Crowning King Anchovy: Cold War Gay Visibility in San Antonio's Urban Festival

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Between 1951 and 1964, gay men in San Antonio organized a mock debutante pageant called Corny-ation during the city's annual urban festival, Fiesta.[1] Fiestas typically include multiple parades, fairs, theatrical events, and the crowning of festival royalty over a period ranging from ten days to two weeks. Like many festivals in southwestern cities, San Antonio's event relies on the historical pageantry of the western frontier, a romanticized representation of Spanish history, and stories of racialized conquest.[2] I argue that gay men took advantage of Fiesta organizers' attempts to broaden the event's appeal to middle-class publics in the 1950s to position Corny-ation as an event for the common man, for "the little people" of San Antonio. During Fiesta, Corny-ation was attended by a public audience of thousands and reviewed in local newspapers, dramatically increasing gay visibility. Corny-ation designers and organizers brought a camp aesthetic to a public audience that resonated throughout the growing gay and lesbian community in the city's public sphere and rendered that community visible to some heterosexual observers.

This research contributes to a rich body of scholarship on the Cold War era that focuses on the growing network of lesbian and gay bars, social

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[1] Fiesta has gone by many names, including the Spring Carnival and Fiesta de San Jacinto. Corny-ation has been spelled as Cornyation, Corny-ation, and Corny-Ation. Corny-ation was the most common spelling in the 1950s.

[2] Laura Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City: Heritage and Carnival in San Antonio* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 9–13.

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clubs, communication networks, and homophile activism.[3] I differ in my approach due to my explicit attention to the integration of gay men and lesbian into city life.[4] I build on George Chauncey's arguments in *Gay New York*, particularly on his analysis of the integration of gay men into public streets, taverns, cafeterias, and bath houses and on his insistence upon the importance of studying "the tactics by which gay men appropriated public spaces not identified as gay."[5] The study of gay visibility in public spaces and events is critical for understanding Cold War gay life and the gradual incorporation of gay men and lesbians into the urban public sphere. The civic festival of San Antonio's Fiesta produced a liminal public space that had enduring consequences for place making and the formation of an urban cultural public sphere.[6] Although such visibility is often dismissed as temporary or inconsequential, I contend that Corny-ation rendered gay culture visible to some heterosexual observers and implicated gay men as urban citizens worthy of integration into the city. This legibility ultimately led festival organizers to ban Corny-ation from the festival.

Drag, camp, and cross-dressing operated as the most identifiable and widely used signifiers of homosexuality during the Cold War period, particularly in the South.[7] Most studies of gay visibility focus on the more tangible signifiers of drag and cross-dressing without considering the use of camp in other contexts. David Halperin, in *How to Be Gay*, articulates the importance of studying the "sexual politics of cultural form," including camp, as a way of accessing gay subjectivity and identity.[8] These cultural forms include the attitudes, sensitivity to style, aesthetics, and cultural practices developed within

[3] See, for example, Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Craig Loftin, *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[4] See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Moira Kenney, *Mapping Gay LA: The Intersection of Place and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and Meeker, *Contacts Desired*.

[5] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 23.

[6] On the function of urban festivals in general, see Monica Sassatelli, "Urban Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere," in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Monica Sassatelli, L. Giorgi, and G. Delanty (London: Routledge, 2011), 12–28; and Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*.

[7] On drag in the South, see Brock Thompson, *The Un-natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 70–71; and on drag and camp more generally, see Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 3, 100.

[8] David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15–16.

gay communities.[9] Camp functions as a type of gay performance based on "incongruity, theatricality and humor. . . . [I]ncongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy."[10] Corny-ation did not include cross-dressing gay bodies but exhibited gay culture through the use of coded language or double entendre, camp humor, and the publicly acknowledged organization of the event by Anglo and Latino gay men who worked in the occupational gay ghetto of the arts and theater and who controlled the content of the show through dress design and scriptwriting.[11] Corny-ation designers and scriptwriters used coded language common to the Cold War period, but they also injected an emerging camp aesthetic whose democratic nature they deployed to satirize elite debutante culture and eventually national and city politics.[12] Through the performance of camp, Corny-ation positioned its gay designers and organizers as simultaneously sophisticated critics of the status quo and representatives of the "little people," revealing the complex and contradictory nature of camp as a cultural form performed for the general public. Few studies focus on the production of camp for a nongay audience and the possible consequences of this production.[13] Nan Alamilla Boyd argues that Cold War female impersonator performances allowed "public access to a nascent queer culture" by giving public audiences a glimpse at an otherwise "hidden society" within Cold War culture.[14] Similar to these performances, I argue that the public production of camp rendered the growing gay and lesbian social world more visible to others.

San Antonio in the 1950s and 1960s

During the Cold War period, gay men and lesbians were oppressed by antigay laws, the medicalization of homosexuality, nationwide panics about homosexuality as contagion, and anti-Communist organizing against homosexuality.[15] In Texas, laws prohibiting sodomy existed until they were

[9] Ibid., 10–17.

[10] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 106.

[11] The term "Anglo" refers to non-Hispanic Caucasian individuals. "Latino" is a peculiarly American term used to refer to people with ethnic and cultural ties to South America. Both terms are expressions of the racialized divide between English and Spanish speakers (also called Hispanics) and are in common use in South Texas.

[12] On coded language, see Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 108–9; on the democratic nature of camp, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 33–38.

[13] For this critique of camp and its exclusive focus on gay audiences, see Fabio Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 1–42.

[14] Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 39.

[15] David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Tom Waidzunas, *Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

overturned in a Supreme Court case in 2003.[16] There was limited positive gay visibility: representations of gay life were prohibited in the movies, and it was not until 1964 that a mainstream magazine, *Life*, published an article on gay life.[17] Simultaneously, the post–World War II urbanization of America contributed to the growth of gay spaces such as bars and of communication networks such as the distribution of *ONE Magazine*, a publication of the homophile group the Mattachine Society.[18]

The gay and lesbian world of San Antonio grew dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s and built upon a tradition of local nightclubs that had attracted female impersonators from across the country in the 1930s and 1940s.[19] During the 1940s Anglo and African American gay men and lesbians shared spaces with heterosexual African American patrons in bars and house parties on the city's east side.[20] In the 1950s gay men and lesbians frequented a handful of bars with mixed gay and heterosexual patrons in the downtown area, and a retired Anglo air force colonel opened the first exclusively gay bar, El Jardin, in 1954.[21] In 1952 a gossipy review of vice activity in a book titled *U.S.A. Confidential* remarked on the visibility of homosexuals in San Antonio and the popularity of "fag shows" at a local club.[22] By the 1960s members of the gay and lesbian community in San Antonio could frequent a number of exclusive gay bars in town. Bars, coffee shops, and newsstands that sold *ONE Magazine* sprang up on the edges of Travis Park, a downtown green space known as a meeting place for gay men.[23] Gay and straight clientele frequently shared these spaces. Mary Ellen Mitchell, a heterosexual African American woman, owned a series of bars and establishments that catered to a lively mix of Anglo and African American gay men and lesbians. The glamorous Menger Hotel downtown included the Roosevelt Bar, named after Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough

[16] Dale Carpenter, *Flagrant Conduct: The Story of "Lawrence v. Texas"* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

[17] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Meeker, *Contacts Desired*.

[18] On the growth of gay spaces, see John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela Di Leonardo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 169–78. On the growth of the gay world, see Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*; Loftin, *Masked Voices*; Meeker, *Contacts Desired*.

[19] Melissa Gohlke, October 22, 2012, "San Antonio's Drag Culture of the 1930s and 1940s" *UTSA Libraries Topshelf,* http://utsalibrariestopshelf.wordpress.com/2012/10/22/san-antonios-drag-culture/, accessed October 30, 2012.

[20] On San Antonio, see also Melissa Gohlke, "Out in the Alamo City: Revealing San Antonio's Gay and Lesbian Past, World War II to the 1990s" (master's thesis, University of Texas San Antonio, 2012), 24–25. On similar shared spaces between black and white patrons in New York, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 257–66. The large military encampment in San Antonio during World War II and the long history of a legal red-light district in the city contributed to the character of these spaces.

[21] Gohlke, "Out in the Alamo City," 32.

[22] Ibid., 29.

[23] Craig Loftin, email message to the author, August 21, 2013.

Figure 1. Mary Ellen Mitchell with bar attendees at the Top Hat, 1961. Courtesy of Carolyn Weathers.

Riders. It was a preparade gathering place for gay Fiesta attendees and was otherwise frequented by a group of older Anglo gay men.

Many gay and lesbian San Antonians also went out into the country to enjoy freedom and privacy, and in the 1950s and 1960s several bars sprang up on the outskirts of San Antonio.[24] Gay men and lesbians referred to two of these bars—the Klein's in the 1950s and Paul's Grove in the 1960s—as "the country."[25] In the 1960s Anglo and Hispanic gay men and lesbians used this term as code when they spoke to one another: in response to questions about where they were going for the evening, they would respond, "Oh, we are going out to the country."[26] For the heterosexual outsider, this sounded

[24] John Howard suggests that queer southerners were particularly likely to go out into the country for sexual freedom and exploration. John Howard, introduction to *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 3.

[25] In the 1970s entrepreneur Arthur "Hap" Veltman opened a bar actually named The Country in downtown San Antonio that operated as a mixed gay and heterosexual space.

[26] Gene Elder, interview with the author, February 24, 2012.

like a pleasant rural drive, while to the gay insider, it was a way of identifying other gay men and lesbians. Although the military police occasionally raided Paul's Grove looking for wayward soldiers, the rural setting allowed for privacy and bigger spaces, including a pool in the backyard and outdoor areas for recreation.[27] Some patrons spent the entire day or weekend at Paul's Grove. As it was outside the city limits, the establishment was also the only gay bar that allowed dancing in the 1960s. One young Anglo lesbian remembered that "they had these lights over the dance floor. And I'd be dancing with my girlfriend, next to some [gay] queen. And if the light went from green to red that meant the military police were coming through the lobby and we had to drop everything and grab a queen. And I'd always get this drag queen named Squirrel, and it was like 'oh please, he's wearing a dress. I'm sure they're gonna know something's up.'"[28] In the late 1960s and early 1970s Hispanic and African American drag queens, gay men, and lesbians frequented a bar called the Ponderosa on the southern outskirts of San Antonio in Von Ormy.[29] This bar was known for its dynamic drag shows, including the annual Miss Sweetheart, Miss Cinco de Mayo, and Queen of Soul pageants.[30]

During the 1950s and 1960s gay men hosted a network of house parties in San Antonio, some of which were inclusive of lesbians. Bill Carter and his partner, Butch, two Anglo men, threw house parties during Fiesta.[31] Carter managed the music for Corny-ation for more than a decade, and his house parties included a close group of friends and acquaintances, middle-class, professional, and artistic gay men and lesbians. House parties were very popular, and they often began after the bars had closed at midnight. Carter recalled that many Corny-ation designers, scriptwriters, and duchesses would attend parties at his house during Fiesta and throughout the year.

Although venues like "the country" and house parties hid the gay and lesbian world from heterosexual publics, mixed bar spaces rendered this world visible. Similarly, changes in the citywide festival Fiesta created new opportunities for gay visibility.

Festivals and Hierarchy

Historically, Fiesta reinforced existing social hierarchies in the city due to its domination by social elites. Fiesta de San Jacinto originated in a com-

[27] Gohlke, "Out in the Alamo City," 39–42.

[28] K.Z., interview with Aimee Sunderlin, March 8, 2012. Sunderlin was my undergraduate research assistant.

[29] John McBurney, interview with the author, November 9, 2012.

[30] Beatrice Roman, "Country Days and Drag Nights on the South Side," *OutinSA*, July 12, 2015, http://outinsa.com/country-days-and-drag-nights-on-the-south-side/, accessed November 20, 2015.

[31] Bill Carter, interview with the author, June 22, 2012.

memoration of the Alamo in 1891 with a parade sponsored by upper-class women from the elite circles of Anglo society who thought of themselves as guardians of high-class culture and who, along with their male counterparts, ran almost all major events in San Antonio. Although most literature on festivals focuses on their carnivalesque aspects, investigating their creation of a "world upside-down" and their inversion of the status quo, festivals and carnivals are also sites of contestation between elites and minorities.[32] In San Antonio, social elites dominate the event by organizing the largest central events and controlling the festival association, which gives them the power to exclude minority groups. For example, it took decades for Hispanic Fiesta royalty to be acknowledged as official royalty by the Fiesta Commission in San Antonio.[33] This domination may be common in other urban festivals; for example, elites have contested the desegregation of parade organizations in New Orleans's Mardi Gras.[34]

In Fiesta, elite Anglo men and women organized the two largest and oldest events: the Battle of the Flowers parade and the Coronation of the Queen of the Order of the Alamo.[35] The Coronation of the Queen was a particularly rich site for the display of social elite festival culture. In her book on the history of the Coronation of the Queen, *Dressing Up Debutantes: Pageantry and Glitz in Texas*, anthropologist Michaele Thurgood Haynes notes that since the first coronation in 1909 the basic structure of the event has undergone relatively little change. Each coronation is based upon a different theme or court, such as the Court of Empires, Court of Opera, or the Court of Mysterious Worlds.[36] Twenty-four young Anglo elite women of marriageable age, half of whom are from out of town, individually march across the stage and up the stairs to an appointed seat, where they await the arrival of the princess and the crowning of the queen. Each woman is announced by her name and a court title related to the theme, such as "Her Grace Margaret Ann McCloud of the House of Smith, Duchess of the Sacred Chapel of Les Invalides," along with an elaborate narrative about her title.[37] The coronation is officiated by the Order of the Alamo, a private men's club created by John Carrington with the sole purpose of crowning a queen of San Antonio, and its ritual form mimics similar ceremonies in British aristocratic and southern chivalric tradition.[38] Haynes describes the

[32] For an explanation of the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen Press, 1986).

[33] Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 135–68.

[34] James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 3–26.

[35] Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 1–43.

[36] Michaele T. Haynes, *Dressing Up Debutantes: Pageantry and Glitz in Texas* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 164–65.

[37] Ibid., 83.

[38] Ibid., 36–40.

historical pageantry of the coronation as "a mythologized ethnic and class history that justifies the hierarchical positioning of Anglo participants," and it continues to be the most exclusive of all the Fiesta events.[39] King Antonio, who is chosen by an Anglo-dominated men's club called the Cavaliers, exclusively presided over the coronation and Fiesta as a whole until his dominance was contested by El Rey Feo, "The Ugly King," in 1980. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) created El Rey Feo as the chief fund-raiser of their scholarship program in 1947 and successfully lobbied to include the new royalty in Fiesta during the 1970s as part of a systematic challenge to the exclusivity of the festival.[40]

Fiesta expanded in the 1950s in response to demographic changes and pressure to diversify the offerings of the festival. This expansion did not alter the exclusivity of events like the Coronation of the Queen but rather created new events to appeal to middle-class publics. The 1950s were a time of dramatic urban growth in San Antonio; between 1940 and 1970, the population of the city doubled, and it became the fifteenth largest city in the country.[41] The early 1950s were a time of large-scale municipal reform to cope with these population changes.[42] Because of these changes, Fiesta organizers wanted to encourage San Antonio residents to come out of the city's northern suburbs and into the downtown celebrations. In response, Fiesta organizers broadened the participation of San Antonio residents in the festival with an "increasing emphasis on Fiesta as a mainstream, inclusive festival, a party for Everyman" in festival marketing and newspaper coverage.[43] Organizers deemphasized the connection of the festival to the battle of the Alamo, replacing masculine patriotism with a focus on Anglo and Latino relations.[44] They reorganized the power structure of the Fiesta organizing committee in an attempt to curtail the dominance of elite organizations like the Order of the Alamo. Most efforts were focused on creating new opportunities for the participation of middle-class and non-Anglo residents, including alternative royalty to the Queen of the Order of the Alamo. For example, the Miss Fiesta crown was created in 1950 as a scholarship pageant for deserving young middle-class women.

Another example of this proliferation of events after World War II was the culinary and musical event known as A Night in Old San Antonio, which was sponsored by the San Antonio Conservation Society (SACS), a group of middle- and upper-class Anglo women committed to philanthropy and

[39] Ibid., 17.

[40] Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 145.

[41] David Ralph Johnson, John A. Booth, and Richard J. Harris, *The Politics of San Antonio: Community, Progress, & Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 28–52.

[42] Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio, Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 47.

[43] Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 103.

[44] Ibid., 123–25.

the preservation of historic landmarks and the city's cultural heritage.[45] SACS helped restore one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, La Villita, in the heart of downtown San Antonio, a process that both preserved a Spanish heritage site and displaced Hispanic residents of the neighborhood. SACS sponsored a yearly festival that began as the Indian Harvest Festival in 1936 but became a part of Fiesta in 1946, moved to downtown locale La Villita in 1947, and was renamed A Night in Old San Antonio (NIOSA) in 1948.[46] In an attempt to create tourist commodities out of local culture, the event featured food and music of different periods and ethnic groups, from Indian, Spanish, and Mexican to the cuisine of the Old South and the Gay Nineties.[47] NIOSA was widely attended by middle-class Anglo families, college students, and members of the military in the 1950s. However, this event did not entirely disrupt the race and class hierarchies in Fiesta. Laura Hernández-Ehrisman argues that NIOSA "demonstrated the gap between the romantic rhetoric of restoration and the reality of a racially stratified society."[48] Anglo SACS organizers positioned themselves as the experts on Mexican and other ethnic cultures yet relied on the labor of their own Latina housekeepers to make the food for the event.[49]

A Night in Old San Antonio provided the venue for the founding of Corny-ation, which began as a fund-raiser for the San Antonio Little Theatre (SALT) during the 1951 festival. SALT performed the new show as NIOSA entertainment at the Arneson River Theatre, an open-air theater in which the San Antonio River divided the audience from the stage; the theater was created in 1938 through the Works Project Administration. For fourteen years, thousands of NIOSA attendees paid an extra two quarters to watch Corny-ation, which began as a satire of the Coronation of the Queen.

Corny-ation for the "Little People"

Corny-ation was part of the broader destabilization of the Fiesta festival hierarchy, and Corny-ation directors quickly positioned the show as an event for the "little people" of San Antonio. They used media coverage, descriptions of participants, and key themes and rhetoric in the shows themselves to demonstrate that the festival was aimed at the common man. The visibility of camp culture at a public festival relied on this expansiveness of the San Antonio civic festival, along with the general expansion of the public sphere in postwar life. By positioning Corny-ation as a show for the "little people" or the "poor man's coronation" and thus explicitly contrasting it with the

[45] See Lewis F. Fisher, *Saving San Antonio: The Precarious Preservation of Heritage* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1996), 2–3.

[46] Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 99.

[47] Ibid., 98–102.

[48] Ibid., 98.

[49] Ibid., 99–101.

elaborate, elite affair of the Coronation of the Queen, Corny-ation designers created space for gay visibility within the festival.

A group of middle-class Anglo gay men involved in SALT founded the show. Joseph Salek was the newly hired director of SALT when he attended his first Fiesta and the Coronation of the Queen in 1950. He expressed his desire to satirize the Coronation of the Queen to SALT performer Russell Rogers, a businessman and member of a wealthy ranching family in northern San Antonio.[50] In 1951, when SACS invited SALT to perform on the NIOSA stage, Rogers recruited his friend Homer "Chips" Utley, Jr., a World War II veteran who worked as a speech arts teacher at a local high school, to write the first Corny-ation script. Rogers and Utley fashioned the show as a mock debutante pageant that satirized the language, regality, and elite aesthetic of the Coronation of the Queen.

According to newspaper accounts, the first Corny-ation in 1951 directly mimicked the coronation ceremony: "With clumsy and humorous ceremony, her imperial majesty, Empress of the Cracked Salad Bowl, was crowned by King Anchovy I on the river of the thousand islands," Miriam McGary wrote in the *San Antonio Light*.[51] Another *San Antonio Light* reporter proclaimed the event "a clever takeoff on the fiesta's coronation" and called it the "talk of the evening."[52] Female members of SALT paraded down the Arneson River Theatre stairs in colorful and humorous outfits; they were proclaimed as the Duchess of Parsley or the Duchess of Onions with elaborate language that parodied the high-culture descriptions of the coronation debutantes. Little did Rogers and Utley know that they had just created a hit. From the first show, both local papers published yearly reviews of the show. By 1953 Corny-ation was the biggest draw in the NIOSA midway, and beginning in 1954 it appeared in the event guide to Fiesta in the *San Antonio Express News*.[53] Eventually, performances of the show took place two or three times a night for several nights during NIOSA. By 1955 journalists commented that Corny-ation drew just as many spectators as the Coronation of the Queen. "This is not surprising," commented one journalist, noting that "the Corny-Ation, started as a spur-of-the-moment gag four years ago[,] has rapidly grown into one of the durable traditions of the Fiesta San Jacinto. It is not meant for serious-minded people, and this is one of its greatest attractions."[54] In 1956 Gerald Ashford, regular columnist for the *San Antonio Express News*, wrote an editorial column suggesting that Corny-ation played an important role in broadening the participation in

[50] Ray Chavez, "Conversation between Joe Salek, Ray Chavez, and Russell Rogers," *Art Forum*, March/April 1986, 21.

[51] Miriam McGary, "Pilon," *San Antonio Light*, April 20, 1951, 5-B.

[52] Margaret Clark, "Fiesta Frolic at La Villita Huge Success," *San Antonio Light*, April 18, 1951, 1-C.

[53] "Corny-Ation Top Attraction at La Villita," *San Antonio Express News*, April 21, 1953, 1-B.

[54] "Corny-Ation Again Makes Big Hit," *San Antonio Express News*, April 20, 1955, 4-A.

Fiesta and arguing that it had grown into an "established institution."[55] Indeed, Corny-ation became so popular that it was imitated by local high school students. For at least two years—in 1955 and 1959—the Gold Battalion club at Harlandale High School, a high school with a predominately middle-class Anglo student body, put on a Corny-ation of its own during the school fall festival.[56] In 1964 over 8,500 people attended the show over the course of the four-day-long event at the Arneson River Theatre.[57]

Part of Corny-ation's popularity was its broad base of participants and critique of elite culture. Salek's basic philosophy of a community theater was that it "should have as broad a base as possible, and should not only appeal to many different types of people . . . from many different walks of life and social strata . . . but should actually work those people into its program."[58] Corny-ation included everyone from gay designers to middle-aged female artists playing the queen to small children performing ballet. The royalty of the Corny-ation—King Anchovy, who presided over the affair, and the empress, who was crowned at the end of the event—were usually not members of the social elite. King Anchovy was typically a middle-aged businessman, politician, or member of the art and theater world dressed in humorous attire. Corny-ation empresses were women who had gained public attention through their work, acting, or activism. The first empress was Amy Freeman Lee, thirty-seven, a well-known local artist and art critic for cultural events with a regular column in the *San Antonio Express News.* A positive review of the first Corny-ation in the *San Antonio Light* remarked at the cleverness of the script and the humorous acting of Queen Amy Freeman Lee, who ignored the entertainment on her behalf by reading the funny papers, filing her nails, and playing canasta.[59] Another Corny-ation empress was Wanda Graham Ford, who was the wife of the famous southwestern architect O'Neil Ford and who was known in the city for her activism against the San Antonio Expressway and for famously being photographed for *Life* magazine while she was protesting in front of a bulldozer. In contrast to the Coronation of the Queen, not all of the duchesses who supported the empress were young, slender, and marriageable. Both the empresses and the duchesses, in other words, were very often unconventional women; they took leadership roles in SALT or were older and unmarried.

However, while these new participants certainly represented an expansion of the types of citizens who were participating in Fiesta, the majority of

[55] Gerald Ashford, "How to Improve Fiesta," *San Antonio Express News*, April 23, 1956, 10-A.

[56] Harlandale High School yearbooks from 1951 and 1957, courtesy of Harlandale School District, San Antonio, Texas.

[57] San Antonio Little Theatre, Corny-A-tion box-office report, 1964, box 10, Playhouse Archives, San Antonio, Texas (cited hereafter as Playhouse).

[58] Félix D. Almaráz, *Standing Room Only: A History of the San Antonio Little Theatre, 1912–1962* (Waco: Texian Press, 1964), 97.

[59] McGary, "Pilon," 5-B.

them were still predominately middle-class and Anglo members of SALT. Up until the 1960s, when a few Hispanic men began designing costumes, Hispanic participation was limited to the backstage crew. Anglo middle-aged gay men controlled much of the content of the show, including its direction, design, and script. The master of ceremonies' descriptions of each duchess and her costume as she marched down the aisle of the theater communicated the critique of elite culture and San Antonio politics. In an example of what Pete Daniel has described as the unique power of white men in the South in the 1950s to defy social conventions without punishment, gay designers and scriptwriters who had established themselves as professionals in the city used their class position and their presence in the public sphere to criticize the status quo.[60]

The content of the show clearly positioned the event to appeal to the middle-class audience of Fiesta. Corny-ation was first and foremost corny. It was organized by the Order of the A-corn, and corn-related jokes were dispersed throughout the program, advertising, and media coverage. The appropriation of the "acorn" and "corny" symbols was a critique of its own. Jazz musicians in the 1920s had popularized the term "corny" to describe outdated music.[61] By the 1950s "corny" had come to mean old-fashioned, overly sentimental, or unsophisticated. This corniness positioned the Corny-ation as a rustic, unsophisticated event, in contrast to its elegant counterpart. But in a period of sweeping social change in San Antonio this corny language also contained the double entendre of indirectly criticizing the Order of the Alamo or the Coronation of the Queen itself for being old-fashioned or behind the times. In some of the earlier shows, scriptwriters mocked the Coronation of the Queen through such illustrious themes as the Court of Cosmetic Subterfuge (1953) and the Court of the Glorified Barnyard (1955). The campy incongruity of elite courts and royalty juxtaposed with women dressed as cosmetic products and farming implements directly satirized high culture and elite femininity and presented critiques of the class and racial hierarchies in San Antonio. In the prologue of the Court of the Glorified Barnyard, the program notes: "As the strains of the great orchestra fade, the LORD HIGH AGRARIAN magnanimously summons the SHARE CROPPERS to render homage to royalty." King Anchovy arrives on Ye Old Irrigation Ditch, and the duchesses included four Country Duchesses followed by four In-Town Queens. The finale involved "her horrendous highness, vice-empress of scarecrows and guardian of the throne and yards" and of course "her corn-fed imperial majesty."[62]

[60] Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 158–59.

[61] Penguin Random House, "Corny" *Random House*, last modified 2010, www.randomhouse.com.

[62] San Antonio Little Theatre, program for the 1955 Court of the Glorified Barnyard, 1955, box 10, Playhouse.

Figure 2. The Vice Empress of Scarecrows.

The term "corn-fed" signified both being plump and being provincial or unsophisticated. This theme was a not-so-gentle mocking of royalty that contrasted high society with the sharecroppers and stressed the poverty and rural nature of the "little people." This contrast between the Lord High Agrarian (the master of ceremonies, who symbolizes elite culture) and the sharecroppers (the performers and audience) emphasized the race and class hierarchies between San Antonio Anglo elites and Latino and poor publics.

The show also frequently asserted that it was the coronation for the "little people" as a way of playing to its middle-class or working-class audience. In the script of the opening monologue by the master of ceremonies for the Court of Broken Traditions in 1960, the MC proclaimed: "You're about to see the *seamy* instead of the *sequin* side of San Antone—things as they *really* are—the poor man's Cornyation . . . the Fiesta of the little people! After all, *this* is the 30 cent tour! Welcome to the Court of Broken Traditions. . . . You Make 'Em! We Break 'Em!"[63] This was not the first time

[63] Lois Burkhalter and John Palmer Leeper, "The Court of Broken Traditions" script, 1960, box 10, Playhouse.

that the show had been described as the "poor man's" show. This language underlined the contrast between the sordid, disreputable Corny-ation and the high culture of the Coronation of the Queen. Corny-ation scriptwriters positioned these traditions as created by the city elite and "broken" by the Corny-ation cast and audience, who spoiled or queered them. In the late 1950s this satire of elite culture gradually began to include satirization of national and local politics as well, such as when the 1958 Court of Outer Space included a critique of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the politics of the Cold War. In many of these skits, the primary mode of satire was a strategic use of gay cultural codes and camp humor.

Sophisticated Gay Men, Coded Language, and Camp Culture

Although drag became an important part of the show during its revival in the 1990s, the Corny-ation duchesses have always been women, not cross-dressing men. Nevertheless, cross-dressing and gender play may have occurred sporadically in the show. Newspaper reviews of the first show in 1951 reported that there were "masculine mermaids" who "delighted the audience with their antics while reclining on the edge of the stage."[64] Former performers, designers, and audience members recalled that in the early 1960s a few gay men schemed to covertly perform cross-dressed as duchesses, but it is unclear whether or not they succeeded.[65] But the fact that Corny-ation was primarily conceived by gay designers and scriptwriters who included large doses of coded Cold War gay double entendre and camp humor in the show made it a source of gay visibility. I draw on work by David Halperin to suggest that this gay visibility relies on the cultural form of camp rather than the presence of gay bodies on display.[66]

A small group of Anglo gay men at the center of the San Antonio art and theater world controlled most of the content of Corny-ation, and their scriptwriting and costume design consciously engaged with current social and political issues.[67] Almost all the designers were unmarried middle-aged Anglo men, although there were two women and a few Latino men who occasionally designed. Gabriel Alonzo was raised in San Antonio, served in

[64] Clark, "Fiesta Frolic."

[65] Interviews included Tommy S., interview with the author, July 15, 2012; J.C., telephone conversation with the author, July 6, 2012; and Carolyn Weathers, email message to the author, September 11, 2013.

[66] See Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, 15–16.

[67] We must, of course, use caution when trying to determine the sexual orientation of those who are deceased and cannot speak for themselves. So many of my interviewees referred to the Corny-ation designers as "a bunch of gay men," "all gay men," or "all gay hairdressers" that I feel safe in my assumption that most of the men involved in designing the show were identifiable to others as gay. However, the reader should not assume that any individual man mentioned here necessarily identified himself as gay. Some of the Corny-ation designers were married.

Figure 3. Unknown designer with Corny-ation duchess, 1954, courtesy of the Institute of Texan Cultures.

World War II as a young man, and was a display artist at Sears and Roebuck. He started designing for Corny-ation in 1955 and designed dresses in at least eight different shows. Michael Gene David was the child of immigrant parents from the Philippines and Mexico. Other Latino men worked backstage as stage crew or were involved in the promotion of the show. There were also a few women who were involved in scriptwriting in the 1960s.[68]

These male designers were self-employed or worked in "gay ghetto" occupations in the art and design world as hairdressers, florists, visual artists, window decorators at department stores, or drama teachers at the high

[68] All of the information in this paragraph comes from triangulating lists of designers, cast, and crew members in Corny-ation office files (assorted folders in box 10 of the Playhouse Archives), newspaper coverage of the event, and show programs. I compiled a master list of designers and conducted Ancestry.com searches on all of them, finding information on approximately two-thirds of the designers. These records included military records, marriage records, census data, occupational information from city directories, and obituaries for many of the designers.

school or college level.[69] According to Esther Newton in her seminal work on 1960s drag communities, this occupational strategy of non-gender-normative occupations marked the designers as gay men; members of the public would assume but rarely openly discuss the sexuality of these men.[70] Advertising and promotion for the show highlighted the involvement of these artistic men; designers were often featured posing with their duchesses in newspaper articles, and their talents were highlighted in press releases. The master of ceremonies announced the names of designers and their places of employment during the show, and in the 1960s the program listed the designers' names.

Newspaper accounts of the Corny-ation designers detailed their artistic inclinations, described their trips to Europe to view art, and summarized their opinions about theater events. These media accounts painted a portrait of these men as having sophisticated aesthetics. In the 1950s slang terms commonly used to refer to gay men included "swishy," "temperamental," and "sophisticated."[71] "Swishy" signified effeminacy, but a gay man with social class and a certain appreciation and exposure to art and theater could be "sophisticated" or "temperamental," which had more positive connotations. In a social gossip column in the *San Antonio Light*, one newspaper columnist wrote: "There's a greeting card on the market, one of Rosalind Welcher's Panda prints, which reads: 'What's this, my deah? Did I heah Cholly say it's your birthday? How cha'ming!' Shows a lah-de-dah dowager-type, complete with lorgnette and pearl choker. We dispatched said card to Chips Utley, who was honored with a surprise party."[72] The card, with its references to a "dowager-type" with a British accent, was appropriate for Corny-ation scriptwriter Utley due to stereotypes about sophisticated men being dramatic.

Former duchesses frequently described these artistic gay men as sophisticated, well dressed, witty, and well educated about the art and theater worlds.[73] In interviews, these now-elderly women used "sophisticated" and "homosexual" interchangeably and frequently felt more comfortable referring to the men by the former term as they described the men's influence on SALT. One former duchess recalled:

[69] Scripts for all years except two are archived in box 10 of the Playhouse Archives in San Antonio, Texas.

[70] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 32; M. V. Lee Badgett and Mary C. King, "Lesbian and Gay Occupational Strategies," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73–86.

[71] For a discussion of "swishy" gay men, see Loftin, *Masked Voices*, 203–22. For references to gay men as "sophisticated" or "temperamental," see Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 8; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 87.

[72] "Capri, Mallorca, Tripoli Beckon Traveling Localites," *San Antonio Light*, June 15, 1955.

[73] B.G.C. and L.J.P., interview with the author, July 10, 2012; E.K., interview with the author, July 17, 2012.

> And you know, in the early days of the San Antonio Little Theater, we had hairdressers that would come and do our hair before the productions. I mean, it was just like Broadway. I had a dresser, very spoiled. And you know, in hindsight, I'm sure it was because all of these guys were so sophisticated. They'd seen a lot of New York theater, they knew exactly what went on, and everybody has a dresser in New York. So they tried to create that, and they did. We used to have black tie opening nights. It was a big deal. [Going to New York] there's a sophistication that you come back with. A lot of people go back and live, but if you don't, you go back to recapture it, but what you get from living there is with you forever. And so that's where they got their sophistication. They were well traveled before they ever started doing what they did.[74]

While most of the designers were from San Antonio or migrants from rural Texas towns, many had also experienced cosmopolitan cultures.[75] Some had lived in or visited major American cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, while others were World War II veterans who had spent time in Europe and perhaps participated in gay bar life while on leave in major US cities.[76] Many of the men were influenced by these travels. In his letters, Salek mentions his frequent trips to San Francisco and his visits to the homes of former Corny-ation designers living in New York and Los Angeles. Many designers had worked in New York or Los Angeles in the art or theater world in their early twenties and returned to San Antonio in their thirties. Phillip Jefferson "P.J." Allen was born in Kyle, Texas, but worked in New York as a dancer before moving back to Kyle to live in his family home and work in San Antonio.[77] Jud D. Davis, described in his obituary as an "artist, florist, gourmet chef, caterer, singer, dancer, and fragrance expert extraordinaire," was born in San Antonio but left the city as a soldier during World War II. He later lived in multiple cities during his career, working in the theater business in Boston and New York, participating in SALT in San Antonio, and eventually moving back to Houston and then San Antonio at the end of his career.[78] Other men frequently traveled together on summer vacations, including international trips to art museums and driving trips across the United States. The local society columns of the municipal newspapers reported on these trips, further solidifying the reputation of these men as sophisticated and worldly and contributing to the legibility of Corny-ation as a gay cultural event.

[74] E.K., interview.

[75] The following information was gleaned from census records, newspaper reports, military records, and obituaries for designers.

[76] Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire*, 113–14.

[77] "Obituary: P. J. Allen," *Lockhart Post Register*, May 25, 2006, www.post-register.com, accessed July 20, 2012.

[78] "Jud Davis obituary," *San Antonio Express News*, June 29, 2013.

Another way Corny-ation became a type of gay visibility was its use of coded language and double entendre to communicate its message to the audience. In interviews, several Corny-ation participants remarked that Corny-ation humor often relied on double entendre and obscure theater references that only some audience members could fully appreciate. The scripts include references to gay icons such as Sophie Tucker and Gina Lollobrigida, along with tongue-in-cheek allusions to Greek culture and the Kinsey Foundation, which may not have been comprehended by heterosexual publics as allusions to gay culture. In 1954 the Duchess of Schizophrenia from the Court of Hallucinations wore an outfit consisting of one half of a man's suit and one half of a dress, which the MC explained as representing the "big switch," or Christine Jorgensen's recent and public sex transition.[79] By the 1960s the Corny-ation scriptwriters were increasingly deploying puns with a second sexual or vulgar meaning. For example, a critique of a San Antonio police sex scandal was titled "The Duchess of the Policemen's Ball."[80] In his study of pre–World War II gay life, Chauncey describes how double entendre and coded gay language allowed men to "place themselves and to see themselves in the dominant culture, to read the culture against the grain in a way that made them more visible than they were supposed to be."[81] This nicely describes how gay Corny-ation designers engaged with both the specific culture of San Antonio Fiesta and the dominant culture of social and political elites, finding a place for themselves within both. Their sophisticated satires rendered gay men "more visible than they were supposed to be" in Cold War San Antonio. This visibility established them as social critics and important contributors to the urban cultural public sphere.

One of their key contributions was the use of aesthetic and humorous campy costuming for the young women who performed in the show. Male designers dressed women up like drag queens in order to mock high-society debutantes. Camp "came out" in these scenes by imitating the "coming out" of debutantes. The term "coming out" as it developed in the 1930s and 1940s in New York satirized the debutante "coming out" of society women.[82] Corny-ation used incongruous juxtapositions to mock and criticize both high-society rituals like the Coronation of the Queen and, later, the status quo in San Antonio. Corny-ation designers took young pretty women and sometimes intentionally made them unattractive by sending them onstage in burlap sacks and oversized outfits and with messy hair or buckteeth. In 1954 a local newspaper described the duchesses as "a group of local lovelies (hardly recognizable as such)."[83] Duchesses wore outfits that

[79] Betty Scheibl, "Fiesta Madness Hits Bugsy Peak at 'Court,'" *San Antonio Light*, April 22, 1954.

[80] Burkhalter and Leeper, "The Court of Broken Traditions," script, 1960, box 10, Playhouse.

[81] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 288.

[82] Ibid., 286.

[83] Jan Bradley, "Post-script: Cornyation under the Fence," *San Antonio Express*, April 22, 1954.

combined elaborate designs with found objects. Sometimes the duchesses and queens were overweight or older women attended by a line of slave boys in skimpy attire. Well-known men in theater, business, and politics were transformed into King Anchovy, a laughable caricature of royalty. Profane items like brooms for wands, fruit baskets for tiaras, and outhouses for a throne replaced symbols of royalty and pageantry. In the late 1950s the costumes of the female duchesses also began to include campy elements often used by drag queens. The 1959 Empress of the Court of the Sport of Sports incorporated heavy white face paint that was later used by drag queen groups like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Other duchesses utilized creative costume styles and techniques that may have been adapted from resourceful drag queens. For example, when new designer Ray Chavez designed the costume for his duchess, Joyce Lambrecht, he used halved grapefruits to enhance her breasts.[84] Texas drag queens in the 1960s often had to be resourceful and use common household items to create the illusion of breasts.[85] In 1961 a reviewer in the *San Antonio Light* remarked that "the royal dresses are so bad that they're good. The empress' gown is a 'soft' combination of chartreuse, fuchsia and iridescent orange splotches on a black background. Put all the show's ingredients together and they spell corn—delightful, lavish, and well-planned corn, the secret potion of a successful Corny-ation."[86] This element of being "so bad that they're good" eloquently describes camp aesthetic as a style, and audience members and reporters expressed their appreciation of the skillful use of this aesthetic.[87] As Susan Sontag famously noted in her iconic article about camp, camp in the Cold War operated as a "private code" among urban gay men, as some of the subtle codes were comprehended only by gay members of the audience.[88] However, other scholars have noted that camp was also a way for Cold War men to "stage their homosexuality for the public in ways that were at least potentially a source of admiration and inspiration."[89] Corny-ation designers could display their proficiency in the humor and theatricality of camp in a way that was appreciated by an audience of thousands and covered positively in the local newspaper.

These designers used this camp aesthetic to humorously criticize serious issues. According to Esther Newton, "Camp humor is a system of laughing

[84] Joyce Lambrecht, telephone conversation with the author, July 19, 2012.

[85] John McBurney, interview with the author, November 9, 2012.

[86] Hal Wingo, "Big Can of Sardines," *San Antonio Light*, April 19, 1961.

[87] Some of these elements were similar to a Bakhtinian carnival. Indeed, there are commonalities between camp and the carnivalesque, including the reliance on the female grotesque. For a discussion of the grotesque body, see Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics*, 22–23; Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For an analysis of the connection between camp and the carnivalesque, see Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," 32; Caryl Flinn, "The Deaths of Camp," in Cleto, *Camp*, 446–47.

[88] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" (1964), in Cleto, *Camp*, 53.

[89] Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 102; and Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 289.

at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms."[90] Corny-ation addressed issues that were serious—scandals, political debacles, and social elitism—with humor and satire rather than bemoaning them as tragic. In an early articulation of the camp aesthetic, a character in Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel *The World in the Evening* explained the difference between low and high camp: low camp is "a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich," while high camp "always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."[91] Corny-ation brought fun to seriousness in precisely this way. One of Corny-ation's designers in the 1960s described the way Corny-ation revealed seriousness through the deployment of humor:

> But it was always very pertinent, because I mean, politicians are stupid now and they were stupid then, so a little humor. Charlie Chaplin says that what happens up close is tragedy but from a distance it's comedy. And that's the truth here. I mean, all these jerks pounding their chests and walking around, and then you have Corny-ation that pointed a finger at the reality of what was going on. I remember how funny it was, because it was very pertinent, and you knew what they were referring to.[92]

To the degree that Corny-ation "pointed a finger at the reality of what was going on" and used humor to poke fun at politics and high society, it demonstrated, as Philip Core argued in the 1980s, that "camp is a lie that tells the truth."[93] Designers and directors often mocked figures from high society or important organizations in town, including the Chamber of Commerce (the Chamberpot of Commerce), the Cavaliers (the Cheva*liars*), and the San Antonio Conservation Society (the Consternation Society).[94] These themes became stronger in the 1960s as the show began satirizing debutante elites, eventually criticizing San Antonio politics and social life. By 1962 the targets even included the Fiesta event itself, which appeared at Corny-ation as the Court of Fiesta Madness.[95]

[90] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 109.

[91] Isherwood, *The World in the Evening: A Novel* (1954; London: Methuen, 1999), excerpted in Cleto, *Camp*, 51.

[92] J.C., telephone conversation.

[93] Philip Core, "Extract from Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth" in Cleto, *Camp*, 1999 [1984], 81

[94] Burkhalter and Leeper, "The Court of Broken Traditions" script, 1960, Box 10, The Playhouse.

[95] Ken Maples and Bill Robinson, "The Court of Fiesta Madness" script, 1962, Box 10, The Playhouse.

That camp was such a strong focus of Corny-ation is remarkable given that the aesthetic was just being developed in coastal metropolises like New York and San Francisco—places far better known for gay cultural innovation than South Texas. The camp aesthetic was not mentioned in popular and literary magazines until the 1960s.[96] Camp developed so early in San Antonio due to the sophisticated exposure many designers had to the theater world in New York and Los Angeles.

Simultaneously the product of gay sophistication and an appeal to proletarian satire, Corny-ation exemplified the complex and contradictory nature of camp. Crafted by gay men with broad exposure to emerging cultural forms, the show was embedded within local political and social dynamics. By embodying both sophistication and democracy, designers and scriptwriters could simultaneously satirize politics with vulgar humor while relying upon the audience's appreciation of their sophisticated artistry to protect them from the social ridicule, legal persecution, and social ostracism that was otherwise still common for gay men in this era.

The Corny-ation Drag Show

The show fit into a growing gay and lesbian world that was pushing the boundaries of Cold War gay and lesbian visibility. Many gay men and lesbians attended the show regularly. One Corny-ation designer started attending in the 1950s after reading about Corny-ation in the paper; as a teenager, he took his mother with him and was a regular attendee for years.[97] One lesbian daughter of a SACS volunteer remembered crawling over the wall to view the show as a young child and feeling as if she was watching something "forbidden."[98] Some designers knew each other from gay bars in the 1950s and 1960s in San Antonio. In the 1960s some designers frequented nightclubs such as the One-Oh-Six that included gay, lesbian, and heterosexual clientele. One duchess, Joan, recalled being invited to participate in the Corny-ation through a group of gay and lesbian friends she knew from the One-Oh-Six and other bars in town. Joan knew many of the designers in the show and a few duchesses from her gay bar networks, suggesting that at least some lesbians performed as duchesses in the show.[99] In the 1960s this embeddedness in the gay and lesbian bar scene included a Corny-ation drag show during Fiesta out at Paul's Grove and attended by a mixed gay and heterosexual audience.

Carolyn Weathers, a young Anglo lesbian, recalls acting as the master of ceremonies at a drag show performed at Paul's Grove on May 5, 1963, just after the main Corny-ation event. The drag show included some cast

[96] Fabio Cleto, "Introduction to Section I: Tasting It" in Cleto, *Camp*, 1999, 45.
[97] J.C., telephone conversation.
[98] Anonymous, interview with the author, June 20, 2012.
[99] Joan Ottavio, interview with the author, June 15, 2012.

members of the real show and was viewed by regular bar attendees along with a few straight and prominent San Antonians who were associated with the NIOSA event. Weathers recalls that "it was a thunderous success. In my diary entry for that date I say the first show was great, and the second show was hysterical—and we were all potted (meaning half-lit with lots of Lone Star beer)."[100]

The Corny-ation drag show included a few Corny-ation duchesses, but it primarily starred duchesses who were men dressed in drag. The show mocked Fiesta with duchesses of events like NIOSA and the Western Parade. It also mocked Corny-ation by listing a designer for each duchess along with a fake organizational sponsor. These organizational sponsors included the Downstairs Division of the Order of the Alamo Plaza, the Upstairs Division of the Greyhound Bus Club, and Local 69 of Streetwalkers International. One of the more explicit duchesses was the DoMore Cowboys.[101]

The script of the drag Corny-ation modeled itself after the regular Corny-ation's mocking of the Coronation of the Queen, creating an exquisite blend of fashion commentary, camp, and vulgarity. For example, as the Duchess of the Pilgrimage paraded in front of the audience, Weathers as MC called out:

> Sad and mournful in her black robe and train, this duchess still manages to bring a small amount of—gaiety into her costume.
> Lovely brocaded flowers adorn her train of Neiman Marcus net.
> She looks so pious—but somehow a bit perverted, too! —— (Wonder where she's going on *her* pilgrimage?)[102]

The Pilgrimage to the Alamo was a solemn affair hosted by the Daughters of the Order of the Alamo during Fiesta.[103] This duchess combined mocking the seriousness of the solemn procession to memorialize the Alamo with sexual innuendo of the word "pilgrimage" and double meaning of the term "gaiety." The Duchess of the Flambeau mocked the excesses of royalty and the Fiesta Flambeau, a large lighted night parade during Fiesta:

> Our vivacious duchess is truly a sight to behold.
> Her train is many-splendored. Here is a work of art all in itself. Each precious triangle of Japanese silk was sewn on by ten blind monks over a period of two years.
> The volcano near the center is symbolic of her hot nature and her fame as an eruptress.
> Her headdress is created of spun glass spikes aglow with jewels.[104]

[100] Weathers, email message.

[101] Weathers, email message; script of Corny-ation drag show, 1963, courtesy of Carolyn Weathers.

[102] Script of Corny-ation drag show, 1963.

[103] See Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 194–95.

[104] Script of Corny-ation drag show, 1963.

This satire of the Flambeau sexualized the parade with phallic imagery of eruption and heat. The narrative mocked the elitism of the Coronation of the Queen directly with its emphasis on the craftsmanship of the elaborate train and headdress. The synthesis of sexualization and satire created a campy critique of the pageant itself and Fiesta more generally.

Like the regular show, the Corny-ation drag show was a hysterically good time. The show was also a critical moment in which the gay and lesbian community claimed Corny-ation publicly as its own event and used drag to do so. This drag show contributed to the demise of the show, since it attracted SACS members who then formed a connection between the gay and lesbian community and Corny-ation that they had not been conscious of before.

The End to Our Fun

By the early 1960s members of the San Antonio Conservation Society were beginning to express concerns about the content of the Corny-ation performances, both the costumes and the script for the show. According to Salek, "The Conservation Society got to a point where they asked to read the scripts before we presented them. I suppose they thought they had to censor them or something. We should have known that the end to our fun was in sight."[105] SACS did edit the scripts for content and language, but many of the double entendres and vulgarities of the show escaped their censure. SACS could not control the designer's costumes, the ad-libbing on stage, and the unpredictable wardrobe malfunctions. In 1963 an actor's "glittered bikini" fell off in the show when he was performing as an attendant to a pregnant empress, Mary Byall, who was mocking the Kennedys' fertility.[106] On 12 February 1965 the chairs of the San Antonio Conservation Society, Mrs. James T. Padgitt and Mrs. Chester S. Weincek, wrote to Salek and insisted that it was time "to make a change in the type of entertainment that is presented in the Arneson River Theater, and to have a production suitable for all age groups attending our 'Nights' during Fiesta Week."[107] Referring to discussions within SACS that had been going on "for several years," Padgitt and Weincek made their case against Corny-ation with the argument that it was not suitable for children. Salek later recalled that the women had "called us obscene—not family entertainment."[108]

Soon after these objections were voiced, there was a flurry of letter writing and meetings, including one between SALT, the Fiesta Commission, and SACS. But Conservation Society members were not prepared for the fact that the wild popularity of Corny-ation made its cancellation a subject of public debate through editorials in local newspapers. The *San Antonio*

[105] Chavez, "Conversation," 21.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Padgitt and Weincek to Salek, February 12, 1965, box 10, Playhouse.

[108] John Shown, "Some Call It Porn, but It's Mostly Corn," *Express Sunday Magazine*, April 17, 1983.

Figure 4. Mary Byall, the Empress of the More-the-Marrier, 1963, courtesy of Wayne Byall.

Express News editorial staff applauded the SACS decision and criticized Corny-ation: "Amid its rare flashes of humor was an abundance of slapstick boredom. There were also frequent lapses of good taste."[109] In contrast, almost a dozen letters to the editor and editorial columns of both major municipal newspapers contested the decision. In an open letter to SACS, also published in *Express News*, Kenneth Maples argued that SACS needed to broaden their minds and membership, that censorship efforts had unduly tamed the 1964 Corny-ation, and that Cornyation "in its purest form is instructing satire."[110] The fact that the show was becoming increasingly campy and brazen had a definite impact on SACS's decision, and after a February 1965 meeting, it was clear that Corny-ation was indefinitely kicked

[109] Editorial, "Fiesta Event Made Better," *San Antonio Express News*, February 21, 1965.
[110] "Cornyation Slash Protested," Kenneth Maples, letter to the editor, February 23, 1965, *San Antonio Express News.*

out of A Night in Old San Antonio. SACS members justified the decision with complaints about foot traffic in and out of the show and their objections to the vulgar scripts and risqué costumes that made it impossible for Corny-ation to be described as "a family show."[111]

Despite these setbacks, Corny-ation designers and producers, along with the SALT board, were determined to move the production forward. Scripts had already been written, and Fiesta was merely weeks away. The group quickly scrambled to find a new location for the show, to put together advertising, and to solidify the script. The Corny-ation board printed a bumper sticker ("Yes, Virginia, there will be a Corny-ation") to proclaim their defiance of the SACS decision.[112] SALT members made arrangements to hold the show at Villa Fontana, a local Italian restaurant near La Villita. Due to fondness for the show by city politicians, the San Antonio City Council made special provisions to allow Corny-ation barkers to solicit passersby on the sidewalk outside the restaurant to encourage participants to come watch the show.[113] Despite these efforts, the new version of Corny-ation flopped. Given the dismal attendance and the fact that SALT barely made a profit, the board was forced to admit that holding the event independent of NIOSA was impossible.

Aside from a brief revival during NIOSA in 1979, the show was dormant for almost two decades. In 1982 former designers of the show, Ray Chavez and Bob Cotham Jolly, revived the show in the Bonham Exchange, a gay bar in downtown San Antonio. In the 1990s the show became a major fund-raiser for HIV/AIDS organizations, contributing almost two million dollars to AIDS service organizations along with other charities.[114] The revival shows the enduring legacy and appeal of this campy critique of the status quo during a major Texas urban festival.

The story of Corny-ation is but one example of how marginalized groups came to be included as stakeholders and participants in San Antonio's Fiesta in the 1950s. By framing the show as the "poor man's" event meant for the "little people," Corny-ation designers and scriptwriters consciously played to the democratizing goals of festival organizers. They used this cultural opening to bring a camp aesthetic and gay visibility to a nongay festival audience. In Corny-ation, camp was a form of gay visibility that fit within the culture of an urban festival and the growing gay and lesbian world in San Antonio. David Halperin contends that camp lays the foundation for a more inclusive society because it "throw[s] a wrench in the machinery of social depreciation."[115] References to stereotypically gay

[111] San Antonio Little Theatre, board of directors meeting minutes, February 17, 1965, box 10, Playhouse.

[112] SALT board records, 1965, box 10, Playhouse.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Cornyation, "About," *Fiesta Cornyation*, last modified 2015, http://www.fiestacornyation.org/about.html, accessed August 12, 2015.

[115] Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, 188.

occupations, coded language, and camp humor allowed gay designers and scriptwriters to make a public place for themselves within the expanding cultural public sphere.

About the Author

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