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Bridging the Vantage Point of Distance: Reynaldo Rivera and the Visual Legacies of Queer Spectacle across Time and Space

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Abstract: Gender impersonators and trans gender-nonconforming people have long been a source of fascination within the visual arts. Nevertheless, illustrators and photographers alike have perpetually instrumentalized the image of the queer subject as a visual shorthand for criminality, freakishness, and deception. Beginning with the broadside illustrations of José Guadalupe Posada, this article examines how visual representations of Latinx queerness and gender nonconformity shifted across the Americas and throughout the late nineteenth century into the late twentieth century. Ultimately, I contend that Reynaldo Rivera's photography of late-twentieth-century ballroom culture provides a substantial departure from these speculatory conventions by visually legitimizing the lived authenticity of the queer Latinx people who populate his work.

Keywords: Reynaldo Rivera; LGBTQ; Latinx; queer; transgender; photography; ballroom

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Citation: Vélez, Estefanía. 2024. Bridging the Vantage Point of Distance: Reynaldo Rivera and the Visual Legacies of Queer Spectacle across Time and Space. *Arts* 13: 54. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13020054

Academic Editors: Ray Hernández-Durán and Cristina Cruz González

Received: 2 December 2023
Revised: 7 March 2024
Accepted: 8 March 2024
Published: 12 March 2024

Correction Statement: This article has been republished with a minor change. The change does not affect the scientific content of the article and further details are available within the backmatter of the website version of this article.

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1. Introduction

In an essay about the life and career of Reynaldo Rivera, Chris Kraus proposes that his photographs of drag performers and trans women demonstrate a singular ability to "see his subjects less as they are than how they most wish to be seen, lending himself to their dreams and illusions of glamor" (Kraus 2020, p. 22). Rivera himself dates these photographs to "the period . . . just before all these big transvestite movies came out" (Kraus 2020, p. 26). In truth, drag queens, women impersonators, transgender individuals, and gender-nonconforming people have always been the subject of visual fascination, but few of these visualizations have exhibited demonstrative intimacy and respect for their subjects. Starting with printmaker José Guadalupe Posada's (1901) *Los 41 Maricones* lithograph, I aim to track how visual representations of Latinx drag culture, queerness, and gender nonconformity shifted and changed in the Americas throughout the twentieth century. By integrating the work of Diane Arbus and Jennie Livingston into this study, I provide a comparative example of how many white cisgender photographers perpetuated their own visual fascination with drag queens and queer communities from what Susan Sontag once described as a "vantage point based on distance [and] privilege" (Sontag 1977, p. 25). In this essay, I will argue that Reynaldo Rivera's work, which only began to receive significant critical attention as recently as 2019, signals a departure from these visual conventions of presenting drag performers and trans gender-nonconforming Latinx as criminal deviants or distant Others. Through Rivera's use of identity-affirming photographic titles and his self-inclusion and participation in his club photography, I posit that his portfolio regards the authenticity of his subjects as non-negotiable and thus draws his queer subjects within intimate proximity of the viewing audience.

2. "El Baile de los 41"/"The Dance of the Forty-One"

On the night of 20 November 1901, forty-two men were arrested in a police raid on a secret drag ball in Mexico City. As one of the first gay scandals in modern Mexican history, the Dance of the Forty-One was not only regarded as a crime, but also as an assault against public morality, despite the fact that it was a strictly private affair. This scandal

was only worsened by the fact that many of these reported "criminals" were members of the Mexican elite. Infamously, President Porfirio Diaz's son-in-law was allegedly amongst the politicians and socialites discovered at the scene (Irwin et al. 2003). Of the attendees who were detained by the police, however, those who were dressed in feminine attire would later face the most severe legal consequences, which included public humiliation, compulsory enlistment in the military, and forced labor. In sharp contrast, the attendees who displayed more gender-congruent behavior by wearing suits and other traditionally masculine attire were largely able to evade legal recourse through bribery. Many of these men would go on to claim that they had been deceived by their dance partners and were unaware that they were not, in fact, dancing with cisgender women.

In their analysis of the Dance of the Forty-One, Espinoza and Resendiz (2018) contend that the Mexican judicial system used this scandal to re-establish heteronormative masculinity; although homosexuality was not recognized as a crime in twentieth-century Mexico, legal recourse was nonetheless taken in order to publicly discourage gender variance and queer sexuality. For instance, when seven of the nineteen attendees sought to appeal their forced admittance into the military on the basis that homosexuality was neither prohibited nor illegal, they were instead charged with crimes against public decency and their punishment remained unchanged. As Espinoza and Resendiz aptly explain in their research, the mere fact that the more "effeminate" members of the Forty-One faced harsher legal consequences than their peers served to demonstrate that "to be gay and masculine could be forgiven with the right payment, but to be gay and feminine was to be publicly denounced, ridiculed and punished" (Espinoza and Resendiz 2018, p. 25). As a case in point, of those arrested at the scene, Governor Ramón Corrall only compelled the nineteen attendees who had been found cross-dressing to publicly sweep the streets while wearing their gowns, subjecting them to public humiliation.

This scandal was further immortalized in a series of broadside illustrations by José Guadalupe Posada, a famed illustrator whose engravings, broadsides, and lithographs routinely depicted scenes from Mexican popular culture, scandals, and politics. In *Los 41 Maricones Encontrados en un Baile de la Calle de la Paz el 20 de Noviembre de 1901*, (Figure 1) Mexican queerness and gender nonconformity is rendered as a comical spectacle. The image captures a moment of festivity and dance, as gentlemen donning three-piece suits lock arms and hold hands with their lady-like counterparts. Their dance partners are adorned in all the accouterments of hyper-femininity, such as ribbons, pearls, delicate shoes, and tight-waisted gowns, but their thick brows and handle-bar mustaches provide a visual punchline: the gentlewoman are, in fact, men in coquettish costume and their dance partners, who would claim ignorance of this fact, are theatrical fools. As Robb Hernández puts it: "For Posada, the maricón is a clash of gendered signifiers—exaggerated silhouettes, voluminous hips, bulging breasts, garish mustaches, wide brows, and shorn hair. Los 41 Maricones is a sight to mock, a laughable portrait of Mexican male effeminates and buffoons" (Hernández 2014, p. 135).

Through his work, Posada invites the viewer to survey the Dance of the Forty-One without implicating themselves in the process. If the image is meant to assume the vantage point of the police officers, it appears that these "queer criminals" have elected to continue dancing to the very last moment of the raid. After all, Posada depicts the subjects mid-action: their skirts are still bellowing in the air and their feet are momentarily suspended in air before they land their next dance-step. The dancers smile gayly at the audience, as if wholly unaware of their impending doom or, perhaps, inviting their interlopers to join in the fun. This image depicts, of course, fiction. The Mexican newspaper *El Popular* reported that, on the night of the raid, the police had "encountered numerous difficulties in trying to get the partygoers to open up" (Irwin et al. 2003, p. 22) and subsequently broke into the house through a back entrance. Reportedly, as the police officers forced themselves inside, many of the attendees attempted to flee the scene while others desperately began to change out of their clothes. Other accounts, such as the report written in the *El Paris* newspaper,

describe the police officers openly ridiculing the attendees as they arrested and detained them, mocking them for their makeup and gowns (Irwin et al. 2003, p. 22).

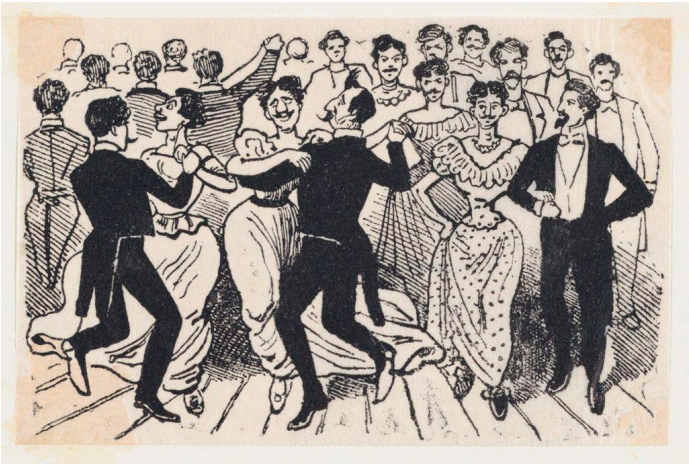

Figure 1. José Guadalupe Posada (1901), *Los 41 Maricones Encontrados en un Baile de la Calle de la Paz el 20 de Noviembre de 1901*, broadside etching on zinc. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To an extent, Posada's willingness to take creative license with the events of the Dance of the Forty-One is largely incidental. What is far more important is the ideological aim of this visual record and the way it equips Posada's audiences to regard the queer subjects he depicts. First, it is important to note that, despite the fact that neither homosexuality nor cross-dressing were punishable crimes under the law, Posada's lithograph is providing a visualization of criminality. While the authors of *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico* posit that Posada's lithographs present the Forty-One as "sympathetic rakes and naughty rascals" (Irwin et al. 2003, p. 174), this claim is undercut by the flagrant use of a homophobic slur in the illustration's title. Though "maricón" is not interchangeable with the English epithet "queer", Rosemary Hennessy's description of the latter is of some use. Posada's characterization of the dancers as "maricones" belies his belief of their criminality because, as Hennessy makes clear, such a word "not only troubles the gender asymmetry . . . but potentially includes 'deviants' and 'perverts' who may traverse or confuse hetero-homo divisions and exceed or complicate conventional delineations of sexual identity and normative sexual practice" (Hennessy 1994, p. 42). Furthermore, as Hernández explains, "in these lithographs, maricones are obedient, frivolous, docile, and ultimately contained by heteromasculinist authority and a machista disciplining gaze" (Hernández 2014, p. 136). Posada's depiction of the subjects in drag encourages the audience to hyperfixate on the overt signifiers of their masculinity. With their virile mustaches, cartoon silhouettes, and broad noses, the dancing ladies are not duplicitous sirens. There is no need for the viewer to closely inspect for subtle cracks in the facade of their gender performance. Instead, they are caricatures of gender play, female impersonators whose impersonations are not convincing in the slightest.

3. Drag Performance and Gender Nonconformity in 20th-Century Photography

Visual fascination with queer subjects and gender transgression has, of course, only strengthened with the rise of photography and photojournalism throughout the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For many photographers, gender impersonators and drag performers provide ample visual material for broader conversations on identity, public perception, gender performance, and other categorical differences such as race and class. In many instances, these depictions are, like José Guadalupe Posada's broadsides illustrations of the Forty-One, indivisible from notions of criminality and social deviance. Weegee's *Naked City* (1945), a collection of photographs which repeatedly presents New York City

cross-dressers and gender impersonators being detained by the police, serves as a pointed example. Photographs such as *Transvestite* (Weegee 1940) and *Transvestite in a Police Van* (Weegee 1941), for instance, both depict queer and gender-nonconforming subjects within the tight confines of a police car, posing for the camera before they are presumably transported to jail. Other photographers, however, present their queer and trans subjects not necessarily as criminals, but instead as freaks. One such photographer is Diane Arbus, who began her career as a fashion photographer in the 1940s before focusing more exclusively on capturing marginalized individuals and social outcasts through black-and-white photography. Though her unconventional subjects ranged from sex workers and carnival performers to people with disabilities, Arbus also frequently photographed drag queens and trans women in New York City. The specter of the freakshow features uniquely throughout these photographs. As Chrisoph Ribbat explains:

> when Diane Arbus . . . portrays crossdressers, their poses seem similarly ridiculous, if not downright embarrassing. She calls her subjects "freaks," and even though we can sense a certain respect for them in her notes, her photographs do not give much of that respect away. They frame with enormous precision what seems to be the enormously erratic behavior of individuals crossing gender lines. (Ribbat 2001, p. 35)

Throughout these photographs, Arbus appears to occupy the position of the heteronormative, cisgender viewing audience and, in doing so, seems to go to great lengths to expose the supposed "ruse" of her subjects.

Arbus' propensity for presenting queer and trans subjects as deceptive spectacles is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in her use of titles, which often reveal the subjects' birth names and their assigned sex at birth. Consider, for instance, Arbus' photograph of the legendary Stormé DeLarverie, a butch lesbian and drag performer who played an instrumental role in the 1969 Stonewall Riots when she resisted arrest at the hands of the New York City police. While the inciting events leading to the riots have been somewhat contested, it is now commonly accepted that the violence DeLarverie suffered at the hands of the police spurred the attendees at Stonewall to band together in spontaneous protest (Chu 2018). In Arbus' photograph of DeLarverie, Arbus subverts the viewer's heteronormative assumptions by contrasting DeLarverie's dapper, traditionally masculine presentation with a title that refers to her in explicitly feminine terms: *Miss Stormé, the Lady Who Appears to be a Gentleman, NYC* (Arbus 1961). The fact that this features as a pattern in Arbus' work is especially injurious because, as Rosemary Hennessy explains, "for many lesbians and gays who have not had the social resources or mobility to insulate themselves from heteronormativity's insistence that sex equals gender, drag has been not so much playful subversion as a painful yearning for authenticity, occasionally with brutally violent results" (Hennessy 1994, p. 42).

Julia Bryan-Wilson is one of many critics who raises issues with Arbus' visual spectacularization of trans and gender-nonconforming individuals. In her critique, Bryan-Wilson posits that Arbus' photographs regard "trans identities as a visual shorthand for deceit, surprise, and transgression" (Bryan-Wilson 2016, p. 112) and, in doing so, makes an exploitative spectacle of "how clothes, hair, and posture might or might not securely 'match' an underlying body" (Bryan-Wilson 2016, p. 112). True to her point, the implied otherness of Arbus' subjects features heavily in Judith Goldman's praise of Arbus' work, which she describes as populated by "freaks and lonely people" (Goldman 1974, p. 30). Composed three years after Arbus' death, Goldman's essay in *Art Journal* celebrates the late photographer because:

> Arbus' camera reflected the visual confrontations we choose not to have, the appearance of horrors that stop us but are hard to see . . . though trained not to admit it, we are fascinated with the aberrant, the violent, and the perverse. When we are assured no one is watching, we stare at cripples and auto wrecks. (Goldman 1974, p. 30)

It is important to note, of course, the presumptions Goldman makes about the collective audience of Arbus' work. Arguably, for the queer viewer of Arbus' work, a trans woman, drag queen, or a butch lesbian may be a sister, neighbor, lover, or one's own self. To posit that Arbus' work captures "horrors that stop us but are hard to see" (30) is to assume that the sight of Stormé DeLarverie figures as a horror at all; this assumption is especially ironic given the fact that DeLarverie, who worked as a bouncer in countless New York City gay clubs, was commonly considered "the guardian of lesbians in the Village" (Yardley 2014).

In her seminal book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag proposed that Arbus "photographed people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive from a vantage point based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that what the viewer is asked to look at is really *other*" (Sontag 1977, p. 25). In *Queer and Straight Photography*, Ribbat (2001, p. 35) is similarly critical. Regardless of where one lands on the question exploitative qualities of Arbus' work, I am interested in the "vantage point based on distance" (Sontag 1977, p. 25) which Sontag proposes, as evidenced in Arbus' photograph *Female Impersonator Holding Long Gloves* (Arbus 1959). This black-and-white gelatin silver print presents a striking juxtaposition between the subject's glamorously made-up face, neatly pinned hair, and bare chest (Figure 2). The only figure to populate this backstage scene, the female impersonator stands between the photographer and the line of mirrors just behind him, where makeup and other instruments (presumably for the work of impersonation) abound. The subject's vulnerability is only heightened by his lack of clothing: save for the gloves in his hands, the impersonator is dressed in little more than his underwear.

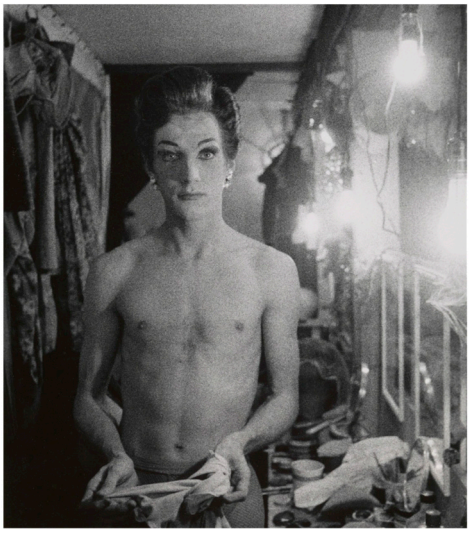

Figure 2. Diane Arbus (1959), *Female Impersonator Holding Long Gloves*, *Hempstead*, *L.I.*, black-and-white photograph. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Unlike Posada's lithograph, Arbus' photograph does not encourage the viewer's vitriol and laughter, but it nevertheless imposes distance between the queer subject and the presumably cis-straight audience. In this photograph, the unnamed impersonator is void of any discernible community, as evidence of other performers is only suggested through the collection of abandoned cosmetics in the distant background. They are, instead, a queer outlier in an otherwise sterile and unpopulated scene. The line of mirrors behind the subject does not offer reflections of either the impersonator, nearby performers, or Arbus herself. In comparison to Rivera Reynaldo's own backstage photographs, which we will later study, the absence of the female impersonator's peers presents an expansive ache. Whoever Arbus' nameless subject may be, they are alone; given the fact that Arbus enjoyed a degree of fame and critical status by the 1950s, the subject is also figuratively outnumbered by the promised audience of Arbus' photograph. Furthermore, the subject demonstrates no overt familiarity with the viewer or the photographer. With brows raised

and mouth taut in an ambiguous line, the impersonator offers neither a warm smile nor a disapproving frown. If this photograph is indeed meant to inspire what Bryan-Wilson describes as a "subcultural or nonnormative jolt" (110), it is worth noting that Arbus does not capture her subject in the height of impersonation but instead, like the subject's bare hands clutching removed gloves, exposes the very qualities which glamor, makeup, and costuming would likely obscure.

4. "Paris Is Burning"

Given the fact that Reynaldo Rivera situates his photography to "the period . . . just before all these big transvestite movies came out" (Kraus 2020, p. 26), it is worth turning our attention to one of the films he was undoubtedly alluding to: Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*. Released in 1990, Livingston's documentary explored the underground ballroom culture of New York City throughout the mid-to-late 1980s and, in doing so, provided groundbreaking visual representation of Latinx and Black queerness during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Though Livingston's approach to the queer subjects who populate her work is not free of its own host of ethical problems, *Paris is Burning* signals a cultural departure from long-standing visual traditions of presenting queer and trans people as criminal deviants; through a series of interviews, Livingston instead captures not only the vibrancy and glamor of Harlem ballrooms, but also the complex lives of the legendary performers who participated in them.

Though the documentary has enjoyed tremendous critical and cultural acclaim, it has also been the subject of ample controversy. In this vein, Phillip Brian Harper's critique of *Paris is Burning* is especially apt: "the very privilege that Livingston's work enjoys not only potentially augments the effective agency of the drag-ball queens but also works to thwart its realization" (Harper 1994, p. 98). This dichotomy between privilege and thwarted agency is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the financial debates between Livingston and the documentary's cast. Two years after the documentary's release, for example, the *New York Times* reported that nearly all of the queer subjects featured in the film filed legal claims against Livingston. Although the film grossed more than $4 million dollars in the American box office, many of the key figures of Livingston's documentary reported earning little more than five thousand dollars for their involvement in the film (Green 1993). Speaking to this controversy, Pepper LaBeja, who was one of the many who attempted to file a lawsuit against Livingston, expressed:

> I feel betrayed. When Jennie first came, we were at a ball, in our fantasy, and she threw papers at us. We didn't read them, because we wanted the attention. We loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she told us that when the film came out we would be all right . . . But then the film came out and—nothing. They all got rich, and we got nothing". (Green 1993)

Livingston's apparent unwillingness to compensate the *Paris is Burning* cast better is especially disquieting given how often their low socioeconomic status (and, consequently, their limited access to food, income, and job security) served as content in the film. Toward the last quarter of *Paris is Burning*, for instance, Livingston turns her camera to a hungry teenager, Freddie Pendavis. She follows Pendavis into a local fast-food restaurant, repeatedly panning over the hot food on display before cutting back to the young man, who hesitates to explain what "mopping" (i.e., shoplifting) is before Livingston's camera (Livingston 1990, 50:00). Similarly, much of Octavia St. Laurent's storyline in the documentary follows her attempts to leave the perils of sex work in order to pursue a career in the modeling industry. Speaking to St. Laurent's short-lived fame after the documentary's release, Katie Rife explains "the crossover lasted for exactly one gig before she returned to dancing behind glass at a Times Square peepshow" (Rife 2020).

In her critique of Livingston's documentary, bell hooks argues that Livingston perpetuates the perspective of an "imperial overse[er]" (Hooks 1992, p. 151) by opting to never visually appear in the film herself. Livingston does, however, occasionally speak in the film;

in fact, it is within one of the rare instances in which Livingston is heard behind the camera that her distance from her subjects becomes troublingly apparent. Shortly after Livingston captures Pendavis stealing food, the camera cuts to two unnamed Black women, standing before a residential building in West Harlem. Of the two, only one directly faces the camera and Livingston's questions as she explains that they are both waiting for "the working girls to get here" (Livingston 1990, 53:28) so they can begin preparing for a much-anticipated ball. When Livingston asks, "and what is it those girls are doing?" (Livingston 1990, 53:30), the forward-facing woman smiles directly at the camera and explains the situation: "they're making money for the balls or they're making their costumes, their outfits" (Livingston 1990, 53:35). At this moment, Livingston's camera moves away from the speaking subject, peering instead over the shoulder of the woman who continues to face away from Livingston's lens. Just beyond her profile, the camera captures a glimpse of a nondescript room where various men are situated around tables.

Having discovered little to tantalize the audience, Livingston adopts a more direct approach and asks, "What's their profession?" (Livingston 1990, 53:40). At this, the speaking subject visibly hesitates. In sharp contrast to her earlier confidence in front of the camera, the woman's smile takes a more nervous turn. For a moment, she directs her gaze in every direction but Livingston's own. Finally, she confesses that the women in question are showgirls, before Livingston insists once more: "Uh-huh. *Anything else*?" (Livingston 1990, 53:45). With a measure of visible reluctance, the woman only supplies: "It depends . . . it depends. I don't know a lot of their professions, but usually they're showgirls" (Livingston 1990, 53:47). That Livingston immediately cuts to Venus Xtravaganza, a trans sex worker who was murdered by a client before the film's completion, is telling. Seemingly unsatisfied by what her previous subject has left unsaid, Livingston uses Venus as a visual signifier in order to validate the suspicions that her previous subject refused to confirm.

Though brief, this scene does considerable work in revealing who Livingston imagines her viewing audience to be. Because Livingston refrains from speaking throughout the vast majority of the film, it is noteworthy that she breaks her silence in order to interrogate a Black subject about the potentially illicit lives of her peers. Throughout the interaction, the unnamed woman visibly bristles. Her tone and ambiguous choice of words imply that she would rather leave the private affairs of other women unsaid, likely due in part to the extreme hypervigilance that trans women and women of color endure at the hands of the police. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently clear that Livingston's subject's vague answers appeal to a shared shorthand between herself and her community. Indeed, for many of the disenfranchised women finding fleeting comfort in Harlem ballrooms, sex work is commonplace and often necessary. Unlike Livingston's imagined audience, those who are familiar with and immersed in ballroom culture understand the loaded implications of working as a showgirl. That Livingston repeatedly tries to make the implicit explicit suggests that she, like Diane Arbus, has situated *Paris is Burning* in a "vantage point based on distance" (Sontag 1977, p. 25). Imagining that her audience will not belong to the subject's community and thus will not understand her veiled suggestions, Livingston tries to bait her subject into crossing a boundary of respectful silence.

To her credit, Livingston's status as an outsider does serve a practical purpose: by virtue of her own ignorance of the drag and ballroom community, *Paris is Burning* serves as an effective primer for a cis-straight audience, providing them with digestible explanations of queer slang and African American vernacular, and myriad models of queer kinship (such as the relationship between house mothers and their children). It is important, too, to observe how Livingston's approach to her subjects offers a stark contrast to visual predecessors such as Arbus; when Livingston names her subjects, she refers to them by their chosen names. Unlike Posada's lithographs from nearly a century earlier, which present trans women, gay men, and/or female impersonators as gendered caricatures, Livingston's subjects present a wide array of gender presentation; in sharp contrast to many subsequent depictions of trans people since the documentary's release, Livingston's focus does not exclude those who do not "pass" or are not, in other words, assumed to be

cisgender. Furthermore, with television shows such as FX's "Pose" and "RuPaul's Drag Race", and Beyoncé's recent "Renaissance" album paying homage to the documentary, it is undeniable that *Paris is Burning* has had a demonstrable impact on American fascination with drag, vogue, and queer artistry, however short-lived and cyclical such pop culture fascinations may be.

When Livingston directs her visual focus to the ballroom, her subjects are allowed to shine. In the opening ten minutes of the film, for instance, the camera follows Octavia St. Laurent as she walks down the proverbial runway, self-possessed and confident as she offers the judges a confident smile (Livingston 1990, 06:40). It is easy in these moments to forget that Livingston is there holding the camera or, better yet, it is easy to notice that she *alone* is there. Within the ballroom, Pepper LaBeija, Willie Ninja, and other queer elders of color take center stage, entirely self-possessed as they vogue before their adoring crowds. As the audio becomes inundated with the cheers and jovial shouts of their fellow queers, the ballroom attendees provide two performances in one: one for Livingston's camera, and another for their community. In these moments, Livingston cannot interrogate the ballroom dancers or aim her camera too long on a flustering subject; her voice cannot cut through the crowd, and her subjects do not hold still before the camera. Broadly speaking, Livingston maintains a visual wonder for the ballroom dancers both on and off the stage, dedicating much of the film's screentime to her subject's dreams and aspirations beyond the ballroom scene. In doing so, her camera does not invite the viewer to ridicule her subjects or to regard them as pejorative freaks, as the illustrations and photographs of Posada and Arbus might. Nevertheless, her interrogatory approach towards how her subjects procure their meals and income suggest that she, too, is entranced at the prospect of queer criminality.

5. The Work of Reynaldo Rivera

Immersed in the underground queer scene of 1990s Los Angeles, Reynaldo Rivera was a friend and confidante to many of the gay men, trans women, and drag queens who would go on to populate his work. This familiarity allowed Rivera access to a variety of intimate queer spaces: drag balls, bathrooms where gay Latinx often cruised, and the backstage dressing rooms of the gay clubs he and his subjects frequented, such as La Plaza, the Silverlake Lounge, Mugy's, and Little Joy (Wolf 2020). If Arbus' visual catalogs demonstrate what bell hooks once regarded as the perspective of an "imperial overse[er]" (Hooks 1992, p. 151), Rivera's photography provides a comparative glimpse from outside of the margins. Rivera's portfolio is more closely aligned to the unapologetic sensibilities of Maricónography, which uses visuals materials to "trick, tease, and overthrow a delicate image system of Latino heteronormativity and white gay racial superiority" (Hernández 2014, p. 145). His photographs of queer Latinx subjects frequently usher us into their dressing rooms, bringing our attention to one of the most significant features of his photography: his repeated self-inclusion within his pictures of LA's trans Latinx and drag performers behind the stage.

Reynaldo Rivera began taking photographs in 1987, focusing on portraits of his neighbors throughout downtown Los Angeles (Kraus 2020, p. 16). Because Los Angeles was predominantly composed of Latino, low-income, and working-class people at this time, his subjects were frequently domestic workers, people in the service industry, and the homeless population with which Reynaldo often committed petty thefts (Kraus 2020, p. 17). By the time Rivera was eighteen, he was not only deeply immersed within the local queer community, but it also figured heavily in his photographs because, as Kraus explains, "across his body of work, River depicts people enmeshed in their own private worlds who completely transcend their surroundings through the force of imagination and their inner lives" (Kraus 2020, p. 22). While Rivera's body of work spans nearly four decades, it was only with the publication of *Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City* in 2020 that his portfolio was organized into a single, material collection. His titular book comprises nearly two hundred photographs taken at the turn of the twentieth century,

which showcase members of Reynaldo's queer community, trans women, and drag queens performing across a network of underground gay Latino clubs.

In one such photograph, *Gaby*, *Reynaldo*, *and Angela*, *La Plaza (1993)*, (Rivera 2020, pp. 36–37) (Figure 3) a woman places her hand squarely on her hip as she offers the camera a confident smile. To the left, another figure looks over her shoulder. Though she is in a similar state of undress, she radiates none of the placidity of Arbus' unnamed female impersonator—her face partly obscured, Rivera captures Gaby either in the act of disrobing or, inversely, clothing herself. Regardless, she is too preoccupied with making her self-image to spare the audience a pose or direct glance. The photograph does little to bring emphasis to the supposed artifice that either of these figures are performing. Though they are surrounded by the resources they undoubtedly use to fashion themselves before a performance, Rivera provides little to no context about their lives or identities outside of the ballroom and stage. In the title of the photograph, he offers their names as directly as he offers his own. The two figures are surrounded by an excess of clothing and cosmetics, and through a mirror reflection, Rivera is figured within the scene. With the camera firmly in hand, he is surrounded by all sides. By consequence, Rivera is as much a member of the scene as Gaby and Angela, being prone to the same aesthetic choices of posing and self-presentation.

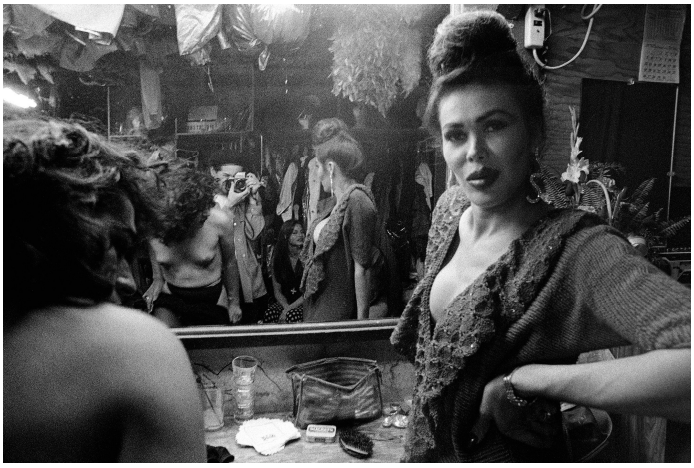

Figure 3. Reynaldo Rivera (2020), *Gaby*, *Reynaldo*, *and Angela*, *La Plaza (1993)*, black-and-white photograph. Image courtesy of "Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City".

In Rivera's analyses of his own work, the fact that he was allowed entry into the backstage spaces and dressing rooms of queer performers is demonstrative of the bond they shared. He explains: "in those days, this was kind of hush-hush. Remember, this is an illusion and you don't want to break the illusion. And their families might not know they were *vestidas*—that's what they called it in Mexico. It was a different world, and it was very private and they needed to trust you" (Miranda 2021). Within these photographs, Rivera does not break their trust. Instead, he refers to his subjects only by their chosen and stage names, both in the titles of his photographs and the select interviews he provides throughout *Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City.* When asked to explain why he elected to share these photographs over twenty years after they were first taken, Rivera has also cited a personally held responsibility in honoring the memory of many of his now-deceased subjects. Citing the AIDS pandemic specifically, Rivera explains: "I was determined to find beauty in places deemed ugly, or maybe I was just documenting the way that beauty can live side by side with violence and the ugliness of life, society and this country, a country that let millions of us die in the most inhumane way. We were rewriting the script we were given at birth. So many of us died without a trace due to AIDS and other acts of violence. I've chosen to leave a trace" (Miranda 2021).

While Rivera has disclosed very little about the creative process behind the visual production of his photographs, it appears that his subjects often saw the results of his work. In fact, Rivera recalls that he was trying to meet with Miss Alex, a trans woman who frequently featured in his work, to discuss their latest photographs when he had learned that she died of a sudden heart attack (Moffitt 2021). Reynaldo's proximity to and relationship with the subjects he photographed has been much discussed by the few critics who engage with his work, but it is also demonstrated across a wide array of his pictures. Unlike Arbus' female impersonator, Reynaldo's queer subjects regard the camera with visible familiarity, whether that results in Angela's come-hither confidence or Gaby's nonchalance in the aforementioned photograph. On the other hand, Rivera's photograph titled *Gaby*, *La Plaza (1993)* (Rivera 2020, p. 46) seems to capture another form of intimacy: a glimpse of vulnerability in the backstage dressing room. With downcast eyes and a languid frown, Gaby does not look at the mirror or the camera, but seemingly within. In this photograph, Gaby dons a frilled jumpsuit and, adorned in jewelry and with a face fully made-up, Rivera provides a glimpse of her. This is not as a female impersonator, but as a trans woman in truth. True to the previous photograph, this image also situates Gaby in a world that is populated and bursting with material evidence of her queer kinfolk, her sisters in glamour; once again, she is framed by a collection of costumes and cosmetics that surround her. To her right, another person stands just behind her, demonstrating that, even in this quiet moment of introspection, Gaby is not facing the camera alone.

In another image of queer and trans glamor, *Reynaldo*, *Miss Alex*, *and Angela*, *La Plaza (1993)* (Rivera 2020, p. 34), Miss Alex and Angela face away from the camera and instead anchor their focus on their respective reflections in the mirror (Figure 4). Like Gaby, Miss Alex and Angela are surrounded by the evidence of their social network: an array of clothing, cosmetics, and wigs impressively clutters the scene. Though they remain unnamed, other peripheral figures populate the scene. Entirely engrossed in their own work, they neither pose for the picture nor raise their eyes to meet Rivera's lens. While Miss Alex and Angela groom themselves, Reynaldo is once again depicted by their side. Closer now to the photographic forefront than he had been in the previous image, Reynaldo's face is largely obscured from view, but a crinkle in his eyes does ample work to suggest he is grinning behind the camera. The central woman's expression conveys confidence and self-possession in front of the photographer, as well as, by extension, the audience.

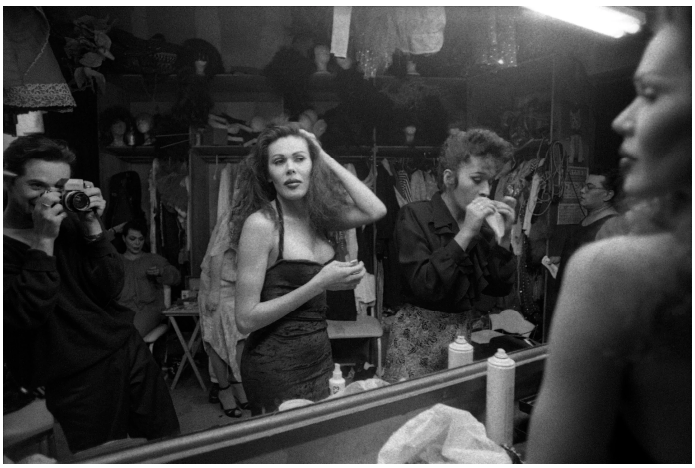

Figure 4. Reynaldo Rivera (2020), *Reynaldo*, *Miss Alex*, *and Angela*, *La Plaza (1993)*, black-and-white photograph. Image courtesy of "Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City.".

That Reynaldo seems to be smiling in this photograph is notable here, too, because it provides a stark contrast from Livingston's participation within her own work. In *Paris is Burning*, Livingston strives—and arguably fails—to serve as an impartial spectator; Livingston is neither presented nor regarded as a member of the ballroom scene, nor a particularly beloved guest. She does not participate in her subjects' community practices.

She does not feign fostering any relationship with her subjects. While Livingston's subjects trusted her enough to stand before the camera, the tension between the documentarian and her subjects reveals that such trust has its limits. Livingston's decision to cut from the tight-lipped woman in Harlem to Venus Xtravaganza—and in so doing use Venus as an oblivious signifier of trans sex work—demonstrates that such mistrust was warranted. The Harlemite, in other words, was right to hold her tongue. In comparison, Rivera regards *Provisional Notes* as a tangible expression of his continued emotional connection with the people he photographed in his youth. Describing the aims of the collection, Rivera explains: "It's our family album. It's a Latino family album and it's a queer family album. It talks about the complexity of who we are" (Miranda 2021). As scholars such as Cheryl Finley have noted, the family photo album figures as more than a sentimental heirloom—the family album also serves as a visual expression of the personal and group identities of those who collect, select, and feature within the visual artifact. As Finley aptly explains, "as artifacts . . . old portrait albums impart knowledge of the society and the mind that created them" (Finley 2012, p. 331). While Finley's work focuses predominately on the nineteenth-century family album and its incomparable value to the personal and national legacies of Black America, Rivera's own propensity for engaging with his portfolio serves a similar purpose, which is to immortalize and preserve the images, identities, and personally held narratives of an oft-silenced community.

In "Reynaldo Rivera's Delirious Chronicle of Los Angeles Nightlife," Christina Catherine Martinez posits that the growing exposure of Rivera's work coincides with a broader interest in photographers of color who "documented ways of life that complicate the aesthetic and historical narratives set by the canon of white street photographers including Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand" (Martinez 2022). Given Rivera's prolific use of black-and-white photography, and considering who the subjects of his works were, Martinez is not wrong to place his work in conversation with Arbus' own, which has undeniably received greater critical reception within museums, archives, and broader visual culture. In truth, Rivera himself has bristled at the comparison, positing that the emotional distance between Arbus and the people she photographed made "it [feel] like you were excluded. Like you're not invited to that party. My work is not like that at all. She took people that were normal and made them look freaky. I took people that were ordinarily considered freaky and made them look amazing, or cool, or normal. My gig was to have people look the way they wanted to look" (Martinez 2022).

While the emotional effect of Arbus' photographs is likely too subjective to debate, it is undeniable that where Arbus' photographs focused on the queer individual and their solitary defiance of gender norms, Rivera's lens widened to encompass the dynamic social and cultural contexts of his subjects. Through Reynaldo's photographs, the viewing audience is not only tasked with gazing at the queer individual, but to do so as they exist in their own world. Whether backstage at a club or situated somewhere within a crowd of queer Latinx audience members, Rivera's viewer is immersed in the queer scene without a warning, primer, or safety net. If one does not know about cruising culture, for example, a viewer may fail to recognize the sexual charge of Rivera's *La Plaza (1997)* (Rivera 2020, pp. 68–69) or his various *Patron* (2020) photographs taken in Silverlake Lounge. Unlike Livingston, Rivera does not seem preoccupied with offering an uninformed viewer with ample explanations of queer life and practices. By virtue of his desire to present the subjects of his portraits as "amazing, or cool, or normal" (Martinez 2022), such photographs dare to leave the speculatory ogler—hungry for the carnival freakshow—unsatiated. In other words, Rivera's work is not tailored to the cis-normative voyeur. Instead, he offers the informed, unthreatened, and queer-affirmative viewer a glimpse at a subject who, emboldened by the proximity of their community, will confidently gaze back.

Last but not least, I turn our attention to the photograph entitled *Elyse Regehr and Javier Orosco*, *Downtown LA (1989)* (Rivera 2020, p. 111). At the center of Rivera's black-and-white photograph, two individuals stand side by side, their arms seemingly interlocked and drinks in hand (Figure 5). The relaxed posture and unapologetically direct gaze of

both subjects harkens to what Hernández describes as the "elements of maricónographic image production [which] are found in the shared defiance, flamboyant daring, and brazen embellishments of its practitioners and the provocative tactics they deploy across diverse generic and interdisciplinary media" (Hernández 2014, p. 146). Face half-obscured by a costume mask, the figure on the left purses their lips towards the camera. Donning a white wig and frilled blouse, their presentation easily invokes the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century dandy, providing a stark juxtaposition to the Latinx woman just behind them, whose clothing and poses keep closer with the fashion of Southern California in the 1990s. To the right, their partner is similarly dressed in white and adorned in flowers, makeup, and pearls. Though Rivera only offers this photograph in monochrome, this subject's lips are clearly painted and, between the beauty mark on her left cheek, her groomed brows, and her sultry fan of their lashes, she evokes all the polished beauty of Marilyn Monroe.



Figure 5. Reynaldo Rivera (1989), *Elyse Regehr and Javier Orosco*, *Downtown LA*, black-and-white photograph (Rivera 2020, p. 111). Image courtesy of "Reynaldo Rivera: Provisional Notes for a Disappeared City".

Through the lens of his camera, Rivera inadvertently offers a glimpse of what those forty-two queer Latinx people might have only dreamed of at the turn of the twentieth-century. Unlike the figures captured in Posada's lithograph, Rivera's photograph imbues Else Regehr and Javier Orosco with dignity and respect; though they, too, meet the viewer's gaze in the midst of some jovial celebration, they are presented neither as deviants, criminals, nor fools. Instead, they are figures of beauty within a gender masquerade, endowed with classical and modern signifiers of regality, femininity, and theatricality. While Posada takes umbrage with the dancers who take one another by hand, the physical proximity between Elyse and Javier bellies an intimacy and affection that can only be admired. Detailing an incident in which roofers accidentally set fire to Rivera's home, Martinez explains that "the pressure from the blast of the fire department's hoses caused more damage than the fire itself, resulting in a strange body of compromised negatives that Rivera has been printing nonetheless" (Martinez 2022). Though subtle, the result of the damage makes itself known to spectacular effect in this picture: above Elsye and Javier both, photographic imperfections hang over their heads like glowing embers. The figures appear aflame, as if the very space that surrounds them affirms what Rivera holds to be true: theirs is a light that will never go out.

6. Conclusions

In order to best appreciate the significance of Reynaldo Rivera's photography, it is necessary to contextualize his work within a broader history of visual representations of queer and gender-nonconforming subjects across the twentieth-century Americas. As demonstrated in José Guadalupe Posada's (1901) *Los 41 Maricónes*, Diane Arbus' photographs, and

Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, queer culture, expression, and bodies have long been the subjects of voyeuristic fascination. Though these works vary in their mediums and aims, they all make a spectacle of the gender-nonconforming subjects they depict. Posada's broadside illustration is easily the most egregious example of this aim, but Arbus' propensity towards presenting her queer subjects as freaks serves as little improvement. Just as the derogatory title of Posada's illustration serves to demean the forty-one dancers, Arbus' titles emphasize the biological sex of her queer subjects in order to expose the alleged deception of their gender presentation. Coupled with how frequently she captures her subjects in states of vulnerability, isolation, or undress, Arbus' photographs largely serve to titillate, shock, and offend. In this respect, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's definition of a blank stare—a mode of unproductive staring that demonstrates "the inability to turn surprise into knowledge", "signals alienation" and "marks society's outcasts" (Garland-Thomson 2009, p. 22)—is especially apt. If Posada's illustration can be said to invite the audience's laughter, Arbus' photographs instead invite their blank stares.

Posada, Arbus, and Livingston also demonstratively distance themselves from their subjects and instead align themselves with a presumably cis-straight audience. It is in this regard especially that Jennie Livingston's documentary devolves into queer spectacle; though *Paris is Burning* presents the Harlem ballroom subculture through a comparatively sympathetic lens, Livingston nevertheless engages with the queer community at a distance. She may raise her voice to ask a queer subject an invasive question, for instance, but she will never visually present herself standing beside them as they answer. In this respect, bell hooks' critique is especially apt: "Livingston approaches her subject matter as an outsider looking in. Since her presence as white woman/lesbian filmmaker is 'absent' from *Paris is Burning* it is easy for viewers . . . [to fail to] recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston" (Hooks 1992, p. 151). Like Posada and Arbus before her, it is evident that Livingston created her documentary with a cis-straight audience in mind. She provides her viewers with a glossary of words and phrases she imagines they need defining. She bristles when her queer subjects leave too much implicit or unsaid. Her camera lingers and closes in on queer criminality when it can. It is undeniable that *Paris is Burning* remains a cornerstone in queer media and representation, but it is also true that Livingston's status as a non-member of the ballroom scene complicates this legacy.

In providing this comparative study between Posada, Arbus, Livingston, and Rivera, it is not my aim to malign one visual artist in favor of another. Whatever critiques one might hold towards Livingston's work and Arbus' portfolios in particular, it is undeniable that their work significantly contributed to the limited stock of queer representation within twentieth-century photography and film. The need to broaden queer visual and historical archives in order to better include artists such as Reynaldo Rivera, however, cannot be understated. As Michelle Shawn Smith explains in *Photography on the Color Line*, "the archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility" (Smith 2004, p. 8). In choosing to "leave a trace" (Miranda 2021), Rivera's photographs immortalize the queer and trans Latinx communities of twentieth-century Los Angeles and, in doing so, keep them visible. In this vein, Chris Kraus is right to characterize Rivera's work as constituting photographs of a disappeared city: the vast majority of the bars and clubs that he and his friends frequented have closed. Many of the drag performers, trans women, and queer Latinx that populate his work did not live past the 1990s (Kraus 2020, p. 25). For scholars, historians, and archivists alike, Rivera's work thus serves as an invaluable contribution to the recovery, preservation, and continued circulation of marginalized histories. Through Rivera's titles, we know the chosen names of queer and trans people that do not otherwise exist in the public record. Through his photographs, which present trans and gender-nonconforming subjects in all their glamor, we see how they once smiled, preened, and dressed. It is Rivera's easy manner and eagerness to pose beside his subjects, however, that is especially refreshing; however

innocuous it may seem to pose beside one's friend, his physical proximity to his subjects parallels the social and emotional proximity that made such photographs possible. It is the very evidence that his portfolio is, as he calls it, "a queer family album" (Miranda 2021). In allowing us a chance to turn its proverbial pages, Rivera provides us with a rare glimpse at Latinx queer expression, companionship, and community making from the inside.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable insights and support provided by Robb Hernández, Julie Chun Kim, Rebecca Sanchez, and John Bugg.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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