



Mercedes de Acosta (1934). Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.

# **Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms**

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Patricia White

A June 1934 *Vanity Fair* item highlighted for its readers the latest roles of movie royalty Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich as Queen Christina and Catherine the Great, respectively, with “a composite photograph by Edward Steichen,” “ingeniously constructed by superimposing two separate pictures . . . [of] those rival Nordic deities of Hollywood.”<sup>1</sup> The image features all the sensual conventions of black-and-white studio-era glamour portrait photography. Garbo is in passionate profile at the bottom right, wearing black, her head thrown back, fingers spread, eyes half-closed. Dietrich’s face is in the top left of the image, her white blouse open at the neck, but her eyes do not meet our gaze; heavy-lidded, she looks down and to the side. The stars look for all the world as if they are about to kiss, yet the negative space between these pastiched studio portraits was never to be traversed. Leaving aside the fact that women never kissed in Hollywood, Garbo and Dietrich were constructed as singular, mutually exclusive European divas; they remained rival stars of rival studios. In a

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queer optical exercise, however, reversing figure and ground, the negative space can be seen as the fullest in the composite portrait, for it is occupied with our desire. Only on this screen can be projected a story in which both stars are featured, in which their narcissism melts into homoerotic passion.

In her 1991 videotape *Encuentro entre dos reinas* [Meeting of two queens], Chilean video artist Cecelia Barriga manipulates clips from *Queen Christina* (dir. Rouben Mamoulian, US, 1933) and *The Scarlett Empress* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, US, 1934) as well as excerpts from the two stars' other films in a fashion strikingly similar to the 1934 mass culture artifact. She recredits their films in a series of vignettes without dialogue, alternating and juxtaposing scenes and motifs to make their coming together seem inevitable: Catherine and Christina, Dietrich and Garbo, encounter each other in a fantasy space; in other words, they costar in a movie.<sup>2</sup> Besides intercutting to match glances and actions, in several sequences the video uses effects to include both stars in the same frame. Barriga's behind-the-scenes artistry casts her in the role of a latter-day Steichen, whose glamorous photographs had helped to project these stars' images onto the private screens in viewers' heads. Collecting and reanimating found images, she is also merely a more exalted and talented version of the ordinary viewer, the public whose wants Steichen and *Vanity Fair* "ingeniously" anticipated when superimposing the two portraits. Barriga's tape renders that ordinary viewer's lesbian fantasy visible. The 1934 magazine image was a precursor of such visibility.

*Vanity Fair* gave fans this image near the peak of the stars' popularity; Barriga made her eleven-minute valentine at the end of their long and divergent lives (Garbo died in 1990, Dietrich in 1992). Why is a Garbo/Dietrich meeting a still-potent fantasy for viewers of Barriga's videotape at the end of the twentieth century? For a few years at the beginning of the 1930s, the Hollywood publicity machine exploited the stars' rivalry and elaborated their similar iconic status: European, arty, mysterious, androgynous. In certain ways our end of the millennium moment syncs up nicely with that time. If the catch-phrase "lesbian chic" explains that synchronicity, it should not be understood

dismissively. For that is the idiom in which *Vanity Fair's* collage speaks; by doubling up the sensuality of the glamour portrait, it unleashes the homoerotic gaze latent in the stars' images. Barriga's tape may be the product of a flourishing late-twentieth-century lesbian visual culture, but her self-representation renders homage to an earlier Hollywood vision.

### **A Genealogy of Lesbian Chic**

A genealogy of lesbian chic leads back from the video artist Barriga to another woman who shared her investment in Hollywood. She too was an artist, though not a visual one, and she too was a fan. Although she did not cut and paste those images for *Vanity Fair*, she might have, for the collage dramatized her own desire. And she did clip out the "composite photograph," carefully saving not just one but two copies of it in her files. One wonders that she needed such mass-marketed keepsakes, for Mercedes de Acosta, a New York writer of Spanish descent, dandy, dyke, and spiritually enlightened socialite, was intimate with both stars in the early 1930s; indeed she is the only woman lover they are believed to have shared. "You can't dismiss Mercedes lightly," wrote Alice B. Toklas to Anita Loos in 1960 after reading de Acosta's autobiography *Here Lies the Heart*: "She has had the two most important women in the United States—Garbo and Dietrich."<sup>3</sup> (One wonders if Toklas's elevation of the stars' status as national players is a sly comment on de Acosta's own grandiosity.) Mercedes de Acosta briefly triangulated the Hollywood-manufactured Garbo-Dietrich rivalry and in a way fulfilled the Garbo-Dietrich fantasy. The stars came together by playing a role in *her* story; similarly, each of us fans serves as site for the imaginary intersection of eroticized fragments of mass culture—fragments that come together nowhere else, such as those Barriga reanimates in her tape. It is a story stranger than fiction: Mercedes, Blonde Venus, and Swedish Sphinx.

Mercedes de Acosta had a look; she was known for it. She may have pursued icons, but she also made *herself* iconic. Her flamboyance is a gift to anyone writing about the lives and times

she passed through. In contrast—and perhaps in tribute—to her beloved elder sister Rita Lydig, a famous society clotheshorse, de Acosta was a dandy. Drawing on this gay male trope, she made her sexual identity uniquely visible. Almost every description of de Acosta emphasizes the distinctiveness and consistency of her wardrobe; she dressed all in black or all in white, and she looked *Spanish*. As early as 1928 a newspaper profile describes her thus: “She wears peculiarly characteristic clothes, and contends that she has succeeded in reducing the dress problem to a fine art,” and it goes on to enumerate the items of her wardrobe. A similar litany is repeated in almost all print references to de Acosta:<sup>4</sup> highwayman’s coats; tricorn hats (or cossack caps); pointed, buckled shoes; and, much later, an eye patch (though worn for health reasons it was not inconsistent with her overall effect of “Cuban pirate elegance”).<sup>5</sup> At once typecast and unique, she called attention to ordinary butchness by going over the top, for instance by exaggerating the usually understated sartorial practice of having several versions of the same wardrobe item (leather jacket, jeans). De Acosta’s coif was similarly dashing; she wore her black hair slicked straight back. Like anyone who dresses with the courage to convey a sexual persona, she was sometimes mocked. Perhaps her height—5'3"—was a liability in someone who pursued larger-than-life figures such as Greta Garbo. (Tallulah Bankhead is said to have called her, wickedly, “a mouse in a top coat.”)<sup>6</sup> It was Garbo who bestowed her most charming and evocative nickname, one that others in their circle picked up: “Black and White” referred to de Acosta’s exclusive palette, but the phrase captured her studiedly romantic nature, and even her mood swings, as well.

De Acosta was both theatrical and a lover of actresses from childhood. Her Hollywood period came after achieving modest success as a playwright and poet and acquiring a large acquaintanceship among the cultured and famous in New York and in Europe. Although none of her screenplays was ever produced, and although she seemed to have a rather snobbish attitude toward movies not starring her European friends, her romance with Hollywood is key to her significance. She mediated between

“literate” and popular culture, she was a prism through which a joint project of high modernism and mass culture—creating new styles of femininity and sexuality—was refracted. Though behind the scenes and largely forgotten, de Acosta achieved a paradoxical visibility: the tabloids conveyed her “artistic” temperament, her Spanishness, her mannishness. She was famous for being a lesbian at a time when fame and lesbianism were being redefined by Hollywood cinema. Arguably, her style left a trace in the movies; she is a precursor of Barriga as a lesbian *metteur en scène*. Take another look at a 1934 twist on the Hollywood studio portrait, the image of Mercedes that opens this article. The intersection of a mass-marketed glamour aesthetic and legible lesbianism is there in black and white.

Since “lesbian chic” was declared a trend in the early 1990s, there has been a market for writing on Hollywood lesbians. De Acosta’s book attracted some attention when it appeared in 1960, and it has remained an indispensable underground reference, but she did not make a penny, dying poor in 1968. Today crass commercialism gives us ill-researched, opportunistic retellings of de Acosta’s story such as Axel Madsen’s *The Sewing Circle* (1995). But lesbian chic also reflects a genuine sea change, allowing the contributions of queer women to be acknowledged in mainstream culture, and de Acosta’s book can be seen as an advance indicator of the shift in current. The affective and sexual relationships that a number of major female screen and stage stars enjoyed with women—often, indeed, with de Acosta herself—have been given thorough and often thoughtful treatment in several important biographies that appeared throughout the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> And the academic meeting of cultural studies and queer theory has started to transform performing and screen-arts history. Not interested simply in “outing” erstwhile representatives of chic, today we begin to analyze how “chicness” itself—notably the glamorous style that Hollywood disseminated worldwide—is connected to homoeroticism and to the historical formation of contemporary homosexual identities. Desire continues to be routed through mass media, even as sexual and political culture has shifted greatly. De Acosta’s

connection to Garbo and Dietrich might even be seen as a harbinger of a much later *Vanity Fair* image, shorthand for the 1990s lesbian-chic phenomenon. Herb Ritts's August 1993 cover of *k.d. lang* being shaved by Cindy Crawford is a meeting of butch style and mainstream feminine celebrity that alters both.

### **In the Garbo Archive**

Various tawdry and worthy dimensions of the lesbian-chic phenomenon fueled the publicity flurry surrounding the 15th of April 2000. On that date, the tenth anniversary of Greta Garbo's death at age 84, fifty-five letters from the star to Mercedes de Acosta, together with seventeen cards, fifteen telegrams, a number of photographs, and a few miscellaneous items, were unsealed at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. The cherished papers had been given by de Acosta to the library, an elegant repository with an impressive collection of modernist manuscripts and cultural artifacts, under condition that they remain sealed until ten years after the death of the longer-surviving correspondent. The unveiling took place amid much speculation, scholarly and sensational, that the sexual or romantic nature of the women's relationship might be revealed in the star's own words. It wasn't. But as Garbo's biographer Karen Swenson commented to the press, "for anyone to have expected she would say anything explicitly was contrary to Garbo's character."<sup>8</sup> It is what is implicit in the correspondence, the coverage of its opening, and the public and private relationship it indexes that is interesting.

Despite the anticipation and excitement, and the library's linking its publicity to lesbian and gay pride events in Philadelphia (de Acosta, at least, was out and proud), the unsealing was not free of phobia—not simply homophobia but press phobia, although the situation did not even approach Garbo's own paranoia about publicity. The Garbo estate has vigorously dismissed the suggestion that the women ever were lovers, regarding de Acosta as an unreliable source. "Prior to the unveiling . . . I was asked many times if I thought the rumors of an affair between de Acosta and Garbo were true. The answer is no," said Garbo's

grandniece Gray Horan at a press conference at the Rosenbach after the unsealing on 17 April 2000. “What I know of her personally (and what is publicly known about her amorous history) consists exclusively of men,” she stated, with an emphatic gesture of “in-ing”: What one knows of Garbo “consists of men.” The press seemed to show as much glee at debunking the rumors after the letters were opened as it had in spreading them before (debunking, of course, is a way of spreading). “Garbo’s letters reveal friendship, no explicit sign of lesbianism”: this Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* headline makes what seems to me a rather sophisticated semiotic distinction between explicit and inexplicit signs, between friendship and lesbianism. The estate’s prohibition against quoting from the letters adds to the uncertain status of the denial, and the injunction to focus on Garbo’s work rather than her personal life hardly alters the problematic. As had happened so often in Garbo’s lifetime, columns of newsprint—and now space in other media channels—contain very little denotative information about the star. Yet today one dimension of what is connoted by Garbo’s image—lesbianism—can be newly named and widely publicized. Horan remarks that “anyone determined to classify Garbo as one of de Acosta’s lesbian lovers will certainly be disappointed with the contents of these letters.” But the language of determination and certainty goes against the grain of queer signification—and of Garbo’s appeal. The point is not to out Garbo, but to begin the historical and cultural analysis of what and how a connoted “lesbianism” might mean.

In fact disappointment pervades the correspondence itself, which extends from 1931, the year de Acosta met Garbo at émigrée screenwriter Salka Viertel’s Santa Monica home, to 1958, just a few years before de Acosta published her memoir and Garbo broke off contact. They are missives from an indecisive and dissatisfied woman—one who could also be wistful and funny—and from a reluctant correspondent. Written, sometimes printed, in blunt pencil on notebook paper, addressed playfully to “Black and White,” “Boy,” even “Honeychild” or “Sweetie,” Garbo’s letters seem warmest on gloomy topics. She is empathetic with Mercedes’s health and housing problems and shares her



own cares. She does send greetings to Mercedes's "friend" (her lover Maria Annunziata "Poppy" Kirk) and mentions the prospect of the latter's becoming jealous if Garbo were to visit Mercedes in Paris again, but these are the only indicators of a sapphic lifestyle—and that is Mercedes's not Garbo's.<sup>9</sup>

If the women had a romantic affair in the 1930s, Garbo for one had moved on. She wrote infrequently, sometimes answering de Acosta in exasperation, and sometimes, it seems clear, not at all. There are no letters or telegrams or flower cards from 1941 to 1946. Besides this period (which coincides with Garbo's retiring from the screen), there were other breaks in the friendship, and Garbo expressed ambivalence about de Acosta's persistence in letters to mutual friends Viertel and Cecil Beaton. Yet precisely because de Acosta *never* moved on, Garbo could count on her. By the 1950s there is a fairly regular flow of holiday and birthday flowers and cards, and a degree of responsiveness to what were evidently de Acosta's inquiries about travel schedules and meeting plans. Garbo's pain, bluntness, and humor are genuine. The estate has habitually refused permission to quote from Garbo's letters, and this new cache is unlikely to see print anytime soon. So as Horan's statement concluded—and her words signify perhaps more than she intends—"Garbo's mystery remains intact."

But the correspondence is now accessible at the Rosenbach, the pièce de résistance of the collection Mercedes de Acosta deposited after she had published *Here Lies the Heart*, a collection that includes early drafts of the book.<sup>10</sup> Though at least one reader of the memoir is said to have quipped, "Here lies the heart—and lies and lies and lies,"<sup>11</sup> the more than 5,000 items among de Acosta's papers at the Rosenbach collection include plenty of material to back up her accounts. As Beaton put it when he met de Acosta in 1928: "She has glorious enthusiasms, glorious friendships."<sup>12</sup> There is voluminous correspondence from her famous lovers, especially from Broadway star Eva Le Gallienne, and lusty poetry from Isadora Duncan. There are letters from an assortment of modernist celebrities, including Beaton (the topic was most often their mutual obsession, Garbo, but sometimes shoes) and Toklas, Igor Stravinsky, and even fellow tricorne hat

fancier Marianne Moore (whose papers are among the Rosenbach's treasures). Especially interesting for comparison is a delicious bunch of Dietrich's love letters, some of which had been under seal until her death in 1992. The collection also includes wonderful photographs and some intriguing miscellany, including "a single stocking" from Dietrich and an outline of Garbo's foot (so de Acosta could fetch her some slippers).

As Lisa Cohen has wittily noted, "If de Acosta is remembered at all today, it's still for *whom* rather than what she did";<sup>13</sup> the letters from famous people attract attention, while her own writings in the collection languish. I, too, will focus on de Acosta's Garbo-Dietrich one-two punch. Straddling public and private realms, the story illuminates how the stars' celebrity became bound up with lesbianism—if only quite literally de Acosta's lesbianism—in a way that intimately influenced twentieth-century visual and sexual discourses. As Ann Cvetkovich notes, "The stock in trade of the gay and lesbian archive is ephemera."<sup>14</sup> The contrasting footwear mementos that de Acosta archived from each star show differences in their sensibilities, in their relationships with de Acosta, and indeed in their public star personae. Dietrich's stocking suggests a striptease in progress. Connoting the famous legs, it operates as a genuine, classic fetish. As one among many gifts sent to de Acosta, it signifies the star's generosity. Garbo traced her foot, allowing de Acosta access to the truth behind phallic, inflated rumors of its size. The tracing is more like an impression than an accessory, something essential rather than ephemeral. The care Garbo took in defining the slipper errand reminds us of her fastidious frugality (another of her notes to de Acosta accompanies a pair of old socks—not preserved in the archive). The two stars' converging and contrasting—perhaps complementary—sexual and gender personae are constructed through films, promotion, publicity, and private lives, and de Acosta's own style and presence were part of this construction. Although de Acosta's connection with Garbo was much more defining than her liaison with Dietrich, the two stars and their twin sets of correspondence allow us to trace, in the pinnacle of the triangle, de Acosta herself.

**“Tra le la le la triangle. My life’s in such a tangle!”****—Patsy Cline**

Over a brief period in the early 1930s, the Garbo–de Acosta and Dietrich–de Acosta relationships overlapped. Dietrich’s liaison with de Acosta was brief and full bodied. In her letters to de Acosta, many of them accompanying gifts, Dietrich luxuriates in memories of the “exquisite moments when I was in your arms that afternoon” and salutes Mercedes’s “mains sacrées.”<sup>15</sup> She also writes poignantly of the signs of fascism’s rise, of her sense of homelessness, and of “the Child” (daughter Maria Riva, about eight years old at the time), but these short letters and telegrams are primarily flirtatious. Most date from the beginning of their affair—several from its first week. Letters are addressed to “Mon grand amour,” or “Femme adorée,” and telegrams are to Raffael de Acosta, which was to have been Mercedes’s name had she been born a boy.<sup>16</sup> (According to Riva’s book on her mother, “White Prince” was another of Dietrich’s masculine appellations for de Acosta.)<sup>17</sup> They are charming artifacts, often written in French—“because it is so hard to speak to you of love in English”<sup>18</sup>—in green ink on silvery-grey stationery, occasionally sealed with green wax and featuring Dietrich’s monogram or her Paramount studio address. She sends a typed, self-translated quotation from Rilke, song lyrics they had been trying to remember, the latest European sleeping potion, buttons, apologies. When Dietrich traveled to Europe to do publicity for her first film made independently of von Sternberg, *Song of Songs*, she sent back postcards—even Maria sent one to “My Prince”—plus a cigarette case from Vienna, snapshots, and press clippings (although she was busy with several famous male lovers on the trip). And de Acosta shared news of Garbo: she cabled that the director of *Song of Songs* was being considered for *Queen Christina*. Dietrich answered: “Am happy about Scandinavian child I’m sure she will like Mamoulian.”<sup>19</sup>

Until Dietrich’s death in 1992, many of these letters shared “Box 12: Restricted” at the Rosenbach with the sealed Garbo correspondence. Rosenbach librarian Elizabeth Fuller recalls simply reading the star’s obituary and opening the box, not

really considering publicizing the event. The unsealing certainly received nothing like the attention of the Garbo letters. This may be a measure of how much the tide of interest in things lesbian rose during the 1990s, or of de Acosta's importance in Garbo's story and status of amusing episode in Dietrich's. But it also measures a difference in the stars' images and in their afterlives. Dietrich artifacts do not suffer from the same economy of scarcity as Garbo's. The Marlene Dietrich Collection—Berlin includes about 300,000 leaves of correspondence—not to mention 440 pairs of shoes. Thousands of items of its memorabilia were in Dietrich's own possession at the time of her death. Her lovers also represent an embarrassment of riches, and Mercedes is not the only woman among them—although she was one of the few “out” lesbians in the roundup. As Dietrich's daughter reminisces:

I was accustomed to my mother always having someone around. I never questioned their gender or what they were actually there for. . . . I would have hated her habits more had she been motivated by sexual appetite. But all Dietrich ever wanted, needed, desired, was Romance with every capital R available, declarations of utter devotion, lyrical passion.<sup>20</sup>

Adept at romance, Dietrich was a witty, sensual correspondent.

Garbo demanded a very different, less discursive sort of devotion. Though romantic in its way, the Garbo correspondence attests to an embodiment less connected with lyrical passion than with the flesh's susceptibility to chest colds and assorted other ailments. Yet however terse or banal Garbo's letters are, they are expected to reveal some inner truth. Given her obsession with privacy, it is notable that Garbo's relationship with de Acosta's was more public than Dietrich's. In fact de Acosta lucked into her affair with Dietrich; the star's interest was piqued by de Acosta's association with Garbo just as was that of fan magazine readers in the 1930s and again in 2000. De Acosta's relationship with Garbo was, in contrast, utterly premeditated.

Just how was it that Mercedes de Acosta came to stand at the intersection of these stars' lives, to accumulate the contents of Box 12? De Acosta had moved to Hollywood in 1931 to write for

another famous exotic European star, Pola Negri. Her itinerary connected the movie colony quite directly with European dyke modernist literary circles and the New York dyke theater world. Beaton notes that de Acosta “managed not only to make a beeline for all the women who interested her, but by some fluke—or some genius gift of her own, became intimate friends.”<sup>21</sup> In *Here Lies the Heart*, de Acosta piles up portents of her destined meeting with Garbo.<sup>22</sup> She claims her wish came true on her third day in Hollywood (even if it took two months, as Karen Swenson thinks, this is still respectable for a fan),<sup>23</sup> but an even more improbable fantasy was fulfilled shortly thereafter.

Garbo had just finished shooting *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (dir. Robert Z. Leonard, US, 1931), and she departed for an isolated cabin in the Sierra Nevadas for a much needed rest. But as soon as her chauffeur had reached the end of the long drive to the mountain retreat, Garbo turned right around and came back for her new friend Mercedes: “I could not be such a pig as to enjoy all that beauty alone,” de Acosta tells us she said.<sup>24</sup> The pair may not have spent six harmonious weeks on that island in the middle of isolated Silver Lake as de Acosta claimed—from consulting MGM’s records Swenson believes Garbo was gone at best two.<sup>25</sup> But photos in this wild setting of an Amazonian Garbo, topless with a sweater tied strategically around her neck, have sparked the imagination of readers of de Acosta’s memoir since its publication. The Rosenbach’s unsealed records yielded several snapshots from the trip, but an infamous shot from the series of Garbo sans sweater was missing.<sup>26</sup> Gray Horan made no direct comment on the Silver Lake vacation when reassuring the press that “there is no concrete evidence that any sexual relationship between these two women ever existed.” Of the topless photos, she aptly reminds us that her great aunt was, after all, a Scandinavian!

Garbo sailed home to Sweden in 1932, and Anita Loos reported to Cecil Beaton on the bumpy parting between the writer and the star: “The Garbo-Mercedes business has been too amazing. They had terrific battles, and Garbo left without saying good-bye. . . . The story is as long as the dictionary—but much more amazing—so [I] will hope you get together with Mercedes

one day and hear it from her lips.”<sup>27</sup> De Acosta does not let us hear the story from her pen, but *Here Lies the Heart* tells the equally too-amazing story of being courted by Dietrich on the rebound. Riva quotes her mother’s version, from a letter to her father Rudi Sieber: “I am sorry for Mercedes. Her face was white and thin and she seemed sad and lonely—as I am—and not well. I was attracted to her and brought an armful of tuberoses to her house. I told her I would cook marvelous things for her and get her well and strong.”<sup>28</sup> De Acosta made the embarrassing misstep of not recovering from Garbo fast enough. Riva includes de Acosta’s lengthy attempt to explain:

Golden One,

. . . Try to and explain my real feeling for Greta would be impossible since I really do not understand myself. I do know that I have built up in my emotions a person that does not exist. My mind sees the real person—a Swedish servant girl with a face touched by God—only interested in money, her health, sex, food, and sleep. And yet her face tricks my mind and my spirit builds her up into something that fights with my brain. I do love her but I only love the person I have created and not the person who is real. . . .

Until I was seventeen I was a real religious fanatic. Then I met Duse and until I met Greta, gave her the same fanaticism until I transferred it to Greta. And during those periods of fanaticism they have not prevented me from being in love with other people—which seems to take another side of my nature. It was so with you. I was passionately in love with you. I could still be if I allowed myself.<sup>29</sup>

While this is a valuable account of what de Acosta saw in Garbo, by any standard it is very insensitive as a love letter. Riva has her mother pausing while reading to exclaim aloud to Sieber: “De Acosta is too vain for words!” We are nearing the end of the affair, the inevitable moment when, as Riva puts it, “the one-time courted, the adored, the essential being would overstep . . . and bang! That private door to Dietrich slammed shut. Everyone faced this future eventually. Now the White Prince’s time was near. My mother had had enough of ‘Greta this’ and ‘Greta that.’”<sup>30</sup> Riva vividly captures a sense of Dietrich’s exasperation

at all this butch earnestness. But the correspondence does not chronicle the wind-down. Instead it stands as an eloquent *recognition* of de Acosta in her identity as a lover: “I kiss your face and the scars paritculy [*sic*],” wrote Marlene to Mercedes in Antibes.<sup>31</sup>

And so collapsed the glamorous triangle onto de Acosta’s ongoing and one-sided devotion to Garbo. Her self-described fanaticism was a “side of her nature” no less sapphic but certainly more tragic. As de Acosta continued in her letter to Dietrich quoted above: “But if I do get over [this insanity] what then shall I pray to? And what will then turn this gray life into starlight?”<sup>32</sup> A revealing artifact in her collection at the Rosenbach testifies to what extent de Acosta linked religious devotion to fandom. The inside cover of her personal bible is pasted up with six small Garbo portraits. De Acosta’s cutouts resemble the Garbo figures used to compose the *Vanity Fair* composite or the sequences of *Meeting of Two Queens* in which Barriga renders her stars in the same frame. What should we make of the uniqueness (only Garbo) and multiplicity (times six) of the icon here? (There are other personal photographs affixed elsewhere in the bible, another batch of Garbo pin-ups on the overleaf.) We see the compulsiveness of the collector—we need multiple poses (and de Acosta had plenty in her files among which to choose), or, in Barriga’s tape, dozens of clips from many films—to begin to render homage. But the gesture of consecration is also one of desecration and diffusion. Multiple Garbos afford an unconscious recognition of her image’s indebtedness to mechanical reproducibility; the fan’s icon is not unique the way a god is. Unfortunately, de Acosta was not able to live this understanding of the star’s multiple faces in any way other than a masochistic repetition of the same rejection scenario. Aura was by no means deflated by knowing “the Divine Garbo” in the flesh.

De Acosta continued to pray for the transformation of “this gray life” through contact with Garbo, her formulation strikingly reminiscent of the promise of cinema itself. Before Garbo left MGM, de Acosta elaborated her religious fantasy by adapting her play *Jehanne d’Arc* as a script for the star; devastatingly, Garbo



Mercedes de Acosta's Bible with Garbo portraits.  
Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.

rejected the project. De Acosta wrote to Beaton, she consulted her spiritual advisors—"Greta this," "Greta that"—and then heedlessly rushed in every time there was a small opening in Garbo's defenses. Remarkably, though, she remained in contact with Garbo during the 1940s and 1950s, after the star's retirement. Beaton even acknowledged to de Acosta, "I've always thought that the two of you would end your days together."<sup>33</sup> De Acosta's at once thwarted and privileged access to Garbo allegorizes that of the public—and, perhaps even more specifically, of the lesbian viewer.

Consider the other romantic set piece of *Here Lies the Heart*, de Acosta's impulsive visit to Garbo in Sweden in 1935, in answer to what she characterizes as the star's "joking" transatlantic summons to dine with her at Stockholm's Grand Hotel. The episode is all the more sumptuous for its resonance with Garbo's triumph in the MGM film *Grand Hotel* (dir. Edmund



Goulding, US, 1932) the first year of their friendship, and with de Acosta's eugenicist conviction that "to know Greta—one must know the North."<sup>34</sup> But the reality was, as always, more prosaic; even in the memoir one cannot exactly read it as a tryst. For me the rendezvous has all the quality of a missed meeting with the queen, as it poignantly illustrates de Acosta's precarious position between reality and fantasy, favor and suspicion, grandiosity and abjection. Among the previously sealed letters is one in which Garbo sets the terms of this visit. Although she confirms that she will meet de Acosta, it is an ambivalent invitation; it is clearly a response to de Acosta's declaration of her intention to visit. She should plan on coming for just one day, Garbo cautions, and it might turn out to be a waste of time.

### **Epistemologies of the Celluloid Closet**

The Garbo estate's reluctance to expose Garbo's letters such as this one about the Grand Hotel appointment demonstrates fierce protectionism toward a star who employed everyone around her for that purpose while she was alive. Fear of publicity seems to run in the family. But like any prohibition, it has the effect of confirming what it means to deny. Though the worry around publicity is by no means entirely tied to worry about questions of Garbo's sexuality, the connection between secrecy and homosexuality so effectively documented and theorized by Eve Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* is nevertheless strikingly reinforced. Arguably, the peculiarities of Garbo's star image implicate her in this drama of desire and disclosure more than any other star, Dietrich included. Sedgwick argues that the link between representations of knowledge/ignorance (and related questions of publicity/privacy) and the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition is central to modern culture. Sedgwick herself explores that culture mostly through its canonical (male-authored) literature (about men), so the epistemological nexus she has identified appears "indicatively male." I believe that the visual and celebrity culture so characteristic of the twentieth century—and so extensively marked by female hypervisibility—is

also fraught with dramas of sex and knowledge, dramas that implicate female homoeroticism far more deeply than has been acknowledged. But I would venture to say that in the case of the epistemology of Garbo's closet—especially insofar as her knowing de Acosta informs this discourse—Sedgwick's generalization holds. Garbo's secret's connection with the question of homosexuality is “indicatively male,” or at least butch, or, in the parlance of the time, “mannish.”

Garbo's “masculinity” connects her to ontological definitions of homosexuality (qua inversion) as something one *is* rather than something one *does*—even if she wasn't one. Commentators on her persona contributed to this construction of Garbo's “authentic” gender. As Parker Tyler writes: “Garbo ‘got in drag’ whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck—what a magnificent line it makes: like a goose's rather than a swan's—bear the weight of her thrown-back head.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the epistemological drama of knowing—is she or isn't she?—which is so pronounced in Garbo's case is attached to the acquaintanceship drama of knowing de Acosta.<sup>36</sup> De Acosta's known-to-be-lesbian “boyishness” puts the epistemological and erotic implications of the well-known star persona with whom she is associated into historical relief.

In contrast, seduction, which one might consider to be Dietrich's version of lesbianism by metonymy, though it includes the actual sex act, does not implicate the star in a discourse of essence. Having had an affair with de Acosta, or with Edith Piaf, made her less an ontological lesbian than a lesbian icon. Though Dietrich's suits were mannish, ultimately she was not. Dietrich's persona in pants was that of a sexual tease. And though Dietrich was mysterious, no one kept a secret like Garbo. Roland Barthes famously describes Garbo's face as “almost sexually undefined, without however leaving one in doubt,” ultimately leaving sexual definition in doubt and implying that this constitutes her image.<sup>37</sup> The drama of knowledge is not nearly as pronounced in Dietrich's case because there is not the same surface/depth tension; public and private can be seen as equally performative. Perhaps

this is why the Dietrich persona feels more current, ripe for appropriation by Madonna and other wanna-bes. Garbo's image is pervaded with nostalgia, which might be thought of as a kind of lost heroic butchness. Today, when the specific components of Garbo's persona may themselves be lost to contemporary audiences more likely to have encountered lesbian films on television than any of the star's, she belongs as much to the archeology of homosexuality as she does to that of Hollywood. Swenson dismisses the approach some scholars might take toward the correspondence with de Acosta: "But if they feel the need to see lesbianism, they'll see it."<sup>38</sup> But if lesbianism is connoted everywhere one looks in the Garbo archive, it is not because of tunnel vision or voluntarism on the part of fanatics driven by identity politics. It is what history has taught us to look for.

Let me cite two more gay male tributes to the Garbo persona to illustrate the peculiar epistemology of "outing" by connotation that attends it. George Cukor, who directed Garbo in what many regard as her best performance in *Camille* (1937), captured Garbo's articulation of the "ontological lesbian" at the very moment that the type was circulating culturally. In her biography, Swenson reports his very canny, very funny description, written to scenarist Hugh Walpole upon Cukor's first meeting with the star: "Very nice, sweet, completely without humor, arty and rather pretentious. I think Lesbians—real Lesbians—are a little heavy in the hand, don't you? They are so god-damned noble, simple and splendid. I'm so glad you're not one any longer."<sup>39</sup> Cukor chooses his adjectives carefully; the proper noun goes without saying as if associating Garbo with lesbianism is no news. His "real Lesbian" is right out of *The Well of Loneliness*: completely without humor, arty, and pretentious—like our de Acosta. But it is that noble, simple, splendid thing that Garbo had down so well—that the *Queen Christina* role exploits so beautifully and that de Acosta (and many others) worshiped—that made her representative of the type. Finally, Cukor shows he is aware that he has constructed a type when he cleverly gives the immutability of the congenital-invert personality profile a performative twist, addressing the male recipient of his comments on real lesbians as a converted one.

(Indeed his own display of humor excludes him from this now expanded category.) It is the *performance* of the ontological definition of lesbianism that I think is at the core of the Garbo myth.

In a 1928 diary entry, Cecil Beaton excitedly records his first conversation about Garbo with his new friend de Acosta:

The only time that [Garbo] became noisy with excitement was when the tailor sent her a new pair of riding breeches made with flybuttons. She rushed about unbuttoning them & buttoning them up again, showing them to every body. She is very silent. She talks little. She isn't so far a Lesbian but might easily be one. Well, that was Mercedes' story gleaned from a great friend of Garbo's.<sup>40</sup>

Though indirectly quoting de Acosta chattering excitedly about her favorite topic—and this several years before she had *met* Garbo—Beaton engages us in the kind of epistemological speculation queer folks thrive on. If she likes flybuttons, well then she must be . . . . The hint of prophecy in the third-hand pronouncement “she isn't so far a Lesbian but might easily be one” is also a source of pathos. Garbo might easily be one—in your dreams.

Bringing out de Acosta rebalances Hollywood's historical knowledge/sex question. Knowing her implicated both Garbo and Dietrich, and each one differently, in the “real” lesbian culture and styles upon which their film representations would in turn make such an impact. Dietrich's come-on, Garbo's tragedy, their performative (Dietrich) versus ontological (Garbo) “lesbian” styles, their contrasting relationship to “mannishness,” can most readily be illustrated by fashion, both on-screen and off. In the next section, I shall use de Acosta's chic as a key to epistemologies of the contents of the Hollywood closet, circa 1932.

### **Trouser Roles**

De Acosta not only wore pants, she proselytized them. When she “went to Pickfair dressed in a white sweater and white trousers” on her second day in Hollywood, she reports, she was pulled aside and told, “You'll get a bad reputation if you dress this way out

here.”<sup>41</sup> De Acosta was clearly cultivating a reputation, and she continues covertly to connect lesbianism to advanced ideas about clothing throughout her memoir. She can come right out and claim to have gotten both Garbo and Dietrich into pants. “When I had known Greta a little while I got her to exchange her sailor pants for slacks,” she writes,<sup>42</sup> and a few chapters later she is taking up the topic with Dietrich:

I told her she looked so well in *Morocco* in the sequence where she wore them that I thought she should wear them all the time. She was delighted at the suggestion. The next day I took her to my tailor in Hollywood and in true Dietrich fashion she ordered not one pair but many more, and jackets to go with them. Of course she looked superb in all of them. When they were finished she appeared at the Paramount studio one day dressed in one of them. The following day newspapers throughout the whole country carried photographs of her. From that second on, women all over the world leapt into slacks.<sup>43</sup>

While de Acosta exaggerates her tastemaking role, her claims remind us that the memorable cross-dressing performances of both stars onscreen were accountable to offscreen lesbian looks and practices of the period.<sup>44</sup> In the historic sequence from *Morocco* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, US, 1930) that de Acosta refers to so casually, Dietrich, in top hat and tails, had kissed a woman on the mouth. And *Queen Christina*, with its scenes of Garbo kissing her lady-in-waiting and of a barmaid coming on to the star (who is passing as a man in the fiction), was in the works at this time. In a widely reported anecdote, the latter film’s writer Salka Viertel recalls being “pleasantly surprised” when producer Irving B. Thalberg encouraged her to put something of the flavor of *Mädchen in Uniform* in the screenplay.<sup>45</sup> One movie magazine feature among de Acosta’s clippings asks, “Do you know about the NEW Garbo?” and answers with a focus on Garbo’s “closest friends today”—de Acosta and Viertel. The article’s description of Queen Christina as someone “enormously individualized and slightly bizarre who insisted upon carrying the title of king and wearing mannish garb for many years” might have characterized

not only the queen's impersonator Garbo, whose affinity with the role of the Swedish monarch was overdetermined, but also de Acosta.<sup>46</sup> If de Acosta did not dress these screen icons in pants (though she claims to have influenced Adrian's designs for Garbo),<sup>47</sup> in her own trousers she is living proof of the lesbian world their performances encoded and transmitted. Generations of lesbian and gay viewers, and indeed most sentient ones, have decoded some of the signs.

Because the images in *Meeting of Two Queens* are drawn entirely from the stars' films, Barriga's video is an extraordinary example of such spectatorial decoding. It also recodes contemporary lesbian representation via its Hollywood antecedents. The by now somewhat flat iconicity of those few fetishized kissing and cross-dressing scenes is given nuance and depth in the context of the many other aspects of the star performance on display in other sequences and in the context of the tape's own alternative narrative. The contrast between the stars' images emerges both aesthetically and affectively. It is precisely this internal difference that indexes a historical reality—returning us to actual lesbian lives of the 1930s through representational codes of the period.

Let's entertain parallel pants histories for a moment. It was before her affair with de Acosta had entirely exhausted itself that Dietrich made headlines and courted arrest for appearing publicly in Paris in men's clothes. (She sent back a gorgeous studio portrait of herself in a black suit inscribed "für Mercedes.") Riva thinks the threat of arrest was partly a publicity stunt, and laws restricting the number of items of male clothing a biological female can wear have long been selectively enforced.<sup>48</sup> While Garbo never encountered the kind of police harassment that subjected midcentury butches to strip searches, she was aggressively scrutinized by the press—not least on the idiosyncrasies of her wardrobe. Pants for glamour are different from pants for gender authenticity, and Garbo wore them for the latter reason, evoking, as I have argued elsewhere, the "mythic mannish" iconic style made famous by Stephen Gordon, the hero(ine) of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*.<sup>49</sup> Even de Acosta, who, in an early draft of her memoir, claims to have shared Gordon's

biographical peculiarity of being raised as a boy, did not grow up to be as “mannish” as Garbo—perhaps because she did not grow up to be as big. Bringing de Acosta out from her place behind the screen dissolves a contrast between the realm of representation and that of reality, as far as tropes of gender authenticity are concerned, since the “real” dyke got herself up as elaborately as any movie star might.

There is a fair amount of satorial preoccupation within the de Acosta correspondence: Dietrich sends de Acosta a dressing gown and a handkerchief to match—“*also from the men’s department!*” she emphasizes gleefully.<sup>50</sup> Garbo fusses about matching a particular shade of dark blue, and there is the foot tracing. In the visual archive, the idiom in which all three women communicated best, trouser styles are much in evidence. The recently unsealed Garbo box contains 1932 snapshots of an unsmiling star in tennis whites. A more forthcoming series from the height of de Acosta’s affair with Dietrich shows the star at the beach house she had rented from Marion Davies. Dietrich in trousers poses frankly, fetchingly for the camera. Both sets of images—plus the Amazonian Silver Lake series of Garbo—are indelibly marked by de Acosta’s gaze behind the camera. We look with her desire, although her image is absent.

Maria Riva provides an interesting behind-the-scenes commentary on the context in which the Dietrich shots were taken:

My mother played the Golden One to the hilt, and, as always with any of her roles, the costume had to match the characterization. I got to play along. . . . The starring cast of “Santa Monica Beach House” wore creamy white flannel trousers, shirts, and polo necks with an added Dietrich touch: an equally creamy white beret, a little Chevalier touch! De Acosta, who usually wore this exact costume, was, of course, ecstatic. It never occurred to her that our outfits could have been inspired by anyone but herself.<sup>51</sup>

The co-inspiration for the outfit to which Riva is referring was apparently English tennis champion Fred Perry, whom her mother was seeing simultaneously.

Like that of the tennis champ, and unlike Riva's and her mother's, de Acosta's costumes expressed her identity (lesbian, "mannish") as well as her role. Perhaps she fancied herself such a fashion influence because she took trousers so seriously (film director Dorothy Arzner's well-groomed butchness is an interesting off-camera stylistic parallel). A broader cultural understanding of the "essence" of trousers (female masculinity=lesbian sexuality) inevitably leaked into the fan magazines' interpretation of de Acosta's influence over Garbo. For example, this rich description of Garbo's being driven home in secrecy from de Acosta's house down the road appears in an article ostensibly about the



Marlene Dietrich photographed by Mercedes de Acosta (1932 or 1933). Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.



low profile the star was keeping during contract negotiations. But the details, including the fashion notes, connote other secrets:

It was all of fifteen minutes before the blond reappeared with Garbo—blue trousered legs showing beneath a tightly buttoned brown trench coat and blue beret tiled jauntily over straight blonde hair—following close behind. Both girls hurried into the car, which glided swiftly down the road turning through the wide-swung gates at Garbo's place. When the car stopped at the side of the house the Swedish star jumped out and hurriedly disappeared through the front door. The young girl turned and drove back to the green frame house a block up the road.<sup>52</sup>



Mercedes de Acosta and Greta Garbo (1934).  
Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum and Library.

Who was this “fresh young blonde,” and what were those “girls” doing for fifteen minutes at de Acosta’s house? The movie magazine positioned de Acosta, a literary New Yorker of aristocratic heritage thirteen years Garbo’s senior, as a cultural and aesthetic influence on the star, and this shaded into sexual innuendo.

### **Walking with Garbo**

In one of its several incarnations, the 1934 photograph shown here of de Acosta and Garbo together is shamelessly captioned: “An unauthorised shot of the elusive Swedish star, taken by a cameraman who had waited for three hours on the running board of a car parked on Hollywood’s main boulevard. He just managed to snap the Garbo as she came out of her tailor’s with her friend, Miss de Costa [*sic*].” The image is “well-contrasted,” we are told, with a shot of Garbo in a nunlike habit from her upcoming film. The headline trumpets: “The Garbo in ‘The Painted Veil’ and in Corduroy Trews,” and indeed some notion of veiling is dramatically invoked by the costume’s contrast with the offscreen yet indisputable tactility of an everyday menswear fabric.<sup>53</sup>

I would like to suggest that this signature image of the friends, which de Acosta includes among the illustrations in her book, invites a different kind of lesbian speculation than the composite pairing of Steichen’s star portraits with which I have opened; indeed I think it invited this speculation from the general audience to which both images were initially addressed. The superimposed stars suggested a romantic couple, but the paparazzo snap of Garbo and de Acosta in synchronous strides—though just as treasured an image in the lesbian archive—suggests fellow travelers more than lovers. De Acosta herself discusses the photograph, rendering the newspaper caption a little more hyperbolically: “GARBO IN PANTS! *Innocent bystanders gasped in amazement to see Mercedes de Acosta and Greta Garbo striding swiftly along Hollywood Boulevard dressed in men’s clothes.*”<sup>54</sup> The image is a rich negotiation of butchness on the line between public and private.

In her letters, Garbo often addresses Mercedes as “Boy.” She famously referred to herself using masculine pronouns. In the photograph the two were not courting; according to the tabloid, they were shopping—they’d been to the tailor’s, ur-site of butch self-creation. Here is my borrowed literary caption:

She would go . . . that very afternoon and order a new flannel suit at her tailor’s. The suit should be grey with a little white pin stripe, and the jacket, she decided, must have a breast pocket. She would wear a black tie—no, better a grey one to match the new suit with the little white pin stripe. She ordered not one new suit but three, and she also ordered a pair of brown shoes; indeed she spent most of the afternoon in ordering things for her personal adornment. She heard herself being ridiculously fussy about details, disputing with her tailor over buttons; disputing with her bootmaker over the shoes, their thickness of sole, their amount of broguing; disputing regarding the match of her ties with the young man who sold her handkerchiefs and neckties—for such trifles had assumed an enormous importance; she, had, in fact, grown quite longwinded about them.<sup>55</sup>

Having grown quite longwinded herself in this passage from *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall implicates her literary taste for detail with her hero(ine)’s fuss over masculine accessories (the scene is set just after Stephen Gordon has first fallen in love). In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam observes that in Hall’s crucial text of modern lesbian identity, “Stephen positively *wears* her sexuality . . . a sartorial semiotic provides this novel with its system of knowing and unknowing, concealment and disclosure.”<sup>56</sup> The sartorial semiotics of Garbo’s stardom was elaborated at a contemporaneous historical moment. The magazine photo of Garbo and her lesbian friend cuts across the longwindedness of the novel with visual immediacy, giving us two versions of fastidiousness in the dandy and the picky-about-the-basics (later to be eccentrically so) dresser.

The mannish pair promenades with confidence. De Acosta is the more chic, certainly the better accessorized; gloves, cloak, and skullcap—no corduroy here—are shown off by her

bantam posture. But Garbo has the longer stride. Her rush of movement conveys self-assured *flânerie* perhaps—but also the wish to escape. Garbo’s hand shields her face from the intrusive camera. The elegant profile of a pair on parade exposes at the same time a vulnerable flank. The star is running from the press, the public gaze, and she is also outstepping, eluding de Acosta, in whose pace there is just the hint of scurry. Another, overhead paparazzo photo has Garbo entering her car “followed by her one close friend, Mercedes D’Acosta [*sic*]”; in another caption, “the camera snaps as she makes for the car, Mercedes right behind.”<sup>57</sup> In this unwanted (by Garbo, at least) documentation, a quality characteristic of her dynamic with de Acosta is captured. Even accompanied, Garbo must walk *alone* (a dominant trope of early- to mid-twentieth-century lesbianism). Though she might look like she is chasing her, de Acosta is better thought of as Garbo’s lesbian shadow, metonymically connecting Garbo’s very uniqueness and singularity to lesbian community style.

For Mercedes dressed to be seen, to be identified in the papers. Her own struggle for visibility was at war with her respect for Garbo’s privacy; this troubled her in the publication of the memoir and in the disposition of her letters. De Acosta’s visibility may have been self-dramatizing; it may have backfired, perhaps due to homophobia (none of her collection of nicknames—Gray Horan says their whole family, following Garbo, called her *kråken*, the Swedish word for “crow,” and Maria Riva likened her to a Spanish Dracula—was particularly flattering); but it bespoke her desire to have her sexual and gender identity recognized, to wear her desire on her sleeve. Inevitably, there was sapphic slippage when the tabloids talked about trousers. The double-butchtwo-shot gave Garbo a new kind of visibility.

As much as Garbo tried to save a “private” face from public viewing, her on-screen persona insistently enacted the drama of being seen as a revelation of self, hence the emphasis on her eroticized visage and gaze. Interestingly, Garbo begged for on-screen trouser roles. Thalberg rejected, because of its cross-dressing scene, a script he had asked de Acosta to write for Garbo entitled

*Desperate*.<sup>58</sup> So many of Garbo's "comeback" projects, documented, rumored, or fantasized—from Dorian Gray to Hamlet to St. Francis of Assisi (de Acosta's idea) to Mademoiselle de Maupin (Parker Tyler's) to George Sand—were men's or cross-dressing parts. While she was still making films, Garbo wrote to Viertel from Sweden suggesting she "put in a little sequence with the trousers" in the film she was writing about Napoleon's mistress, released in 1937 as *Conquest* (dir. Clarence Brown, US). "I have a great longing for trousers," Garbo wrote, "I am sorry, not to contribute anything more, but it is merely to remind you about the trousers— / trousers, girls in trousers, pressed trousers, girls, trousers, trousers. / By G. Stein."<sup>59</sup> This divine doggerel is as close as Garbo gets to the modernist lesbian set on whose periphery de Acosta moved, though her art pursued many of its visions by other means. The language of "great longing" shades into the representational mode of her films, though it is a male costume rather than a costar that she suffers for.

Girls. Trousers, trousers. The tabloid shot of de Acosta and Garbo on Hollywood Boulevard, though not a "composite photograph" like *Vanity Fair's* image of Dietrich and Garbo or Barriga's fantasized "meeting of two queens," also depicts an impossible couple: impossible in the sense that Hollywood was not ready for a major female star to be involved with a woman—it still isn't—and perhaps impossible biographically. But finally impossible as a couple because the mythic mannish lesbian type is ontologically lonely or at least a loner: two girls in trousers walk alone together, hinting more at a subculture than a romance. This is the mythic, anachronistic lesbian persona that resonates so strongly with Garbo's tragic onscreen characters, her many martyrs to impossible love. Regardless of her actual sexual choices, Garbo contributed enormously to one key historical figuration of what I am referring to as lesbian representability—the conditions under which lesbianism comes to be encoded and decoded in representations, whether movies or modes of dress.

In Garbo's shadow, de Acosta's own negotiation of visibility is a precedent, a condition, of ours today. Her being seen as a

lesbian depended not only on her dress but on the fact that she was an admirer and suitor of women in their most transparent and accessible and paradoxically unavailable form, that of female stars. She became the fan whose gaze was returned, reflecting the homoeroticism at the core of fandom and of chic. If she was forgotten in any number of contexts—her work was mediocre; Dietrich tired of her earnestness and her obsession with her rival; Garbo was selfish and suspicious—she has made a comeback in a moment when lesbian history finally has evidentiary status. Now Garbo is in the news for knowing *her*. When de Acosta died in May 1968, on the verge of a new cultural era, Cecil Beaton expressed his admiration for her: “She was one of the most rebellious & brazen of Lesbians.” He was “just sorry she was not more fulfilled as a character.”<sup>60</sup> Here too there is a shadow of Garbo; on- as well as offscreen, her legacy was that of the unfulfilled character, whether defined by tragic loss in film after film or by early, and fairly empty, retirement from the cinema. Only the writing history can fulfill the promise of “the lesbian” as character, and only through a recognition of the complexity of that designation that has only recently been possible in public.

### **Vulgar Eyes**

If she craved being seen, de Acosta was more careful about what she said than she is given credit for. She wrote a name-dropping memoir, but for something attacked for exaggeration, it barely alludes to homosexuality. When she told the story of her life, de Acosta worried most about what the private, mercurial, and just plain odd Garbo, with whom she was in regular but precarious contact in the late 1950s, would think, and she jeopardized her access to Garbo by publishing. When de Acosta negotiated the sale of her papers to the Rosenbach, she arranged to give the Garbo materials as a gift, stipulating the period of time that they should remain sealed, even forbidding the curator, her friend Bill McCarthy, from reading them. She was impoverished at the time of the sale, and though it has been unkindly rumored that she

had intended to blackmail Garbo with the letters, she reports having declined lucrative offers to sell them off to other parties. This rumor is an inevitable corollary of the public/private epistemology of the closet, through which inaccessible letters accrue more value. De Acosta knew what was not there, of course. But she did not think in terms of “in” and “out.”

Her feelings about the letters’ exposure were elaborated a few years later, on 31 October 1964, in a letter to McCarthy:

I never get over the feeling that one should never give away or show letters which, at the time, have meant much to one and are so very personal.

And yet I would not have had the heart or the courage to have burned these letters. I mean, of course, Eva’s, Greta’s and Marlene’s—who were lovers.

So it seemed a God-sent moment when you took them. I only hope, as the years go on, and you are no longer there that they will be *respected* and *protected* from the eyes of vulgar people.<sup>61</sup>

When the ten-year posthumous seal on the Garbo gift ran out in April 2000, interest in the personal letters’ content echoed that of the public who avidly consumed the tidbits about de Acosta and Garbo in movie magazines in the 1930s, justifying to some degree the Garbo estate’s protectionism. Yet the guardians of the star’s legacy may have seen as vulgar a curiosity more akin to respect for the unique cultural and historical role played by de Acosta.

The eyes that read letters to de Acosta in the Rosenbach collection are not those for whom they are intended. The image of the intended reader is easily interpellated—as Dietrich’s lover, as Garbo’s confidante, or then, almost as easily, as someone pestering the star. De Acosta’s own letters are not available. If we do not know what she wrote to her correspondents we do know how she wrote. Her handwriting was dramatic; she sometimes used purple ink. A collection of poems to Garbo unsealed with the letters dips deeply into the well of loneliness: “I will go back to my own land. / Land of Spain. / Sad, tragic land. . . . But at the End, /

Cold lands swept by wind / and snows / Is where my heart will / die, I know. —Hollywood 1933.” (Lisa Cohen has noted that all de Acosta’s exposure to modernist experimentation never seemed to affect her prose.)<sup>62</sup> But the addressee of this astounding, unreproducible body of correspondence may be most knowable as the collector who clipped and pasted from mass-market magazines, who, in the same spirit, got these famous people to write to her. Cohen characterizes her legacy thus: “The poetry for which de Acosta should be remembered is composed of the fugitive lines of a fan’s devotion as well as of an archivist’s commitment to preserving a material sense of her times.”<sup>63</sup>

After her detailed inventory of the illustrious correspondents encompassed in her donation to the Rosenbach, de Acosta adds a note to McCarthy: “P.S. I forgot to tell you that I have many photographs of Greta in a trunk and a *great* many magazines—American, French, English and Swedish in which articles and photographs appeared of her from 1930 until today.”<sup>64</sup> De Acosta’s cache of fan-magazine and newspaper clippings—any fan could have had one like it; my crumpled obituaries of Garbo and Dietrich fell out of my picture books when I began this essay—is archived alongside her wonderful collection of letters from her wonderful collection of women. De Acosta’s glorious enthusiasm for Garbo may not have extended to the movies in general. But, for me, the vibrant colors on the covers of *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen* burn through the black-and-white posing and the melancholy. If these frankly very American publications do not approach the high modernism fashioned by expatriate lesbian editors and writers, they are artifacts of a movie modernism that has had just as great an influence on twentieth-century culture, especially on the formation of new sexual identities such as those alluded to by the term *lesbian chic*. And though de Acosta tended to disavow her American identity in her persona and in her pursuit of European Golden Ones, she was a perhaps unwitting apologist for a made-in-Hollywood modernism.<sup>65</sup> What else is *Vanity Fair*’s “composite photograph” of “Garbo and Dietrich—the Northern Lights” if not an attempt at popular tastemaking,



queerness in the dream language of fans? If the movies and the ephemeral visual culture surrounding them invited the eyes of vulgar people, they also made it possible for some of us to look differently. For example, contemporary Chilean artist Cecilia Barriga revisits with new knowledge the same mise-en-scène of lesbian celebrity that de Acosta experienced; she enriches our reading of the contents of “Box 12: Restricted” at the Rosenbach. *Meeting of Two Queen’s* fleeting, fragile, late twentieth-century fan’s homage testifies to the historical and transnational reach of these Hollywood icons. De Acosta would have been enthusiastic. She would have saved a copy.

### Notes

It was very busy at Philadelphia’s Rosenbach Museum and Library during the period leading up to and after the unsealing of Greta Garbo’s letters to Mercedes de Acosta on 15 April 2000. I would like to express my appreciation to librarian Elizabeth Fuller, and to Catherine Hitchens and Holly Victor for their kind assistance with the collection, photographs, and permissions. My thanks to Sharon Willis and Jeanne Scheper at *Camera Obscura*.

1. Maddy Vegtel, “Blonde Venus and Swedish Sphinx,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1934, 28, 66. Newspaper and magazine quotations are from the ephemera files, Mercedes de Acosta collection, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, unless otherwise noted.
2. I discuss Barriga’s tape and the differences and similarities between the Garbo and Dietrich star images more fully in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 53–58. See also Mary Desjardins’s “*Meeting Two Queens: Feminist Filmmaking, Identity Politics, and the Melodramatic Fantasy*,” *Film Quarterly* 48.3 (1995): 26–33. The videotape is available from Women Make Movies (212) 925-0606.
3. Alice B. Toklas to Anita Loos, 8 May 1960, in *Staying on Alone: Letters of Alice B. Toklas*, ed. Edward Burns (London: Liveright,

- 1973), quoted in Diana Souhami, *Greta and Cecil* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), ix.
4. See, for example, “Daily Sketch” (London), 27 April 1928, n.p.
  5. Sybille Bedford to Hugo Vickers, 16 September 1992, quoted in Hugo Vickers, *Loving Garbo: The Story of Greta Garbo, Cecil Beaton, and Mercedes de Acosta* (New York: Random House, 1994), 155.
  6. Brendan Gill, *Tallulah* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 52. Quoted in Barry Paris, *Garbo: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 264.
  7. Axel Madsen: *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women* (New York: Birch Lane, 1995). Besides biographies of Greta Garbo by Paris and by Karen Swenson (*Greta Garbo: A Life Apart* [New York: Scribner, 1997]), and of Marlene Dietrich by Stephen Bach (*Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend* [New York: William Morrow, 1992]) and Donald Spoto (*Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]), Gavin Lambert’s *Nazimova* (New York: Knopf, 1997) and Helen Sheehy’s *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1996) treat their subjects’ relationships with de Acosta.
  8. Quoted in Meki Cox, “Garbo’s Secret Still a Secret,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 April 2000.
  9. De Acosta lived in New York and in Paris with Kirk. During the time of her most consistent correspondence with de Acosta—the late 1940s and 1950s—Garbo’s primary companion was George Schlee, who was married to the dress designer Valentina, with whom he lived in an apartment downstairs from Garbo’s.
  10. Mercedes de Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart: A Tale of My Life* (New York: Reynal, 1960). De Acosta’s book is an odd combination of tell-all and discretion. The underground cachet of the memoir, and its value as a work of queer history from a female “participant observer” perspective, is considerable despite its lack of explicitness. Most mentions of homosexuality were revised out of the book, though even widely quoted passages from the early drafts on de Acosta’s early masculine identification, her belief that one’s love object should not be restricted by gender, and the

gay subcultures of the 1920s are not all that extensive or revealing. In her accounts of her love affairs, the reader encounters reports of flowers and mementos shared, and the literary equivalent of the fade-to-black; the long-term relationships are illustrated with shared apartments and travels, but there are no kisses, no caresses. De Acosta's autobiography was billed at the time of its publication much as it might be now. The jacket copy reads in part: "Later she went as screen-writer to Hollywood—the fabulous Hollywood of Irving Thalberg and Louis B. Mayer—where a young Swedish actress named Greta Garbo was just emerging. A spark was somehow struck at their meeting, and their friendship has endured for years. Many of the other greats of stage and screen—Marlene Dietrich among them—also played roles in Miss de Acosta's adventures. All are vividly brought to life in her book." Today the nature of her "adventures" with these women is more widely appreciated.

11. Quoted in Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 254, attributed to a friend. The quote is attributed to Salka Viertel by Jack Larson in a letter to Barry Paris, 26 July 1991, quoted in Paris, *Garbo*, 264.
12. Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 40.
13. Lisa Cohen, "Fame Fatale," *Out*, October 1999, 76.
14. Ann Cvetkovich, "From the Archives of Lesbian Feeling," forthcoming in *Wide Angle*.
15. Dietrich to de Acosta, 10 October 1932, de Acosta collection. My translation from French. Quoted with permission of Peter Riva.
16. Second draft, *Here Lies the Heart*, de Acosta collection, 70.
17. Maria Riva, *Marlene Dietrich* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 254.
18. Dietrich to de Acosta, 19 September 1932, de Acosta papers. My translation.
19. Dietrich to de Acosta, 17 May 1933, de Acosta papers.
20. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 164–65.
21. Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 281.
22. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 142, 162, 208.

23. Swenson, *Greta Garbo*, 252. Swenson has corrected de Acosta's hindsight and several of her wish-fulfilling errors—such as her claim to have spotted Garbo on the streets of Constantinople even though she was not there at the same time. Swenson nevertheless takes de Acosta seriously as a source and as an influence in Garbo's life.
24. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 223.
25. Swenson, *Garbo*, 256.
26. In the sequel to *Hollywood Babylon*—one of a pair of volumes that might be considered de Acosta's memoir's evil-twin document in its name-dropping, queer perspective on movie stars—Kenneth Anger printed snapshots of Garbo from this trip without the sweater and without mention of the image's provenance (a practice that typifies his use of visual material). Nor does he mention de Acosta's presence behind the camera. The photo exists forever underground, a sublime signifier of de Acosta's marginal role in a Hollywood history rendered slightly sordid. See *Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 274.
27. Anita Loos to Cecil Beaton, 29 September 1932. Beaton doubtless did hear it from de Acosta's own lips, since they stayed friends, and compared notes on Garbo, for decades. Hugo Vickers, Beaton's literary executor, opens his book on the relationship between the three of them with this memorable letter; see *Loving Garbo*, 4.
28. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 154.
29. Mercedes de Acosta to Marlene Dietrich, n.d. Quoted in Maria Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 168.
30. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 168.
31. Marlene Dietrich to Mercedes de Acosta, 23 July 1933, de Acosta collection. Despite the throwaway nature of her letters, Dietrich was much more in control of and verbal about her work. With this letter she sends recordings she had made on the trip, telling de Acosta not to play them too loud. Granted, Garbo had retired by the time her correspondence with de Acosta picked up in earnest, but, always an intuitive artist, she says nothing about her

work life except for how it exhausts her and that she would like to be left alone.

32. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 168.
33. Cecil Beaton to Mercedes de Acosta, quoted in Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 210.
34. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 319.
35. Parker Tyler, "The Garbo Image," in *The Films of Greta Garbo*, comp. Michael Conway, Dion McGregor, and Mark Ricci (New York: Citadel, 1968), 12, 15.
36. Lesbianism by association was attributed to a contemporary celebrity around the time of the Rosenbach's Garbo event, when *Out* magazine nabbed pop star Whitney Houston for her first-ever interview with the gay press. When asked how rumors of her lesbianism got started (this was simply a way of delaying asking *the* question, which she denied): "I suppose it comes from knowing people . . . who are. I don't care who you sleep with. If I'm your friend, I'm your friend. I have friends who are in the community. And I'm sure that in my days of bein' out, hanging with my friends, having nothing but females around me, something's gotta be wrong with that" (Barry Walters, "She Will Always Love You," *Out*, May 2000, 59, 113).
37. Roland Barthes, "The Face of Garbo," reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 721.
38. Quoted in Cox, "Garbo's Secret."
39. George Cukor to Hugh Walpole, quoted in Swenson, *Greta Garbo*, 331. Swenson consulted a typescript of the letter at the Margaret Herrick Library of AMPAS dated 21 January 1935, but dates the letter 25 December 1934 in accordance with its place in the sequence of the correspondence.
40. Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 42.
41. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 212.
42. *Ibid.*, 228–29.
43. *Ibid.*, 243.

44. See Andrea Weiss, "'A Queer Feeling When I Look at You': Female Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 283–99.
45. Salka Viertel, *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York: Holt Reinhart, 1969), 175.
46. Elza Schallert, "Do You Know the NEW Garbo?" *Movie Classic*, n.d., 19.
47. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 230.
48. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 206.
49. Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian," *Signs* 9.4 (1984): 557–75. For the comparison between Garbo's persona in *Queen Christina* and Stephen Gordon see White, *Uninvited* 13–14.
50. Marlene Dietrich to Mercedes de Acosta, 6 November 1932, de Acosta collection.
51. Riva, *Marlene Dietrich*, 154–55.
52. Rilla Page Palmborg, "What's Really Happened to Garbo?" *Modern Screen*, n.d., 28.
53. "Daily Sketch," 7 November 1934, 265.
54. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 229. The fact that de Acosta's caption differs from those in her clippings files does not necessarily mean she paraphrased or quoted it from memory. Note, though, that she puts her name first, and of course spells it correctly. Another time the photo appeared, the caption was just as sartorially obsessed: "Corduroy slacks, jersey sweater, and oxfords—Greta returns from a long walk with Mercedes de Acosta" ("It's No Snap to Snap Garbo!," *Movie Mirror*, n.d., 20).
55. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Garden City, NY: Sun Dial, 1928), 151.
56. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 99. My emphasis.
57. *Screen Book Magazine*, n.d. 29; "It's No Snap to Snap Garbo!" 20.
58. De Acosta, *Here Lies the Heart*, 233.

59. Greta Garbo to Salka Viertel, 10 July 1935, quoted in Swenson, *Garbo: A Life Apart*, 341.
60. Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 281.
61. Mercedes de Acosta to William McCarthy, 31 October 1964, de Acosta collection. Quoted with permission; emphasis in original.
62. Lisa Cohen, unpublished talk at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, 4 May 2000.
63. Lisa Cohen, "Fame Fatale," 132–33.
64. Mercedes de Acosta to William McCarthy, 25 July 1964. Original emphasis.
65. For de Acosta, Garbo was a refined taste: "What relation had Mrs. America to a Viking's daughter whose soul was swept by wind and snow?" (*Here Lies the Heart*, 314). Beaton pays tribute to de Acosta's own ethnic mapping of her romantic persona: "She had excellent, severe Spanish taste—in her furnishing & in her interiors using only black & white—and was never willing to accept the vulgarity of so many American standards. She was strikingly un-American in her black tricorne & buckled shoes, highwayman coat & jet black dyed hair" (quoted in Vickers, *Loving Garbo*, 281). On the juncture of European modernism and Hollywood, see Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 332–50.

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A composite image of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich,  
*Encuentro entre dos reinas* [Meeting of two queens] (1991)  
directed by Cecelia Barrigon.