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From Tomboy to Drag : Las Notas de un Rey in Toronto

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CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



Karleen Pendleton Jimenez
From Tomboy to Drag:
Las Notas de un Rey in Toronto

Each drag king you ask will provide you very different answers as to why they have decided to jump on stage. As well, kings emerge from all kinds of offstage identities- there are femmes and fags, straight girls, trannyboys and butches. I identify as a butch. My butch identity offers me everyday comfortable clothes, my cologne and dildos, and my lady. I have also sought out communities of relative safety to surround my butchness. The move from butch to my moments of drag kinging heightens my expression of masculinity. I take the stage I think primarily because for two thirds of my life, I was convinced that it was a humiliating thing for me to be comfortable in men's clothing. The spectacle of the lights and the cheers and the loud booming music celebrating a woman's body or a trans body transformed into a man's for a few minutes, is powerful, and, turns me on. I want to look like a boy. I want to look like a woman. I want to look like a queer, a person who appears to move between the two. I enjoy watching this happen across someone's eyes, when they glimpse a masculine gesture fall from a feminine limb or vice versa.

To pull off a good show requires preparation:
Here is a list of the things I carry¹ with me when kinging:

I carry breasts. I've got big breasts. Huge for the size of my body. I once made a sex video and saw them attached to my body. It shocked me. I looked unreal, like a cartoon or something. It didn't seem fair for someone who liked passing as a boy now and then. I don't want them to go away. Lovers tell me they like them. And they are reflections of the ones my mom had, same shape and nipple design. I like having my mom's breasts still with me.

Duct tape and my girlfriends hands are needed to push them down for the show. An important note: wear a sports bra underneath, nothing smaller or lacier, or you will lose skin and silk at the end of the night. Don't put the tape on too early, or you could lose your breath. I started having a panic attack one night, and another king told me she has puked on occasion when putting the tape on too soon.

The effect is a hard chest no further out than my stomach. I admire it in the mirror, the shape I could never get quite right since junior high when they started growing.

I carry some bad memories from elementary school. They keep me sure that I deserve this.

February 14th, 1983. Rosemead, California (I was 11 years old)
"I was very mad at David W. for saying that my sweatshirt was made for a boy and that I was a tomboy."

As much as my mom loved me, and as much as her lenience around my clothing choices provided me a lot of room to wear my brother's hand-me-downs, we had our battles. There were Sunday church wars with high drama screaming and crying...and laughter, my brother's laughter at how red-faced and awkward-bodied I looked in frills. Once a week I was convinced by force that my humiliation was necessary for community events.

Later force wasn't needed. Laughter alone worked wonders. I tried desperately to look more like a girl and failed horribly at it. To the other kids at my school, to even some of my friends this was a grand joke - a girl who didn't know how to be a girl. Kids wagered bets on my gender, and voted me forward as a beauty contestant nominee. I wanted people to stop thinking I was weird, and I wanted to kiss and makeout. I thought that if I could look more like a girl I would accomplish both. I grew my hair out. I bought pink pants. It didn't stop the laughter. But moving to Berkeley for college, finding a Chicana community, butch mentors and a beautiful girlfriend, made me not care so much any more about it.

I carry good memories of coming out and establishing a Chicana butch pride for myself. Chicago.1992. August (I was 20 years old) "A conference of beautiful Latinas from all over the country. The Dance. I had to prepare for the dance. Dressing is half of it you know. It's meditation. Laying my slacks out, pressing the iron down to make a hard crease. Covering each inch on a white men's shirt as steam pours out over my fingers. Dressing is ritual."

I carry shiny black shoes and dark black and brown checkered slacks, with a freshly ironed crease. Under my pants I carry one black leather harness and brown realistic rubber cock stuffed into those soft stretchy kind of boxers. The boxers need to be tight enough to hold the dildo down on my thigh under my pants. I like packing because I catch my girlfriend's eyes on it. I like it because it means that I am ready to fuck at a moment's notice. I like it because it feels like I'm getting away with something, and because the dick in my brain matches what I find pushing against my pants. On the way to the bar, I get terrified that everybody on the street will see it and attack me or something. As far as I can tell nobody has noticed it yet besides me or my girlfriend. There is one danger though, I find myself drawn to playing with it when I'm suppose to be concentrating on other things like driving.

I carry adrenaline. It makes me shake and keeps me moving. I am terrified of performing. I've never been good at memorizing lyrics. I'm not a good enough dancer to do it on stage for people. My theater skills are so-so - so I start there. Can I find a gag or a sexy thing to act out a song? Can I find a story for people to follow, so that they're not following me so much? What can I find to offer drag in return for what it offers me? People are paying money, what can I make worthwhile for a show?

I carry arrogance. I need a little bit of arrogance too. I carry my chin up a little too high. It is also my oldest brother's look and a proud Chicana style gesture that I have always done unconsciously for official photos and for hellos to my buddies.

I carry a mess of politics in and around me. Feminist politics. Drag King acts got a lot of dick by in large. Entertainment is derived from drawing attention to it, to be outrageously sexist and animal with it. On one level, by virtue of women performing this, there are definite feminist subversive strategies. On another, it doesn't appear to be too different from what men just do, and embodied at times in sexist butch bodies. I wonder how much subversion is really accomplished. I try to find ways to subvert it further - ok here is my dick, but how many ways can I play it and layer it with different meanings: giving it to someone else, changing it from body part to dildo and back again, sucking, fucking, etc. I attempt taboos with it.

I carry a closeted fag within me, read butch who desires other butches. At the academy awards, Steve Martin mentioned the fact that most people around the world believe that everyone in show business is a fag. In Toronto, one drag king was overheard noting what a lot of people whisper, that he was the only "straight" man of the whole drag king troupe. Coincidence, I don't think so. What exactly is the connection between fags, femininity and masculine stage performers? None of those Hollywood butch role models, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Johnny Depp, Benicio Del Toro are straight men. I for one have a pretty clean record of only messing around with femmes, but on stage, the first thing I think of doing is choreographing some butch on butch

play. Maybe because it feels taboo, maybe because offstage it gets complicated in a way that I can't sort through, maybe because show business just attracts fags...and fag audiences, after the last number I performed, a pretty explicit love affair between two Italian men from the 1930's, I was greeted by another straight-man butch in the audience expressing how hard she was in her jeans.

Trans politics: I can't tell you how many people I know personally are taking dosages of testosterone. I can't tell you how many workshops I've attended, how many books I've read on the topic to figure out where my body and gender lie. I have gone from playing with the idea of changing my female body to feeling certain that I need my female body. But drag shows give me the possibility to make slight transformations for a few moments rather than for a lifetime. I like this type of flexibility.

I carry a male name. "What's your name?" the MC asks only seconds before my first show. Karleen. No, I mean your male name. Oh uh, hmm, I hadn't thought of that. Xavier, Xavier is what my buddies in San Diego sometimes called me for fun. My mom, who feared the thought of me being like a man, had even liked it because she said I could be Xavier Ximenez then, both beginning with X's. "You get it, DosEquis," she announced smiling, with my buddies busting up beside us.

"Xavier," I tell the MC.

"Haviwhat?" she asks irritated. That's not going to work.

"El Chicano," I say instead.

"El Chicaano?"

All right, close enough.

Renaming has become tricky business in the last couple of years. A good half of my butch friends have renamed themselves with guy's names and the corresponding pronoun. Women frequently approach my girlfriend and ask her what pronoun I go by. They sometimes give her a hard time for continuing to call me she. I encounter shocked

faces when I have sat down in a room full of butches and have had the only girl name. I feel like my name is under attack. It is the name my mom gave me and I think it's beautiful and a piece of her love. And besides, my girlfriend has always had a fetish for butches with girly names. So these MC's asking me for something else is complicated. I get why it's good for the show, but I don't want to give the queer community something to rename me.

Latino politics in Toronto: In a country not dependent on Latino labor, but never-the-less barraged with the same racist US media depictions, Latino stage identity is strange. Stereotypes of hot sexy Latinos reign, and Enrique Iglesias, Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, and Carlos Santana all get frequent radio play. But who can play a Latino? The Toronto based Venezuelan-Canadian Rey, "El Papito," performs regularly as part of Latino Drag Queen shows with great reception from white audiences expecting hot sexy Latinos. Also, I have performed with him at a local Venezuelan restaurant to very warm responses from Latino audiences. While pulling off a masculine performance that has caused more than a few comments of awe, she identifies offstage as femme and has been trained professionally as an actor. He delivers highly polished, carefully choreographed shows, well-memorized lyrics, great dancing and cock rubbing. But last month when he performed to a crowd of predominantly white lesbians, expecting white lesbian performers, he was provided with a lukewarm response. It was unclear whether he received this because it was announced that she was femme offstage, not meeting a Toronto expectation of butch kings, or because the audience felt that his Latinoness did not catch their cultural expectations for a drag king show. Also TTDK, or *the* Toronto Drag Kings, the only widely recognized king performances in Toronto, have never invited him into their troupe despite his clear talent and vocalized interest. TTDK have come to name themselves over the past couple years as being a highly professionalized group. They strictly monitor the quality of their performers and are relatively closed to the idea of including drag performances that they deem mediocre. In other words, there are no karaoke nights. If you want to perform drag for fun,

do it on your own. While this troupe includes people of color, all performers seem to speak English like native speakers. And the only Latino performances have been carried out by the drag king “Stu” who “looks Latino” but is actually of I believe mixed Indian and British background and does not speak Spanish. *He* has been warmly received by white lesbians.

I performed as a Latino, as part of TTDK, two years ago when they did not think of themselves as highly. I have performed as Julio Iglesias, Richy Valens, Marc Anthony, Manu Chao, and as an Italian boyfriend sidekick outside of TTDK. I don’t look Latino enough for audiences to understand what I’m doing, but I don’t really have a desire to portray white men. Latino singers were my mom’s passion, and I want to be them for her and for me, and well, I’m not particularly concerned about the lack of white male representation.

I carry Guadalupe in gold around my neck. I carry thick cool gel to slick my hair. I carry broken Spanish becoming smooth all of a sudden in lipsynching. I carry my mom and her Placido, my grandma and her stories of my great grandpa who had a sweet voice and guitar that got him an invitation to play at every party in Camargo, and of my great great grandpa who always had a line of girlfriends into his eighties, who, according to my grandma, was adored for being a tiny man.

March, 2000, Toronto. (I was 28 years old) The audience clapped and smiled at my drag king debut. My first earned money in Canada. I was “El Chicano” for five minutes and fifty clapping hands. I checked the NAFTA list for earnings as a male impersonator but couldn’t find it, so I have to keep this event quiet. If I was in LA, I would’ve been a fake, too mixed and pale to even pull off a Spaniard. But in Canada, they’re not even sure what a Chicano or a Spaniard is. Whisked away, I could be my earliest fantasy - the man my mom was in love with my entire childhood - Julio Iglesias. His was the first concert that I ever went to. And I would’ve been embarrassed about it, except that I saw how my mom’s eyes watered when she hummed along with his suave Latino self. I watched how my mom only got these watery eyes for her Latino singers

and boyfriends. So these were my butch role models, not my white Dad, who I never saw her show affection for. Breasts strapped down, my freshly dry-cleaned tux, my shiny CD, I thought of my mom out there in the audience with her heart moving to my voice and I sang wildly.



Footnotes

¹ The idea of the frame for this piece of the essay is based on Tim O'Brien's *The Thing's They Carried*. New York: Penguin.

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