"No Tears for Alden": Black Female Impersonators as "Outsiders Within" in the *Baltimore Afro-American*

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On New Year's Eve in 1938, a national black newspaper, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, announced that famed Washington, DC, black female impersonator Alden Garrison had died.[1] He was only thirty years old. Known for his appearances in nightclubs and stage performances in Baltimore, Atlantic City, and New York, Garrison was considered to be one of the most successful female impersonators on the Eastern Seaboard. Despite Garrison's fame, the *Afro-American* lamented that there would be "No Tears for Alden," as he died alone and penniless in Gallinger Hospital in Washington, DC. In fact, the paper disclosed that just a few "intimate friends" attended his funeral service. Nonetheless, a procession of curiosity seekers paraded by the casket prior to his last rites, hoping to get a glimpse of the performer who was largely known through coverage in the *Afro-American*. The popularity of female impersonators and gay men, often identified as the "pansy craze" of the interwar period, helps to explain the interest in Garrison's body despite the fact that he had fallen into obscurity by the time of his death.[2]

Recently released from an Arlington, Virginia, jail, Garrison had voluntarily committed himself to Gallinger for malnutrition and chills a short time before his death. On its face, the story of Garrison's death at such a young age is tragic but hardly surprising. Garrison was just one of many people who prematurely succumbed to death that year and every year. Of course, Garrison's previous fame as a performer made his death worthy of attention. All three of the largest and most popular national black newspapers, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Afro-American,* covered Garrison's death, attesting to his prominence in the

[1] "No Tears for Alden," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 December 1938, 3.

[2] "Pansy craze" is from George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay World, 1980–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 301.

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early twentieth-century world of black entertainment.[3] Yet fame by itself was not solely responsible for the attention Garrison's death received. The black press of the early twentieth century, particularly the *Afro-American*, covered female impersonators more so than mainstream newspapers. Black journalists registered the existence of gender-nonconforming expression in black communities through their coverage of female impersonators. Thus a combination of fame and public fixation on gender unorthodoxy in the guise of female impersonators insured that Garrison's death would provide fodder for the front page.

While George Chauncey has demonstrated that early twentieth-century black newspapers were preoccupied with female impersonation, there have been no investigations of a single paper's perspective or of the ways that specific reporters covered these topics.[4] In other words, historians have used black newspapers to reveal what Eric Garber calls a public "spectacle of color" in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history without fully revealing the multifaceted and textured dimension of black female impersonators' individual lives.[5] We still know very little about the history of men who defied conventional gender values and respectability politics within black communities in the first decades of the twentieth century and the specific journalists who covered them. A critical examination of the *Afro-American*'s coverage of Garrison's life and death reveals that it was only specific columnists who regularly covered the "pansy beat" or conducted in-depth reporting on homosexual acts and gender-nonconforming dress among men in the late 1920s and 1930s. *Afro-American* pansy beat reporters Louis Lautier and Ralph Matthews reported on a general range of topics and events relating to gender-nonconforming dress and homosexuality among black men, but they paid special attention to a few specific female impersonators, one of whom was Garrison. His reputation as a skilled performer demanded their attention and captured the curiosity of the newspaper's readers, whose thirst for such articles convinced the publishers to devote considerable editorial space to pansy-beat articles.

Moreover, Lautier's and Matthews's focus on Garrison in the *Afro-American* granted him a degree of subjectivity that was typically denied female impersonators in the black press. Female impersonators like Garrison typically made for good headlines, as they were viewed as oddities. Little

[3] "Alden Garrison, Female Impersonator Is Buried," *Chicago Defender*, 7 January 1939, 19; "Noted Female Impersonator Buried in DC," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 January 1939, 13.

[4] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 256.

[5] Eric Garber's pioneering work transformed understandings of the Harlem Renaissance from a history of black cultural production into a compelling narrative of African American female impersonators, gay men, and lesbians who were at the heart of the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century. See Eric Garber, "A Spectacle of Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past* ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1990), 318–31.

of their lives was known outside of what was covered in the papers. However, the *Afro-American*'s coverage of Garrison was extensive and personal enough that it defied a simple characterization of him as a "freak." Instead, coverage provided him with a personhood that included feelings, beliefs, and desires. This article investigates Garrison's life through the lens of black press coverage about him between 1920 and 1938. Focusing on Lautier's and Matthew's coverage, I argue that an examination of the news about Garrison and other female impersonators and gay men in the *Afro-American* can remap our understanding of traditionally male-centered black institutions such as the *Afro-American*, Howard University, and Prince Hall Masonic Temple as nodes in a network of locations that sustained gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression, albeit with varying degrees of complexity and resistance. By carefully reconstructing the pieces of Garrison's life and by revealing how he and other female impersonators negotiated the interstices of race, gender, class, and sexuality from their position as outsiders to both the black community and American society in general, we begin to learn about how black institutions and organizations both incorporated and excluded gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression.

First, a few words about my methodology and terminology. Although I certainly agree with Rebecca Lynne Fullan that newspapers are "full of uncertainties" even as they present themselves as examples of "the quest for certain facts," one reason to use them is that so few other sources exist to provide a full picture of the lives of individuals like Garrison.[6] Newspapers can also provide source material for a microanalysis of famous individuals like Garrison, thus challenging the tendency of social historians to stress the social collective as having significance in investigations of experience. In short, examinations into the individual life are often viewed skeptically if they cannot tell us about broader cultural and social issues over time and place. Susan Curtis notes that some lives are difficult to document using conventional and cultural methodology for writing a biography that helps us "better understand larger forces at work."[7] Yet investigations into the collective also have their problems. They can obscure the granular networks, institutions, and associations that bolstered and shouldered people's public lives. The focus on collective histories has produced extensive examinations on early twentieth-century public spaces such as streets and nightclubs as sites of same-sex desire and gender-nonconforming expression in black life.[8]

[6] Rebecca Lynne Fullan, "Victory Celebration for Essex Charles Hemphill; or What Essex Saved," in *Out of the Closet, into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories,* ed. Amy L. Stone and Jamie Cantrell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 214.

[7] Susan Curtis, *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 6–7.

[8] In the sections of *Gay New York* where George Chauncey focuses on black culture, he confines his analysis to public areas such as nightclubs, parks, and cafés in Harlem where black men developed community and created space for their lives (see 244–67). Laura Grantmyre's examination of Pittsburgh from the early to mid-twentieth century reveals a live-and-let-live

Only recently have we seen more attention to the private space of the home as a site of modern sexuality. In a pioneering article in this journal, Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White argue that a range of sexualities existed behind closed doors in 1920s Harlem and that focusing on private residences "rather than public spaces recasts the sexual geography of Harlem from a vice district to a furnished room district."[9] Understanding the intricacies of the role that gender and sexuality played in the existence of the black press, educational institutions and fraternal organizations are important because there is a limited understanding of how gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression appeared in everyday life, outside of the streets, in African American communities in the early twentieth century. Drawing inspiration from Robertson and his collaborators, I therefore draw attention to how Garrison's connection to black institutions challenges the history of African homosexuality and gender-nonconforming expression as existing on the margins of public life or in cultural expression found during the Harlem Renaissance. Thus a microanalysis of Garrison's life using newspaper coverage hints at how gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression were etched into different black institutional fabrics in early twentieth-century American cities.

Although this article examines same-sex sexuality and gender transgression via female impersonation, I do not presume that Garrison and other female impersonators were gay, transgender, or bisexual; I do not ascribe to them any identification that might be politically relevant to twenty-first-century efforts to fight for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. I take this stance because I do not wish to advance a cause using lives that may or may not be congruent with particular political movements, no matter how much I might personally be invested in a specific political cause.

Garrison never adopted a woman's stage name, a stark contrast to many other professional female impersonators of the early twentieth century, who often performed under the names of white female celebrities such as Gloria Swanson and Greta Garbo.[10] Despite a few indications in the sparse archival record that as an adult he may have exclusively dressed in women's attire, we cannot know what Garrison's motivations for appearing in women's dress were, other than to perform. It would be anachronistic to characterize him

ethos that offered female impersonators a degree of tolerance. See Grantmyre, "'They Lived Their Life and They Didn't Bother Anybody': African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1920–1960," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2011): 987. Kevin Mumford's conceptualization of "interzones" captures the homosexual relationships that occurred between blacks and whites in the early twentieth century. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 76–77.

[9] Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, "Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (2012): 445.

[10] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 263.

as a transgender person even if we might suspect that he would have self-identified as a member of the transgender community had he lived today. I therefore use male gender pronouns to refer to Garrison, even though I cannot be sure that he would have done so. Garrison also never disclosed how he would have characterized his sexual desires, though we have evidence to assume that he was sexually attracted to gender-conforming men. Louis Lautier wrote that Garrison "brazenly" flirted with men irrespective of whether they were accompanied by their wives or girlfriends.[11] Still, it would be disrespectful to categorize him as a homosexual man or in any way that retrospectively challenges his capacity for making his own sexuality known.[12]

Given the fact that no documents exist to document Garrison's own self-understanding, I rely on the phrases "gender-nonconforming expression" and "homosexual expression" to discuss Garrison's dress and sexuality outside of work. I also use the term "female impersonator" when referring to Garrison and his profession because this was the more or less impartial term that black newspapers used in the first half of the twentieth century to refer to men who dressed in women's clothing, whether in their private or in their professional lives. While it is not clear that Garrison used this term himself, I argue that it is historically appropriate and indicative of how he may have felt about his performance as a woman. The term "drag queen," a man who dresses in women's attire for theatrical reasons and often used interchangeably with "female impersonator," would have been foreign to Garrison. Moreover, the context of Garrison's life and how Lautier and Matthews referred to him indicate that his appearance as a woman suggests his affinity for the female gender that exceeded the objective of performance. The descriptions provided by Chaz, one of E. Patrick Johnson's interviewees in the book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, of female impersonation reflect how I imagine Garrison thought about dressing as a woman: "A female impersonator is one who is also a male, but conditions their body, or conditions their look, to emulate femininity in its most, in its truest essence. To pay compliment to what it's like to be effeminate, or a woman, as opposed to make mockery of it."[13] My terminology and methodology, then, are a conscious attempt to respect Garrison's self-understanding without imposing anachronistic terminology on him.

"A Little Dancing Boy Who Grew Up to Be—My God! A Pansy"

Like many black children living Washington, DC, in the early twentieth century, Garrison grew up in one of the notorious alley neighborhoods,

[11] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 September 1934, 8.

[12] Genny Beemyn, "A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 113.

[13] E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South; An Oral History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 351.

the black communities with reputations for fostering immorality and for having high rates of disease and criminal behavior that were hidden in alleys behind affluent homes.[14] Born to Will Garrison and Rose Keeling on 4 June 1908 in a world that was less than fifty years removed from slavery, Garrison grew up in the midst of a hardening racialized system of inequality and in a city that also cultivated a small, elite group of black Americans.[15] Children growing up in Washington, DC, alley communities in the early twentieth century were often forced into adulthood early, often performing wage labor that could contribute to their family's household income at ages as young as seven.[16] Yet these communities also fostered a rich social life of oral and performative culture that helped to prepare Garrison for the stage. Songs and games served as the primary source of entertainment for these often very poor children, who had no access to toys and trips to the cinema.[17]

Garrison began his career as a performer in *The Rosetime Revue*, a variety show staged in Baltimore and Washington, DC, between 1920 and 1924. During this period, Alden lived with his mother, Rosa Payne, who was in her early thirties, and his stepfather, Robert Payne, in his early forties, who worked as a wage laborer in a paint store.[18] When Garrison began performing at the age of twelve, he was the youngest performer in the show, and the *Chicago Defender* described his first appearances on the stage as "specialty costume dances."[19] A 1924 issue of the *Afro-American* highlighted Garrison's performance and described him as performing "a clever Russian dance," introducing readers to the sixteen-year-old Garrison with the caption: "A Young Dancer on His Way to Keith Circuit."[20] This was most likely a reference to the B. F. (Benjamin Franklin) Keith vaudeville circuit in Washington, DC, one of the many popular troupes of traveling actors and performers that were attracting large audiences across the United States in the 1920s. This caption thus performs a rhetorical visualization of Garrison that frames the world of entertainment as a migration narrative—but a migration narrative quite different from the one typically recounted in African American historiography. As a young performer who was "on his way," Garrison's engagement with the Keith Circuit represented an attempt to achieve racial progress beyond his local community but through the field of entertainment rather than the more common path to the North, which often offered greater opportunities with

[14] James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850–1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 2.

[15] Constance McLaughlin Green, *Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 160–67.

[16] Borchert, *Alley Life*, 144–45.

[17] Ibid., 150, 155–56.

[18] United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920; Population* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1921).

[19] "Under the Capitol Dome," *Chicago Defender*, 19 June 1920, 18.

[20] "A Young Dancer on His Way," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 15 August 1924, A10.

Figure 1. Alden Garrison at age sixteen as a young male performer. *Baltimore Afro-American,* 15 August 1924, A10.

regard to employment. In this sense, Garrison's likeness was coded with a mobility that was tied to performance. The image of a young Garrison as a male performer also provides evidence for how rooted black female impersonation as a profession was in vaudeville theater. Efforts to recover the history of black female impersonation often casts it in a rather simplistic and celebratory manner without considering how it was an element in the tradition of black performance and labor. However, time spent performing in *The Rosetime Revue* and on the Keith circuit provided Garrison with the necessary training that he would need to perform as a professional female impersonator later in life. Just as importantly, Garrison's early work as a performer allowed him to escape the manual labor that alley children were often expected to perform to help support their family.[21]

It is largely unknown what specific events transpired in Garrison's life after his first appearance in the *Afro-American* to inspire him to begin impersonating women. We do know, however, that he continued to perform

[21] Borchert, *Alley Life*, 144.

for a variety of audiences, combining female impersonation with other kinds of acts. Several years before he first appeared as a female impersonator in the *Afro-American*, a 1926 issue of the *Washington Post* reported that Garrison was one of several artists who appeared on a program at a local Washington, DC, hospital to entertain black ex-servicemen who had served in World War I.[22] Since he was still one month shy of his eighteenth birthday, it is unlikely that Garrison performed as a female impersonator for this audience. Like many aspiring artists, the young Garrison hiked off to New York to break into the bigger and much more competitive arena of show business in Harlem. In moving to New York, Garrison joined large numbers of single young men, black and white, who came to the city in search of subcultures of homosexuality and fluid gender expression that permitted greater degrees of freedom.[23] Nonetheless, the difficulties of attempting to navigate an unfamiliar entertainment world and new city bereft of family and friends brought Garrison by the late 1920s back to his Washington, DC, community, where it was easier to make a name for himself as an entertainer.[24] Garrison's departure from New York reveals how areas outside of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s served as competing spaces for gay and gender-nonconforming life and expression.

It did not take long after returning home for Garrison to become known as an exceptional female impersonator.[25] Given the extensive network of performers whom Garrison would have encountered on the circuit and in performances throughout New York, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, it is not difficult to imagine that he would have observed and studied female impersonation as a performance genre and perhaps as a lived experience. A growing public fascination with female impersonation and what were known as "pansy acts," performances with homoerotic themes, was reflected in theaters and nightclubs across the country in the 1920s.[26] As a gay and gender-nonconforming subculture became more visible in public spaces, white social reformers and the police became increasingly concerned about the implications of homosexual expression and acts that they viewed as abnormal and a threat to the nuclear family. In New York City, the center of the theater scene in the United States, social reformers' calls for the censorship of images of gay men and lesbians circulated in newspapers. Garrison came of age in a cultural moment of both increased fascination with and regulation of gender-nonconforming and homosexual life.

[22] "Plan Entertainment for Colored Veterans," *Washington Post*, 16 May 1926, M12.

[23] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 135–36.

[24] Ralph Matthews, "Alden Garrison, a Little Dancing Boy Who Grew Up to Be—My God! A Pansy," Looking at the Stars, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 February 1933, 18.

[25] Ralph Matthews, "Sex Appeal Not Needed to Be a Stage Success," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 September 1930, A8.

[26] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 310–11; James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 33–34.

In many ways, Garrison's black world in Washington, DC, and Baltimore was relatively more tolerant of homosexuality and gender transgression, though it was by no means free from police regulation and community condemnation. Heavily populated African American areas of northern American cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago offered some degree of acceptance for female impersonators and gay men. Even the smaller industrial city of Pittsburgh was home to female impersonators who could "perform in nightclubs, participate in parades, socialize in beauty parlors, sing in church choirs, and gather in neighborhood bars" with varying degrees of tolerance.[27]

In 1930, when Garrison was twenty-two, he resided in Washington, DC, with two other men: Albert Scott, who was fifty-six, and Garland Wilson, who was twenty-one. Despite his young age, Garrison was listed as the head of household in the US census, a fact that contradicted heteronormative models of respectable familial structure. It is likely that he earned the most money of the three, since he was a veteran entertainer, while Wilson was a musician and migrant from West Virginia, and Scott was listed simply as a "cleaner."[28] Together the men paid $35.50 per month for rent. Bachelors sharing accommodations was not uncommon for young black men living in early twentieth-century Washington, DC. Institutions such as the YMCA were off-limits to them, and the Great Depression saw a rise in the number of rooming houses for single men.[29] As sociologist William Henry Jones noted in 1929, "It is now becoming quite conventional for three or four young men to rent and furnish an apartment, and live a more or less Bohemian Life."[30] By "Bohemian," Jones meant unmarried, an increasingly common situation for black men and a cause for concern among black social reformers and community leaders who worried about the growing urban population of young middle-class African Americans who rejected heteronormative lifestyles.

However, Jones also seems to be hinting that a bohemian lifestyle could include a gay subculture. For black men with same-sex desires and relationships, rooming houses afforded the freedom to cohabitate with lovers without raising suspicion. De facto racial segregation that largely made it economically and culturally impossible to live in white areas of Washington, DC, also demanded that all three men, irrespective of their sexuality or gender appearance, live within the boundaries of black communities.[31] Men and their roommates found safety in private dwellings away from the

[27] Grantmyre, "'They Lived,'" 987.

[28] United States Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Population* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1931–33).

[29] Brett Beemyn, *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 35–36.

[30] William Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1929), 136–37.

[31] Beemyn, *A Queer Capital*, 32–33, 40.

surveillance of disapproving family members and judicial authorities.[32] A number of sources describe Garrison's roommate Garland Wilson, who would go on to be a highly accomplished pianist, particularly in Europe, as gay.[33] Because there was only a one-year difference in their ages, it is likely that the two men first met on the Keith vaudeville circuit, where Garland, like Garrison, performed throughout some of his teenage years. Garland might also have met Garrison in New York City, where he spent some time playing piano in speakeasies and cafés in Harlem, the center of black gay life in the first decades of the twentieth century.[34] We cannot know whether Garrison and Garland were involved in a romantic relationship or where Walter Scott, their third roommate, might have fit. Nevertheless, Garrison and Garland's cohabitation and connection reveal the personal and private community that almost certainly grew out of relationships forged in the public world of entertainment and gay life.

Nightclubs generated relationships within a fluid social network of black entertainers who contributed and relied on critical information about housing and possible entertainment venues to help them survive the ever-present specters of racism and poverty.[35] In this sense, Garrison's need for community was no different from that of other entertainers. Garrison, however, believed that female impersonators required social connections that reflected their particular positions in the entertainment world and African American community. As one of the founders of the Impersonators Club, an association ostensibly devoted to building community among individuals who chose to impersonate the opposite gender, Garrison rose to the top of the female impersonator community in Washington, DC, at a very young age.[36] The Impersonators Club was particularly significant given that clubs were both markers and inculcators of middle-class respectability in black communities.[37] Clubs provided opportunities for members of different black communities to transcend antiblack racist ideologies that depicted blackness as synonymous with criminality and cultural and social depravity. Notably, black clubwomen created a set of reform practices that sought to uplift the masses of uneducated and poor black Americans living across the nation. In establishing a club for female impersonators in Washington,

[32] Robertson et al., "Disorderly Houses," 457–58.

[33] "Garland Wilson Is Tops with British," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 March 1936, 11; "Garland Wilson, Former Virginian, Makes Good under English Skies," *New Journal and Guide*, 14 March 1936, 15; Tammy L. Kernolde, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 181.

[34] William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story between the Great Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 84.

[35] Shane Vogel, "Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer Poetics of Harlem Nightlife," *Criticism* 48, no. 3 (2006): 407.

[36] Marya Annette McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, DC, 1902–1957" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2000), 196.

[37] St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 689.

DC, Garrison demonstrated that he understood how a network could assist female impersonators in steering through the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

At the young age of twenty-two Garrison was already a favorite of the black Washington, DC, and Baltimore communities as well as the interracial audiences for whom he entertained. Clubs in the black areas of the City that were opened to white and black patrons invited Garrison and other female impersonators to perform as feature performers.[38] Garrison's popularity was reflected in the *Afro-American*'s coverage over the span of his short life. Reporters Ralph Matthews and Louis Lautier often listed his name as one of the most well dressed female impersonators. Described as the "belle" of the eighth annual Pansy Ball at the Elks Hall in a front-page article of the *Afro-American*, "'Miss' Garrison," as Matthews called him, reigned over the affair wearing a "flowing gown of egg-shell satin with studded rhinestones, [and] a tiara of similar crystals."[39] It is worth noting that Matthews singled Garrison out of the large group of female impersonators who attended the affair and described his outfit with painstaking detail. In what appeared to be an expression of grudging respect, Matthews informed readers that Garrison was a "professional" female impersonator, seemingly privileging Garrison's choice to dress in women's clothing over individuals who might have done so for more personal reasons. Moreover, Matthews made sure that a picture of Garrison and three other female impersonators also appeared in the weekly section of the paper dedicated to visually documenting black accomplishment and uplifting stories. Stylishly posed, Garrison stood over another female impersonator, who was sitting, with a fur stole casually draped over his shoulders. Still, Matthews's report of the ball was in no way a glowing endorsement of the affair. He described the female impersonators as "abnormal."[40]

Even as Matthews used a pejorative word to characterize the ball and by extension its participants, his decision to place the photograph of Garrison and other female impersonators among the other photo news of the week suggests that Matthews and the *Afro-American* were less preoccupied with designating female impersonators as complete outsiders and more with establishing where they fit in the diverse fabric of black life. Garrison and other female impersonators can thus be described as what Patricia Hill Collins has termed "outsiders within": by virtue of their racial identity they occupied the same geospatial and social locations as other black men, but they remained outside the full recognition accorded them in everyday life as a result of their challenge to gender and sexual norms. Collins argues that outsider-within status has historically offered heterosexual African American

[38] Beemyn, *Queer Capital*, 31–32.

[39] Ralph Matthews, "'31 Debutantes Bow at Local 'Pansy' Ball," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 March 1931, 1.

[40] "'Pansies' Stage Colorful Ball," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 March 1931, 10.

Figure 2. Alden Garrison at age twenty-two with a fur stole on his shoulder standing to the left among a group of female impersonators. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 March 1931, 10.

women working within white society special insight into the machinations of the interlocking power system of race, gender, and class. But the term can also be powerfully employed to explain how Garrison and the other female impersonators sustained an empowering collective social status as outsiders within black communities in the early twentieth century.[41] Their ability to utilize the camera lens, traditionally used by middle-class African Americans to visually document their humanity as a defense against racist attacks on their characters,[42] allowed Garrison and other female impersonators to claim a place in a black public circumscribed by gender and sexuality. As outsiders within, Garrison and the other female impersonators disrupted the essentialized notions of conventional middle-class gender and

[41] Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S15.

[42] bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994), 45–46.

heterosexual sexual norms expressed in the pages of the *Afro-American* and other black newspapers.

Yet despite the progressive nature of their message, the transgressive impact of the female impersonators was undercut by the marketplace ideology and the male-dominated logics that presented commodified images of female impersonators as "freaks" for reader consumption in the *Afro-American*. Matthews drew comparisons between Garrison's conventional upbringing and male identity during his boyhood and his impersonation of women in early adulthood, underlining the incongruity between gender-nonconforming and conventional gender expression in early twentieth-century black life. Clearly perplexed, Matthews reported that he remembered Garrison as a young male dancer in *The Rosetime Revue*. He was struck by the fact that when Garrison was younger, he dressed in boys' attire such as overalls and did not appear "that way at all." Louis Lautier, regular columnist for the *Afro-American*, also reminded readers about Garrison's performance as a male dancer in Lautier's recollection of *The Rosetime Revue*: "Alden Garrison the pansy, who was not quite so brazen then, did two dance routines."[43] Both Matthews's and Lautier's discussions of Garrison's career as a young male performer highlighted the mutability of gender and suggested to readers that it was a tenuous category at best.

Garrison's ability to effectively transform from a boy into the form of a woman defied rigid gender boundaries. That Matthews was thunderstruck that Garrison had looked like a "normal boy" in his youth reinforced the idea that female impersonators were a distinct and abnormal "third sex." Nevertheless, Lautier's and Matthews's focus on Garrison ascribed a degree of agency that was lacking in their discussion and depiction of other female impersonators, who were rarely mentioned by name and simply called "pansies" and "fairies." Marlon Ross argues that individuals like Garrison are not "normally represented as epistemological subjects, partly as they do not have the luxury of composing the voluminous texts that bear the weight of such deeply buried—and thus closed/closeted up—intellectual dilemmas begging for such painstaking close reading."[44] Because of the disproportionate amount of attention Garrison received in the *Afro-American*, albeit in a frame of abnormality and spectacle, it was impossible to read him simply as an object to be ridiculed and ostracized. No other formal organization offered any female impersonators, white or black, the agency that the black press offered Garrison.

[43] Matthews, "Alden Garrison," 11; Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 30 March 1935, 16.

[44] Marlon B. Ross, "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 171.

"NEWSPAPERMEN KNOW EVERYBODY—EVEN PANSIES"[45]

The personhood extended to Alden and others was certainly not without its complexity. By the time Garrison was twenty-five, in 1933, he was no doubt used to seeing his name periodically appear in local papers. He was a veteran entertainer with over ten years in the business, and he was well known in popular circles in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Moreover, female impersonators had become all the rage in many areas of African American life in the early 1930s, and stories about them often appeared in the pages of black newspapers.[46] In this sense, it was unsurprising that Lautier, writing for the *Afro-American*, reported in late January 1933 that Garrison and twenty or so of his friends congregated at Club Crystal Caverns, a popular nightclub in the heart of the black section of Washington, DC, that was filled with cabarets, jazz clubs, dance halls, and cafés.[47] It was one of the few places that remained open after hours and had staff who looked the other way when patrons consumed liquor from teacups. During the 1930s gay men regularly frequented Club Crystal Caverns, either performing as female impersonators for mixed-race audiences or socializing with others.[48] Dominating the public space of the club, Garrison and other female impersonators, along with men dressed in gender-conforming male clothing, danced and sat around singing to music played by a band throughout the night. Lautier described Garrison as appearing dressed in a "white fur-trimmed creation with a shoulder cape" and with hair that was bobbed, in keeping with the style of this time. Garrison was not shy about his body: Lautier admiringly reported on the feminine qualities of Garrison's body, noting that he "pulled his dress completely off, displaying smart combinations which any woman might be proud to possess." Lautier described Garrison as the "leader" of the group and noted that Garrison was the best dressed and performed an "almost perfect" female impersonation.[49]

Garrison was well known to Lautier. He had reported on Garrison and other female impersonators relatively frequently in the years prior to seeing him at Club Crystal Caverns. Lautier was a prolific journalist covering much of the Washington, DC, social and cultural scene in his regular gossip column, Capital Spotlight, for the *Afro-American*. He would go on to be the first black journalist admitted to the National Press Club in 1955 and the White House Correspondents Association in 1956. However, prior to his rise to prominence in journalism and political circles, Lautier was a promoter of the Congo Club, an "exclusive" pansy nightclub in Washington, DC. With a bird's-eye view of the city after hours, Lautier relished sharing his intimate observations of the comings and goings of nightclub patrons

[45] Ralph Matthews, Looking at the Stars, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 February 1933, 11.
[46] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 257.
[47] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 January 1933, 1.
[48] Beemyn, *A Queer Capital*, 32.
[49] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 January 1933, 1.

with his readers.[50] Lautier viewed himself as the Walter Winchell of the black press. Winchell, author of the first syndicated gossip column in the *New York Daily Mirror*, was notorious for his attempts to destroy people's reputations. Lautier similarly filled his column with exposés and exciting or embarrassing information about prominent members of Washington, DC, society. No one's private life was safe from disclosure.

Lautier seemed to have a particular interest in and knowledge of the female impersonators whom he celebrated in his column. Reporting that he was "avalanched with inquiries about pansies," Lautier informed readers where the latest "pansy clubs" were located and where readers could expect to see specific female impersonators perform and gay men with whom they could socialize. Lautier's personal association with female impersonators as a promoter of a nightclub suggested to some readers that his knowledge of homosexual men extended beyond what he wrote in the *Afro-American*. One reader, he reported, even asked him for a list of "eligible pansies."[51] In another column, Lautier announced that "there is a pansy club in the 2000 block of Fifteenth Street, northwest. . . . 'Mother' Smothers, a Baltimore pansy, started it."[52] In other instances, Lautier divulged where gay men could be found outside the city. He retold a story of a fight between two boys that broke out at a "suburban spot" and was broken up by a "pansy-cook." One column ended with Lautier's observation that a pansy heckled a salesman in a barbershop.[53] Lautier's column was thus a regular source of information about both black men who expressed same-sex desire and female impersonators within Washington, DC's black communities. In some sense, Lautier's coverage of these subjects provided cover for elite black same-sex lives in the capital. Genny Beemyn suggests that racially inflected moral and social obligations compelled black leaders to suppress public same-sex desire and interactions and to recuse themselves from the communities of working-class female impersonators and men and women with same-sex desires. For example, individuals such as Washington, DC, educator Angelina Weld Grimké expressed her interest in women through poetry and private correspondence. The pressure of living up to codes of respectability imposed by her father and other social reformers made developing a public sexual relationship with a woman out of the question.[54] Power and privilege, then, shielded black elites with same-sex desire from accusations of moral degeneracy and protected them from gossipy snippets in the *Afro-American*. In contrast, Lautier's stories about Garrison

[50] "DC Pansy Club to Be Exclusive," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 October 1931, 5; Beemyn, *A Queer Capital*, 31.

[51] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 1 December 1934, 6; Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 18 January 1926, 4.

[52] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 6 October 1934, 3.

[53] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 February 1936, 6; Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American,* 7 May 1938, 7.

[54] Beemyn, *Queer Capital*, 76.

and other female impersonators produced a hypervisible embodiment of nonnormative gender and same-sex sexuality that made it synonymous with working-class life. As we will see, however, Lautier was less reticent about disclosing the homosexuality of a younger generation of African American men.

Lautier was not the only journalist to correlate homosexual acts with poor men and working-class life in African American communities. Other black papers, such as the *Interstate Tattle* and the *Amsterdam News*, also reported on homosexual sexual expression and revealed the names of men who had been arrested for female impersonation or solicitation.[55] The most common coverage on female impersonation in papers typically involved reports about the Hamilton Lodge Ball in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and reporters vacillated between expressing condemnation, ambivalence, and even occasional admiration for this event. Formally, the Hamilton Lodge was home to the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century and initially included prominent individuals from the medical and legal professions along with religious and business figures. Over time, the organization's annual masquerade ball evolved into a gathering for gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression.[56] Black papers' diverse approaches to covering the Hamilton Lodge Ball and other balls and same-sex sexuality make it difficult to come down on either side regarding the black press's position on female impersonation and homosexual expression. What is clear, however, is that Lautier and other reporters remade the *Afro-American* and other black newspapers by animating and mapping the transgressive bodies of gay men and female impersonators across black city and suburban landscapes.

Within the interwar coverage on female impersonators and homosexual desire and expression across different American newspapers, Garrison was a central signpost in designating Washington and Baltimore urban spaces as homosexual and gender nonconforming through his very presence. His name appeared more than that of any other female impersonator in Lautier's column, and he was often singled out relative to other female impersonators in other areas of the paper. Lautier often announced where Garrison and his "harem" were performing, casually mentioning, for instance, that "Alonzo Collins sponsored a pansies' night last Sunday midnight, featuring Alden Garrison and some other 'girls.'"[57] Lautier's preoccupation with and seemingly intimate knowledge of Garrison seems to have been clear to readers of the *Afro-American*. One reader, Edna Roy, wrote to Lautier: "I thought I would ask you this question: Are all those expensive gowns and wraps really Alden Garrison's? I see him quite often and every time he has something

[55] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 256.

[56] "Mystery Veils Freaks' Coup of 92-Year-Old Lodge's Mask Ball," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 March 1936, 13.

[57] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 January 1934, 14.

new."[58] Although Lautier did not respond, the fact that he received such letters makes it clear that he was acting as an "insider-outsider"—a critical observer and participant who possessed private information about gay men and female impersonators. Roy's letter suggests that she saw Garrison regularly in passing. It provides us with some evidence that Garrison most likely dressed in women's attire exclusively and that Lautier would have had confidential knowledge about Garrison's ability to acquire the expensive clothing that he often wore.

Thus, as a self-declared authority on Garrison and other female impersonators, an "insider-outsider," Lautier constructed in his articles a stage on which to display female impersonators' performances in nightclubs and the urban landscape.[59] Intentionally or not, Lautier called into question the respectable heterosexual identity constantly extolled in the black press as a long-standing institution of racial uplift. Lautier's association with gender-nonconforming and same-sex sexuality through his coverage and management of a "pansy club" made it impossible for the *Afro-American* to solely be a heteronormative institution by default. At the same time, Lautier's privileged outsider position as a journalist, an occupation that was universally constructed as heterosexual in its public presentation during this era, permitted him to analyze and discuss female impersonators for an outside public audience even though he had garnered this access to the performers through his insider status as the former promoter of a club that featured female impersonators and hosted gay audiences. Lautier's insider-outsider positionality allowed him to seamlessly move between gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming worlds. The public disclosures published in the *Afro-American* and other black newspapers about the lives of Garrison and other female impersonators in black communities depended on the ability of Lautier and other black male journalists to operate as insiders-outsiders.

As a former law student at Howard University in Washington, DC, Lautier regularly gossiped about former fellow students, faculty, and staff at the campus. Howard had a special significance for Lautier's readers. LaKisha Michelle Simmons argues that Howard was a central cultural and educational institution for elite black families, who used their affiliation with the university to further mark themselves as respectable and apart from the poorer and less educated black residents of Washington, DC.[60] Black

[58] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 1 December 1934, 6.

[59] The insider-outsider is a sociological theory that refers to the privilege that current employees of an organization or business sustain relative to outsiders who are seeking employment. In this article, insider-outsider is a broader concept and should be understood as the power that some individuals have to move between different worlds. For a useful discussion of the concept, see Dennis J. Snower and Assar Lindbeck, *The Insider-Outsider Theory of Employment and Unemployment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

[60] LaKisha Michelle Simmons, "'To Lay Aside All Morals': Respectability, Sexuality and Black College Students in the United States in the 1930s," *Gender History* 24, no. 2 (August 2012): 436.

newspapers regularly celebrated Howard's accomplished students and faculty in feature pieces that evoked respectability and racial uplift. Lautier, however, was particularly interested in informing readers that gay black men could be found on the "Hill," as Howard was often called, since it was located on the highest hills in Washington, DC. "Who said there are no pansies at Howard?" Lautier asked rhetorically. In one column, he noted that two pansies lived in Clark Hall and were bold enough to have their names on their door, though he did not reveal who they were in his column.[61] It is not clear if Lautier meant that the young men in question had their given names on the door or whether they had signified their sexuality in some manner. However, Lautier's willingness to reveal information about gay men enrolled at Howard suggests that he believed there was a growing tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality among younger African Americans during the early twentieth century.[62]

It was not, however, a revelation for Lautier to publicly pronounce that gay men resided in the hallowed halls of Howard. Some of Howard's most esteemed faculty members were known to be engaged in same-sex relationships and to have same-sex desires. Alain Locke, often referred to as the father of the Harlem Renaissance and professor of philosophy at the university, has long been identified as a gay man by historians and literary scholars alike.[63] Rumors about Locke's unmarried status and visible effeminacy circulated among students and faculty on campus. There is also evidence that Locke engaged in sexual relationships with students and colleagues over the course of his tenure at the university. Jeffrey C. Stewart notes that Locke's homosexuality fostered an outsider status that made his position at Howard precarious even as he possessed a special insight into a "heterosexual bourgeois society." While Garrison and female impersonators relied on the art of performance to negotiate their precarity, Locke used his philosophical conceptualizations of artistic expression to negotiate his way through various minefields relating to his sexual identity. Art, according to Stewart, "was a way to cloak his homosexuality and absorb his sexual feelings."[64] Although it is likely that Lautier knew Locke, he did not mention him or make reference to his sexuality in his columns. An implicit class alliance existed between Locke and middle-class and elite men such as Lautier, perhaps acting as a shield to protect their sexuality from public view. Locke was troubled by black elite men and women revealing their homosexual desires, no matter how central those desires were to their

[61] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 January 1934, 14; Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 February 1934, 14.

[62] Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 195.

[63] Beemyn, *Queer Capital*, 56.

[64] Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79, 494.

personhood. Stewart indicates that Locke believed that to "out" oneself as gay or lesbian challenged his and others' efforts to serve as leading race men and women.[65]

Lautier's comments about Howard's pansies rankled some readers. While Lautier suggested that he was not bothered by the criticism, he quoted excerpts from a letter writer responding to Lautier's statement that "Howard University has more than its quota of pansies." The reader wrote: "I have recently learned that similar and even worse reports once floated the entire length of the Lautier famous U street about your being one of those queer things." The writer also physically threatened Lautier, adding that if he dared come to Howard in person to make similar accusations, "it would take all of the microscopes in science hall and Freedmen's Hospital to find the parts of your anatomy." The reader's comments also indicated that rumor and innuendo pointed to Lautier as an insider-outsider relative to a homosexual world; in other words, the reader believed that Lautier was gay. However, rather than denying the rumors that he was "queer" or responding to the threat, Lautier quipped in the same column in which he had quoted the reader's letter, "I'll be up Tuesday and ask all the he-men to raise their hands."[66] While Lautier's repartee disarmed the violence threaded through the writer's comments, it also suggested that he knew that Howard's image of heterosexual masculinity was a facade. The letter writer's anger at Lautier for suggesting that Howard was filled with pansies echoed the anxieties of the university's officials, who grew increasingly concerned that open displays of homosexuality might damage the reputation of the institution. As Stewart puts it, polite "gentlemen and ladies on the faculty or in the administration did not discuss homosexuality publicly, although they probably did privately."[67] Although there is no evidence that Garrison had any affiliation with Howard, he was at the center of the university's public fight to distance itself and respectable black Washingtonians from aspersions about gender-nonconforming expression.

"Washington Citizens Halt Ball"

In 1934 a mob at Howard protested an upcoming event billed as the "Impersonators" dance, an informal way of referring to drag balls. Outraged that the university's reputation for respectability was being tarnished by association with such events, the protesters stripped and chased female impersonators, including Garrison. The *Washington Tribune* had advertised the dance on its front page, announcing that Garrison would host the season's first Impersonators dance. It was clear that Garrison, only twenty-six at the

[65] Ibid., 633.

[66] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Washington Afro-American*, 2 February 1935, 16; Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Washington Afro-American*, 9 February 1935, 11.

[67] Stewart, *The New Negro*, 494.

time, had attained quite a following of female impersonators in the district. The *Washington Tribune* stated, "The group is led by Alden Garrison, well known Washington youth who has gained a measure of fame as a dancer and stage artist."[68] The paper also noted that the dance had been widely advertised in other cities, and many out-of-town guests, approximately fifteen hundred, were expected to attend the festivities.[69] Garrison's fame and notoriety had spread beyond the boundaries of gay life in the city and made the dance one of the more anticipated events of the year in early 1934. His popularity probably made it possible for him to secure one of the most prominent and revered black institutions in the city for the ball, the Prince Hall Masonic Temple. Designed by Albert I. Cassell, prominent black architect and Howard architecture professor, the Masonic temple was located less than a mile from the university and was the built embodiment of black respectability. Prince Hall Freemasonry was a fraternal organization founded when white lodges refused to admit black members. As outsiders within, Garrison and the other female impersonators' racial membership and connection within Washington's black community legitimated their use of this Masonic temple for the dance. In this instance, at least in their arrangement to use the facilities, their racial affinity and Garrison's local celebrity status mitigated their outsider status. It is difficult to presume that the Masonic temple managers were unaware of the purpose of the dance or that Garrison was a female impersonator. In this sense, his ability to reserve the space redefined its heteronormative and masculine-centered symbolism into something more sexually inclusive.

However, the impending presence of female impersonators and gay men at the Masonic temple was too much for Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, who, according to the *Afro-American*, was widely believed to have called the authorities to lodge a complaint. As Lautier reported, "Our first information was that Mordecai Johnson, Howard prexy [a term that is used to designate a college president] asked the police to interfere with the pansies' ball, which was to have been held recently."[70] Johnson made it clear that Garrison and other female impersonators' outsider status could not be tolerated so close to the university. To make matters worse, from Johnson's vantage point, in promoting the ball, the *Afro-American* implicitly compared it with the Capital Colored Citizens' Birthday Ball for Franklin Roosevelt by advertising both events on the same page. Ironically, Garrison's ball was far more inclusive than its counterpart. While the Impersonators ball featured and was open to members of different class groups, only prominent citizens could acquire tickets to the Colored

[68] "Dawn Boys, Twilight Men, Hold Sway at Masonic Temple Tonight," *Washington Tribune*, 1 February 1934, 1.

[69] "Washington Citizens Halt Ball at Masonic Temple Featuring Men Dressed as Women," *Chicago Defender*, 10 February 1934, 4.

[70] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 February 1934, 2.

Citizens' Birthday Ball. It was inaccessible to everyday black Americans.[71] In some ways, the cross-class audience and guest list was as much an affront as the dance's theme to Mordecai and other elite African Americans in city. Early twentieth-century racism made it virtually impossible for middle-class and upper-class African Americans to live apart from their working-class counterparts. Fancy affairs such as galas and balls often offered elite blacks opportunities to construct identities independent of their impoverished cousins. Nonetheless, the potential appearance of gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression in the Masonic temple may have motivated Johnson to attempt to shut down Garrison's ball.

The *Washington Tribune* foreshadowed the resistance that Garrison and other female impersonators would encounter at the temple, noting that female impersonators in DC had not been as visible as they had been in neighboring Baltimore. "There are a large number of dawn boys and twilight men in the District," *Tribune* columnist Ralph Matthews wrote, "but they have been rather reticent about coming out in their true colors in public affairs."[72] Comparing Washington, DC, to Baltimore and Harlem, Matthews also noted that public congregations of female impersonators were not as tolerated in the district as they were in other cities. Although members of the black community in DC tended to protest visible displays of men dressed as women on city streets, they allowed female impersonation as a form of entertainment as long as it was tucked away in small nightclubs. In contrast, female impersonation in Harlem was a much more public and broadly accepted affair through the annual Hamilton Lodge Ball, otherwise known as the Faggots Ball. At its peak in the early 1930s it drew thousands of spectators.[73] Celebrities regularly attended balls, and it was common for literary figures such as novelists Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman to make appearances. In other cities such as Pittsburgh, female impersonators were part of the complex and rich black communities, which sustained divergent perspectives that ranged from full-throated acceptance to outright rejection.[74]

However, as we have seen in the reader's response to Lautier's column about pansies at Howard, opposition to gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression in Washington, DC, was even more heightened than in other urban areas. The city was known for a strong streak of black elitism and egotism. While visiting DC in 1927, Langston Hughes sarcastically remarked: "Negro society in Washington, they assured me, was the finest in the country, richest, the most cultured, the most worthy." The city's social

[71] Marya McQuirter, "Awkward Moves: Dance Lesson from the 1940s," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. Defrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 97.

[72] Matthews, "Sex Appeal"; Beemyn, *Queer Capital*, 32.

[73] Chauncey, *Gay New York,* 257–58.

[74] Grantmyre, "'They Lived,'" 987.

rigidity around gender and sexuality and the airs and pretensions of black society in Washington, DC, were so unbearable that gay black men and female impersonators often traveled to Harlem for refuge. As Hughes put it, "Now I can live in Harlem where people are not quite so ostentatiously proud of themselves, and where one's family background is not of such great concern."[75] Hughes's feelings notwithstanding, Washington, DC, conveyed a strong sense of class tribalism that further divided the city into black elites and the masses. Thus, Johnson's angst over female impersonators publicly congregating in Prince Hall Masonic Temple must be viewed both from within the specific politics of respectability in Washington, DC, and with reference to Lautier's taunting coverage about pansies on Howard's campus. Responding to what the paper described as "citizens' protest," the authorities shut down the dance, stating that it was in violation of the district's code of regulations.[76] However, hours later and faced with large crowds pressing to get inside the temple, the police agreed to allow the dance to go on as long as the organizers would deny entrance to female impersonators.

The weeks and months that Garrison had put into planning the Impersonators ball, an event that by all accounts was highly anticipated by local and out-of-town residents, were largely destroyed. Still, seven unidentified female impersonators managed to make their way past the officers guarding the entrance, find male partners, and dance with them. On being identified as female impersonators, they were escorted out of the building into a waiting crowd that included police officers, who proceeded to kick and shove them down the street.[77] Police officers stood back and did nothing while young men, emboldened attacks by the police on female impersonators, further assaulted them, taunting them and stripping them of their clothes as they attempted to flee.

Although we cannot be certain, it is highly likely that Garrison was one of the individuals who protested female impersonators' prohibition from the dance by defying the police order and entering the Masonic temple. As the main coordinator of the event and a leading female impersonator, Garrison must have felt indignant at being denied entrance and was determined to enter the event. Lautier's report that Garrison and another female impersonator managed to avoid the mob outside the hall by ducking into a nearby restroom also provides evidence that he was one of the protesters. By entering the dance, Garrison and the other six female impersonators challenged the efforts to exclude transgender and homosexual expression from black heteronormative spaces. Garrison was willing to risk bodily harm

[75] Langston Hughes, "Our Wonderful Society: Washington," *Opportunity* 5 (August 1927): 226–27.

[76] "Washington Citizens Halt Ball."

[77] Sam Lacy, "Dawn Boys' Dance Broken Up by Police, Crowd Disrobes Member," *Washington Tribune*, 8 February 1934, 1, 3.

and arrest, and his response to being excluded from the dance demonstrated that he and other female impersonators were navigating gender and sexual peripheries that mapped additional marginalization onto their already racially circumscribed condition. Just as importantly, Garrison recognized that as an outsider within he was forced to develop creative solutions to the "interlocking nature" of "gender and sexual oppression," solutions that were nonexistent for his gender-conforming and heterosexual counterparts. Determined to see all his work and planning come to fruition, Garrison held the ball a month later at the New Albert Auditorium in Baltimore, where black city residents were much more tolerant of the idea of female impersonators and gay life.[78]

"If You Run into Alden Garrison . . . Do Not Fall Victim to Her Smiles"

The crowd's violent reaction would not have come as a surprise to Garrison and the other female impersonators. Men appearing in gender-conforming male dress often chased and harassed men dressed in women's attire during this era.[79] Garrison had often found himself a few steps away from the danger that came with wearing feminine clothing. Some newspapers, including the *Afro-American*, went as far as to sanction violence toward female impersonators. Referring to the attack on female impersonators at the Masonic temple dance, an editorial in the *Washington Afro-American* argued: "They had it coming to them, and, therefore, may blame no one but themselves."[80] Other papers went as far as to threaten female impersonators with death. A *Philadelphia Tribune* columnist ominously suggested that female impersonators belonged in prison or "six feet under-ground!"[81] The black press's accounts of violence against female impersonators and gay men link early twentieth-century African American gay, lesbian, and transgender communities' experiences with their counterparts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[82]

These threats against gender-nonconforming men were a departure from the way that Matthews and, particularly, Lautier had covered Garrison and other female impersonators. Lautier's connection to female impersonators

[78] Collins, "Learning," S19; "Baltimore and Washington Men in Masquerade Dance," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 March 1934, 1.

[79] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 59.

[80] "Young Pansy, Go North," *Washington Afro-American,* 17 February 1934, 4.

[81] Otto McClarrin, "These Female Impersonators," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 6 August 1936, 5.

[82] The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reports that LGBTQ, HIV-affected, and transgender people of color experience greater and more deadly forms of violence. National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, *A Crisis of Hate: Mid-Year Report on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer Hate Violence Homicides* (New York: Antiviolence Project, 2017).

led him to produce light and playful coverage about them. Similarly, Matthews took a relatively benign approach, though he devoted a great deal of his coverage to helping readers understand the biological basis of homosexuality. But neither Lautier nor Matthews sanctioned violence against female impersonators. Nonetheless, both the *Afro-American* and the *Tribune* published the threats against these groups, suggesting that the editors assumed a much more negative view in the larger community and had no fear of disapprobation for presenting a hateful interpretation of the events. As insider-outsiders or, at the very least, individuals sympathetic to female impersonators, both Matthews and Lautier had made themselves vulnerable to the violence that their employer implicitly endorsed. While black female impersonators were both marginalized for their race and criminalized for their choice of dress, even the journalists who wrote about them sympathetically had little power to challenge the black press's commitment to a heteronormative framework, which was constructed along the tension between explicit disavowal of female impersonators and homosexuality and their actual incorporation into the prosaic routine of black life.[83]

The *Afro-American*, then, developed conflicting narratives that challenged readers' capacity for viewing female impersonators and gay men as victims. Often casting impersonators as predators and as purposefully tricking heterosexual men into believing impersonators were biological women, newspapers sensationalized the supposed threat of female impersonators by exposing them as "biological men." Referencing Garrison in his *Afro-American* weekly column, columnist Ivan Sharp warned his male readership about Garrison: "If you run into Alden Garrison while here in Washington, do not fall victim to her smiles and lovely imports. Watch your step. . . . [S]he is a He."[84] Lautier also warned readers about another well-known Washington, DC, female impersonator, Louis Diggs: "Be sure you guys don't make a mistake and pick Louis Diggs. Diggs is a pansy who calls himself or herself Greta Garbo and wears long hair and dresses."[85]

While Sharp and Lautier evoked and constructed a narrative of danger by "outing" Garrison and Diggs as biological men, they also acknowledged their agency and capacity for transcending gender by using female pronouns. Sharp scripted Garrison's body with a gender assignation it actually merited based on appearance. In his attempt to make the sex Garrison was assigned at birth visible, Sharp's warning to visitors "here in Washington" implicitly suggested that Garrison's "secret" was well known to black Washingtonians and Baltimoreans. In this sense, Garrison and other female impersonators openly navigated a world where their gender-nonconforming appearances and expressions were common. Garrison's gender and homosexual sexual expression, then, operated on what Ross has referred to as a "continuum

[83] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 59.
[84] Ivan Sharp, So Sayeth the Prophet, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 March 1933, 19.
[85] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American,* 11 August 1934, 2.

of knowing" in both the geospatial spaces of Washington, DC, and Baltimore and the discursive spaces of the black press.[86] The knowing placed Garrison in great danger. In truth, Sharp's caution to tourists to beware of Garrison and other female impersonators was unfounded. Garrison had much more to fear from gender-conforming men than they had from him. As Lautier had related to *Afro-American* readers, one young man's anger upon discovering that Garrison was a female impersonator had led him to threaten Garrison's life.[87] Acknowledging and accepting female impersonators, however, were two very different things. Although Garrison may have been widely known as a female impersonator, it was clear that he remained an outsider within the black community in which he had been born and come of age. The circumstances of his death provide further evidence of this marginal existence.

A Damper over U Street

Garrison's death in 1938 symbolized the decline of female impersonators as entertainers and the suppression of gay life from public view in the middle of the 1930s. A photograph of Garrison with the caption "Getting Hot" appeared in the *Afro-American* in 1937, a little over a year before the paper reported his death on 22 December 1938. Surrounded by other female impersonators in the floor show at the Republic Gardens (a popular DC nightclub) and with one part of his dress hiked up around his thigh, he gazes into the lens of the camera with a hint of a smile.[88] The smile foretells little of what is to happen to Garrison between the time of this pose and the day he was found alone on the streets. However, what we know about the larger social context and the shift in attitudes toward female impersonators' presence in eastern American cities offers hints of what Garrison might have experienced in the years preceding his death. The decline in popularity of gay male and female impersonators in the early 1930s was a crucial factor in Garrison's death. In January 1938, a year before Garrison died, the *Afro-American* reported on nightclub owners' and entertainers' dismay at the police commissioner's edict that all female impersonators were banned from appearing in night spots across the city.[89] Baltimore's ban was relatively late; it had followed Detroit, which issued an injunction in 1937 to cut down on "sex crimes" by banning female impersonation as nighttime entertainment.[90] Officials in both Chicago and New York had issued

[86] Ross, "Beyond the Closet," 181.

[87] Louis Lautier, Capital Spotlight, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 10 February 1934, 2.

[88] "Photo News: Female Impersonators in Washington Show," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 25 September 1937, 8.

[89] Buddy Colbert, "Baltimore," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 1 January 1938, 18.

[90] Earl J. Morris, "'No Female Impersonators,' Police Declare," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 May 1937, 23.

prohibitions against men wearing female attire as early as 1931.[91] These laws had a devastating impact on the performers' ability to make a living, and they disappeared from clubs in cities such as Baltimore, Chicago, and New York. Referring to Harlem, Matthews wrote: "Nowadays or now anights, it is a rarity to find the undecided lads in the night spots."[92]

The crackdown on female impersonators in Washington, DC, night spots almost certainly complicated Garrison's ability to perform and make money in the year before he died. The lack of employment opportunities for him was compounded by emotional trouble that made it difficult for him to perform, according to the *Afro-American* article announcing Garrison's death that is referenced above. The death of his godmother, a woman who had raised him since he was a child, caused Garrison to suffer emotional breakdowns, reported the paper. The article indicated that Garrison, once one of the most popular and skilled female impersonators with the finest of wardrobes, avoided his friends and his usual haunts, preferring instead to spend his time on the streets.[93] Wandering the streets exposed Garrison to potential encounters with the authorities, who regularly arrested female impersonators and gay men for violating laws around dress and solicitation. Based on accounts from people the *Afro-American* described as "intimate sources," a run-in with the police landed Garrison in an Arlington, Virginia, jail for the investigation of an undisclosed crime. After his release from jail, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Garrison was found in a vacant lot suffering from malnutrition and was taken to Gallinger Hospital on his request.

Even in the absence of archival documents, it is not as difficult as it might seem to draw a picture of Garrison's last days and hours lying in a hospital bed surrounded by other patients afflicted with different health maladies. Patients in Gallinger Hospital were segregated by sex and race, and African American patients were treated on the second floor. Therefore, his placement in Gallinger would have painfully underlined the intersecting liminal racial, class, gender, and sexual positions he had occupied in life. In the final analysis, Garrison's racial identity may have facilitated his untimely death. Ten months prior to his death, the *Afro-American* published an article outlining charges of racism against the staff at Gallinger Hospital. According to the article, a patient accused the hospital of unfairly depriving black tuberculosis patients of space allotted them in order to accommodate white patients. Charges of feeding white patients better food were also lodged against the hospital, echoing charges made by African Americans

[91] Edward Perry, "Manhattan Madness: Police Down on NY Pansies," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 February 1931, 9.

[92] Ralph Matthews, "Is the Reign of Harlem's Twilight Men at an End?," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 October 1935, 16.

[93] "No Tears," 3.

against other early twentieth-century hospitals in Washington, DC.[94] Dr. Walter H. Brooks, pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, noted that fourteen of the nineteen hospitals in the district segregated patients and that black patients often received substandard treatment. Gallinger was one of the nineteen hospitals he listed.[95] It is likely that Garrison was not provided with adequate health care and died due to lack of attention. Ironically and cruelly, in death Garrison lost his outsider-within status and became, in the context of a racially segregated hospital, a full member of Washington, DC's early twentieth-century black community.

Ultimately, Garrison's legacy was left to the *Afro-American* to shape for public consumption. Having written about Garrison more than any other columnist other than Lautier, Matthews fittingly memorialized him with a touch of familiarity: "Garrison, who brought laughs to excitement seekers who derived pleasure out of his odd abnormality died as he had lived—a social outcast."[96] Between the *Afro-American*'s front-page proclamation that there would be "No Tears for Alden" and Matthews's somber statement, the paper strove to have the last public word on Garrison's life, emphasizing his outsider-within status. In some ways, this was appropriate, as the *Afro-American* was responsible for making meaning of Garrison's existence in the entertainment world. At the same time, the paper was an unreliable source in failing to reveal the full dimensions of Garrison's life and death. Garrison's death certificate revealed that his maternal aunt, Barbara Keeling, recovered his body and buried him at Columbian Harmony Cemetery, the graveyard reserved for Washington, DC's African American residents.[97] Someone cared enough about Garrison in death to make sure he had a funeral service and a proper burial.

Thus, despite the gravity of the *Afro-American*'s final statement on Garrison's life and the tragic story the paper told about his last days, Garrison was not a "social outcast." As I have argued, it is far more accurate to describe Garrison and other female impersonators and gay black men as outsiders within African American communities in the early twentieth century. Black female impersonators, in particular, resourcefully maneuvered private and public lives as foreigners in their native land. This status as native interlopers seemed to make them uniquely appealing to black newspapers. Their lives merited coverage not only due to the broader popularity of gay men and female impersonators in the first decades of the twentieth century but also because of the specific interest of *Afro-American* journalists like

[94] "Patient Charges Discrimination at Gallinger," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 March 1938, 16.

[95] Walter Brooks, "Brooks Says DC Hospital Discrimination Is General," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 July 1937, 13.

[96] Ralph Matthews, Looking at the Stars, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 31 December 1938, 18.

[97] District of Columbia, "Certificate of Death: Alden Garrison," Government of the District of Columbia, filed 23 December 1938.

Matthews and Lautier. The columns of their "pansy beat," written from the perspective of insider-outsider status, help us to reassemble the fragments of Garrison's life and construct a window into his personhood, which extended well beyond the Washington, DC, nightlife he dominated in his short life. Inasmuch as Garrison's life is brought into sharper relief through news coverage, his story also discloses the ways that female impersonation and homosexual expression showed up in the black press, Howard University, and Prince Hall Masonic Temple. Therefore, the recovery of Alden Garrison's life suggests that individuals' presence in the black press and interactions with other black institutions provide a means to disclose the ways that gender-nonconforming and homosexual expression are not simply a sideshow of African American history but an integral part of the story.

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