who've done the work of archiving working-class TS lives. Many of our TS contributors already know this, and they have begun to offer copies of their personal collections, which intersect with the nightlife that Lucky created, while also documenting their history of transitions as laborers, socialites, and Pittsburghers. Some of these collections come in the form of wigs, clothing, personal websites, scrapbooks, talk-show recordings, and of course, photo albums. As Lucky's former patrons grow older and pass on, their ephemeral collections are split among friends or tossed away. And though storage limitations won't allow us to indulge in keeping every object, the PQHP will do its best to preserve the narratives and maps of Pittsburgh's TS women, in order to bridge the gap between Lucky's camera and our archive's visitors.

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### Acknowledgment

The research for this paper would not be possible without the generous support from all the women who contributed oral histories to the PQHP—Connie Dorsett, Tonette Johnson, Bobbi Huey, Angela Rae, and Dana Brown—as well as the bar owners and employees who gave several weekends to identifying individuals in photographs. Thanks are also owed to Dr. Tim Haggerty of Carnegie Mellon University and Dani Lamorte for countless revisions of this article and administrative support of the PQHP. Funding for this research has been provided by the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Frank Ratchye Studio for Creative Inquiry, and the Center for the Arts in Society at Carnegie Mellon University.

### Notes

1. See Robinson 2014 for an in-depth discussion of the “archival closet” as it pertains to LGBT social history.
2. In the stories we have collected, the language for a given individual’s sexuality and gender presentation may vary from narrator to narrator. In an effort to explore this ambiguity with clarity, but not remove the agency of each contributor’s language, I would like to highlight certain commonalities. *Gay life* is often used to refer to the gay and lesbian social world emanating from bars, clubs, and cruise areas. *Drag* refers to the physical materials for dressing as a woman (makeup, clothing, and wigs), while *drag queen* refers to someone who dresses as a woman for social occasions but identifies as male. A transsexual woman, or *TS* as abbreviated by our contributors, denotes an individual who lives and works as a “passing” woman and has undergone hormone therapy in the form of pills or shots but has not necessarily sought sex-reassignment surgery. *The change* refers specifically to sex-reassignment surgery.
3. Although the term *hustling* evokes the image of the “male hustler,” the term is used by the project’s contributors of all genders to refer their work as prostitutes, including TS women.
4. Angela and Dana use the term *punking* to describe her presentation as a young gay man, highlighting her hair and using light makeup. She was not yet dressing in drag or using hormones. The term *boobie queen* describes another subtle transition toward passing as a woman, developing a more feminine look and wearing “frocks rather than pants,” but not taking hormones (Rae and Brown 2014).

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