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# De Meyer at *Vogue*: Commercializing Queer Affect in First World War-era Fashion Photography

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**Elsbeth H. Brown**

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Elsbeth H. Brown is an associate professor of History, and Director of the Centre for the Study of the United States, at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929* (Johns Hopkins 2005) and co-editor of *Cultures of Commerce: Representation and American Business Culture, 1877–1960* (Palgrave, 2006). Her current research is an analysis of the commercial modeling industry in the twentieth-century United States, exploring the relationship among visibility, identity formation, and the commodification of the self in modern American history and culture.

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the work of Baron Adolph de Meyer, a pictorialist whose work revolutionized fashion photography at *Vogue* between 1913 and 1922. After a brief discussion of de Meyer's life and work in Europe before emigrating to New York City in 1914, the essay draws on recent scholarship on "public feelings" to investigate the queer context of de Meyer's photographic work for US *Vogue* in the years surrounding the First World War. The essay argues that de Meyer brought to *Vogue* a specific Edwardian structure of feeling defined by a revolt against the rationality of the second industrial revolution and informed by a transatlantic aesthetic movement that privileged emotional life and expression. De Meyer brought together the aesthetic movement with a queer transatlantic counterculture whose style, borrowing from José Muñoz, can be characterized by "affective excess." De Meyer's collaborator in several of the *Vogue* essays was the mannequin and Ziegfeld

model-showgirl Dolores, who complemented de Meyer's camp excessiveness with her signature laconic performance of white affect. In the context of US race politics and commercial culture in the First World War era, de Meyer's queer aesthetic was also a racial project that played a central role in the commercialization of aesthetic feeling.

**Keywords:** photography, queer, Baron Adolph de Meyer, fashion, *Vogue*

Cecil Beaton, the British photographer and designer, held Baron Adolph (Gayne) de Meyer in very high regard. Referring to de Meyer as the "Debussy of the camera," Beaton argued in 1975 that de Meyer had "not been placed high enough in the hierarchy of photographers." Fair enough. It's Beaton's next observation, however, that captivates: "Few have had greater influence on the picture-making of today than this somewhat affected but true artist" (Beaton and Buckland 1975: 106). Here, in two sentences, Beaton brings together feeling (Debussy) and affect—but in the pejorative sense, as in "affected," a flamboyant condition associated with superficiality and artifice. If twentieth-century normative masculinity has been constructed in relationship to discourses of naturalness and authenticity, the lack of feminine artifice and masquerade, then the "affected" male is the effeminate male: in other words, the fairy (Rivière 1984 [1929]; Chauncey 1994; Howard 1999). Beaton, queer himself, was sympathetic to de Meyer's dilemma. In a period when manly modernists of both the male and female persuasion redefined the aesthetics

of photography away from the gushiness of (girlish) feelings to the photographer's (manly) eye, Beaton had to work hard to place the terms "affected" and "true" in the same sentence to describe an artist who had been one of the most influential of pictorialists, and who definitively reshaped the visual vocabulary of modern fashion photography.<sup>1</sup>

De Meyer's photographic work was shaped by both an aesthetic movement vocabulary that privileged feeling over rationality as well as a queer sensibility characterized by what José Esteban Muñoz has called "affective excess" (Muñoz 2000). This article draws on recent scholarship on "public feelings" to investigate the queer context of de Meyer's photographic work for US *Vogue* in the years surrounding the First World War. Scholarship on public feelings has been described by Ann Cvetkovich as a "stealth feminist project" designed to "reimagine political life and collectivity" in "implicitly queer" ways. The work gathered together within the public feelings rubric seeks to understand the relationship between political identities and "structures of feeling, sensibilities, everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation" (Cvetkovich 2007: 461). *Affect*, for this vein of scholarship, emerges generally as a synonym for both emotion or mood, and as the expression of that emotion; in José Muñoz's work especially, *affect* is what the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines as "the outward display of emotion or mood, as manifested by facial expression, posture, gestures, tone of voice." In this article, I will join this interpretive community by historicizing de Meyer's fashion photography as a queer performance of racialized affect that played a brief yet

pivotal historical role in tying aesthetic feeling to commodity fetishism.

### **Pictorialism's Aesthetic Feelings**

De Meyer invented his own history, including his name, as assiduously as he invented himself. As a result, it is difficult to verify most aspects of his life, especially since he destroyed most of his own work in the late 1930s ("all that was superfluous ... all my photographic work, especially").<sup>2</sup> He was born around 1868, probably in Paris, though he spent some of his childhood in Dresden; in most accounts, his mother was Scottish and his father German. He was half-Jewish, German, and homosexual in a period marked by anti-homosexual and anti-Jewish panic, emblemized by the Dreyfus affair (1894) and the Wilde trial (1895). These aspects of his identity produced a name change (from von Meyer to de Meyer), a *mariage blanc* in the wake of the Wilde trial, and two migrations to the United States on the eve of the two world wars. Although de Meyer spent his early years in Paris, he was educated in Germany in the 1880s. Alfred Stieglitz, with whom de Meyer was to have a lifelong correspondence, studied in Berlin between 1881 and 1890; both Stieglitz and de Meyer were influenced by the emergence of amateur photography during these years, especially the 1889 "Photographic Jubilee Exhibition" in Berlin, and the 1891 Vienna secessionist exhibition, "Artistic Photography." Though we have no record of de Meyer's specific entrée into the emerging movement for artistic photography, his photographic work was included in most of the major international photography exhibitions between 1894 and 1912 in London, New York, Paris, Brussels, and Turin. The Linked

Ring Brotherhood, the international photo-secessionist group founded in London in 1892, accepted de Meyer for membership in the early 1898; he remained a member until 1910.

De Meyer moved to London around 1895, at the height of the aesthetic movement. An aesthete himself, with enough family money to shield him from the business of making a living, de Meyer quickly placed himself in the orbit of the era's fashionable circles, a newly-emerged combination of wealth and aesthetic sensibility that entertained and financed the creative group surrounding the future king of England, Prince Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales. In 1896 or so, de Meyer met his future bride, the queer fellow-traveler Olga Alberta Caracciola. A beautiful young woman raised in Normandy's fashionable seaside resort, Dieppe, Olga had modeled for numerous artists who made the yearly pilgrimage to Dieppe, including James McNeill Whistler, who painted her in 1885. It has been suggested that Olga was the model for Henry James's 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew*, as James, in describing Dieppe as a "reduced Florence" with "every type of character for a novelist," remarked "that enchanting Olga learnt more at Dieppe than my Maisie knew" (Ehrenkranz 1994: 21). More importantly for both of them, however, was Olga's relationship to the Prince of Wales, who became King Edward VIII in 1901. Edward was certainly Olga's godfather, and possibly her biological father as well (Olga's mother, the Duchesse de Caracciola, was unmarried). The Prince of Wales played an important role in Olga's life, including gifting a villa to Olga and her mother, where they lived in Dieppe. Olga and Adolph made a

perfect platonic pair: glamorous aesthetes and lavish entertainers; catty insiders dubbed them “Pédéraste and Médisante” (Seebohm 1982: 194).<sup>3</sup> In some accounts, de Meyer became “Baron” de Meyer in 1901, when the Prince of Wales asked his cousin, the King of Saxony, to confer the title so that Adolph and Olga might attend King Edward’s coronation at Westminster Abbey (Harker 1979: 157).

During the first decade of the century, with the Prince of Wales now King Edward VII, de Meyer committed himself to two passions: the social and creative whirlwind of the international smart set and aesthetic (or later, pictorialist) photography. A close friend and patron was Constance Gladys, Lady de Gray, a wealthy and powerful patron of the arts, who brought together, in her salons and social occasions, the royal family and the period’s dancers and artists (Nijinsky, Whistler, Wilde, Beardsley). Between 1901 and 1910, the years of Edward VII’s reign, the de Meyers enjoyed a privileged place in elite Edwardian circles; they entertained extravagantly at their home in London’s Cadogan Gardens, bringing together artists, dancers, and actors with wealthy patrons and art-loving members of the aristocracy. They entertained as well at the Palazzo Balbi-Valier, the villa on Venice’s Grand Canal, which they rented each summer; American photographers Gertrude Käsebier and Frances Benjamin Johnston, for example, visited the de Meyers there in the summer of 1905 (Ehrenkrantz 1994).

De Meyer’s second passion during these pre-war years was the aesthetic movement in photography. Pictorialism, a popular movement in photography from the early 1890s through the First World War, built upon nineteenth-century English models in

arguing for the creative possibilities of the camera. Pictorialism emphasized feelings, emotions, and sentiment over the tyranny of fact, long presumed to be the camera’s singular contribution to representation. The movement is often understood as the effort to elevate photography to the status of fine art, and, in both subject matter and formal strategies, many pictorialists did indeed emulate the effects of late nineteenth-century European painters. As a definition of artistic seeing entailed the ability of the artists to select certain details for creative expression at the expense of others, pictorialist photographers needed to disrupt the camera’s utilitarian leanings. Unlike mechanical or scientific photographs, aesthetic photographs required different means towards different ends (Doty 1978; Homer 1983; Peterson 1992; Bochner 2005). As the American critic C.H. Caffin argued in 1901, the aesthetic photograph “will record facts, but not as facts; it will even ignore facts if they interfere with the conception that is kept in view; just as Corot in his paintings certainly recorded the phenomena of morning and twilight skies and just as certainly left out a number of facts as he sat before the scene, his object being not to get at facts, but to express the emotions with which the facts affected him” (Caffin 1972 [1901]: 10; see also Louis 1906: 74–76 and Stieglitz 1904: 41–44). The pictorialist photographer sought emotional expression, rather than indexical verisimilitude; the camera, like the brush, was to be considered as yet another tool towards aesthetic ends (Brown 2005: 187–188). De Meyer’s photographs, like those of other pictorialists, refined a discourse of aesthetic feeling that emphasized beauty, symbolism, and the

natural world, defined especially in Stieglitz's circle against commerce and the logic of mass production.

Between 1903 and the 1913, when the first society portrait by de Meyer appeared in *Vogue*, de Meyer developed the aesthetic approach that transformed fashion photography. He deepened his relationship with leading photographers, especially Alfred Stieglitz and Gertrude Käsebier, who played a central role in de Meyer's artistic development (Ehrenkranz 1994). As did other pictorialists, de Meyer focused on light, tonal gradations, and differential focus as a means of conveying the emotional tone of the aesthetic photograph. He began backlighting his sitters, using light to define the line of a jaw, a halo of unruly hair: He pioneered the use of artificial light, employing floodlights, reflectors, mirrors, and the low flash as techniques for achieving his atmospheric interior portraits and still-life studies. (When Steichen replaced de Meyer as Condé Nast's chief staff photographer in 1922, he had only worked with natural light, and was initially overwhelmed by the elaborate equipment that staff assistant James McKeon made available to him (Niven 1997: 513).) During this period de Meyer also acquired a Pinkerton-Smith lens, which allowed him to focus clearly on the center of the image, while the edges of the piece dissolved in a luminous glow (Hoffman 2007: 395–96; Hall-Duncan 1979: 35). Eventually, to intensify the luminosity of his images still further, de Meyer stretched gauze or lace across the lens in the effort to disrupt the camera's indexicality. Through these pictorialist techniques, de Meyer pushed the camera image towards the connotative meanings of the aesthetic movement in

photography: beauty, metaphor, symbolism, and emotional intensity. These techniques of producing aesthetic feeling became centrally important for his fashion photography at *Vogue* after 1913.

The period between 1910 and the start of the war in 1914 signaled major shifts in both aesthetics and politics which eventually brought the de Meyers to New York in 1914. Stieglitz's 1910 international exhibition of pictorialist photography at the Albright Art Gallery, in Buffalo New York, which included de Meyer's work, ironically signaled the waning of pictorialism as an aesthetic movement, even though Stieglitz continued to favor de Meyer's work. (In 1911–12, de Meyer was the only photographer that Stieglitz showed at his Gallery of the Photo-Secession.) More importantly for the de Meyers' standard of living, however, their patron, King Edward VII, died in 1910. For a time, the de Meyers traveled with the *Ballet Russes* until 1912, when according to at least one source Olga's amorous relationship with the lesbian arts patron, wealthy Singer sewing machine heiress Princesse de Polignac (née Winnaretta Singer), caused the de Meyers to leave Venice for Constantinople, then Tangier. According to Philippe Julian, the de Meyers "were among the first to colonize the little town, which has since become a suburb of Sodom" (Julian 1976: 33). De Meyer's luxuriously queer album of Nijinsky's performance in *Prelude à l'Après-Midi d'une Faune* left the printer on August 15, 1914, in the first month of the First World War. Living back in London when war broke out, Olga and Adolph immediately became the focus of rumors that they were both German spies: how else to explain their mysterious wealth and their numerous travels? Convinced

by their friends and supporters, Olga and Adolph departed for New York with their friends the Speyers, wealthy London-based German-Jewish bankers who found themselves in a similar predicament. The de Meyers arrived in New York in 1914 with excellent connections, but no money or patrons (Julian 1976: 36).

### **De Meyer at *Vogue***

The de Meyers' arrival in New York coincided with the ascendancy of Condé Nast's magazine *Vogue* as the arbiter of American fashion, taste, and style. Condé Nast, a Midwest-born advertising manager for the popular magazine *Collier's Weekly*, bought *Vogue* in 1909. Founded in 1892, *Vogue* had been a minor society gazette with a circulation of less than 14,000, overshadowed by the numerous more successful magazines, such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Delineator*, both of which also covered fashion but boasted circulation of over one million. Nast avoided the mass audience made possible by the "ten cent magazine revolution" of the 1890s: with *Vogue*, he explicitly sought to create an elite "class" magazine for American tastemakers, funded by advertising dollars from the nation's most exclusive retailers. Of modest background himself, Nast's 1902 marriage to Clarisse Coudert, whose family was part of New York's Four Hundred, guaranteed the necessary elite access. [Nast's name, as well as those of three relations, was published in the *Social Register* for the first time in 1902 (Seebohm 1982).<sup>4</sup>]

By 1911, two years before de Meyer's first photograph was published in *Vogue*, the new magazine had taken shape. Like its predecessor, it was designed as a

handbook for the elite social life of the Edwardian bourgeoisie, covering mostly fashion (including patterns) and society news (weddings, summer resorts, charity events). Specifically, Nast saw the magazine as the "technical advisor . . . to the woman of fashion in the matter of her clothes and her personal adornment" (Seebohm 1982: 76; Chase and Chase 1954). He increased the magazine price from ten to fifteen cents, and reduced its publication schedule from weekly to bi-monthly. New advertising, at exorbitant rates of US\$10 per thousand readers, pushed each issue's page count from the formerly modest thirty pages to over 100; color found its way to each lushly drawn cover.

Fashion photography, as we might call it today, appeared in two guises in these early years: via *Vogue's* "society portraits" and through the fashion essay. Each number carried a "society frontispiece" by a portrait photographer; by 1917, each issue carried several such full-page portraits, spread throughout the issue. In the early 'teens, the portraits were generally straight-forward descriptions of their well-known society, film, and theatre subjects, made by established commercial and theatre photographers such as Aimé Dupont, Ira L. Hill, and Curtis Bell. Very quickly, however, *Vogue's* society portraits were also being made by New York's leading aesthetic photographers, most frequently Arnold Genthe and Gertrude Käsebier, as well as E.O. Hoppé. In the January 15, 1913 issue, de Meyer's first photograph appeared in *Vogue*, a full-page portrait of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney (Figure 1). Also known as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, de Meyer's subject was an art patron, philanthropist and sculptor who



**Fig 1** Portrait of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, *Vogue* January 15, 1913, p. 16. Photography by Baron Adolph de Meyer; Text by staff, © Condé Nast Publications; scan courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

founded the Whitney Studio Club in 1918, which became the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1931.

De Meyer's portrait perfectly connotes the social, economic, and aesthetic longings of *Vogue's* implied readership. The slender Whitney stands imperially before the camera at a slightly oblique angle, her left hand resting lightly on her hip, while her right arm anchors her body to the indistinct studio furniture behind her. With her chin up, Whitney looks down her nose at the camera

and the viewer, suggesting the elite class position that her last name confirms. At the same time, the gorgeous exoticism of her gown suggests a bohemian modernism, the artist's interest in overturning convention. As William Leach has argued of this period, orientalist discourse worked to sanction the permissiveness of an emerging consumer culture (Leach 1993). Some viewers may have recognized the gown as the work of Leon Bakst, the Russian Jewish artist and stage designer who also designed the costumes for the *Ballet Russes*. A structuring band of vertical light encourages the eye to look the subject up and down, even while she looks down at us; de Meyer's lighting, as well as his Pinkerton-Smith lens, focus the viewer's eye on the gown's shimmering whites and the necklace's three loops of pearl. The image is stunningly beautiful, and in the context of *Vogue's* other pre-war portraits, is idiosyncratic in its sophisticated use of lighting, composition, and tonal gradation. Through this portrait, de Meyer introduces the two threads that became central to his later work for *Vogue*: the aesthetic feeling of pictorialist photography with the discourse of money—here signified most explicitly through Whitney's pearls, the portrait's literal focal point.

The second way that fashion photography appeared in the new *Vogue* was through the fashion essay: a series of fashion images, anchored to captions and an accompanying text, which described a specific fashion theme (the season's hats, for example, or gowns by a specific couturier). Some scholars have argued that de Meyer "invented" the fashion essay, but this is not the case: *Vogue* had been publishing multiple-page spreads of fashion photography for years before de

Meyer's first effort appeared in the May 1, 1917 issue. Initially, Condé Nast would get his illustrations from the apparel house, such as Joseph, Bonwit Teller, John Wanamaker, or Abercrombie & Fitch. Photographs depicting the newest "models" in cloaks and gowns were presented alongside pen-and-ink illustrations from the apparel house; the mannequin wearing the clothing items was not identified, unless she was a society woman or otherwise well known to the magazine's readers. As photography began to push out the pen-and-ink illustrations in the mid-teens, however, Condé Nast began using the theatre and celebrity photographer Ira L. Hill to produce multi-page fashion spreads. Although none of the secondary literature on de Meyer or Nast mentions Hill, it is clear from paging through these pre-war issues of *Vogue* that it was Hill, not de Meyer, who was either Nast's first paid staff photographer or who was under contract to Nast.

Secondary literature on de Meyer has consistently made two errors that are not borne out by the pages of *Vogue*: the first is that there were no fashion photography essays in *Vogue* before de Meyer's arrival, and the second is that Nast hired de Meyer on an exclusive contract as the magazine's first paid staff photographer in 1913.<sup>5</sup> From my reading of the magazine's numbers from the First World War era, however, I would argue that while de Meyer's work did appear before 1917, it was not until the Spring of that year that his work begins to dominate the magazine, in both genres of society portraits and fashion essays. By 1917, de Meyer quite likely was enjoying a contract as the magazine's staff photographer, a position he was to hold until 1922, when he left for

*Vogue*'s competitor *Harper's Bazaar* and was replaced at *Vogue* by Edward Steichen (Chase and Chase 1954). Once de Meyer's work appeared in the format of the fashion essay in the May 1, 1917 issue, Hill's work in this genre disappears from the magazine, suggesting a contractual shift from Hill to de Meyer.

A comparison between Hill's fashion essays and de Meyer's suggests why Nast made the shift away from Hill to de Meyer: Hill's images, while more than competent, are straightforward in their attention to detail; unlike the pictorialists, Hill didn't experiment with the lighting, focusing, and printing techniques that signified the aesthetic movement. In a January 1, 1917 photo essay concerning three Jacqueline tea-gowns, for example, a mannequin appears in profile against a black background, smiling histrionically into a hand-held mirror; the posing, uniform lighting, and attention to detail suggest contemporary theatre, film and celebrity portraits, not the emotional expressiveness of aesthetic photography. In contrast, de Meyer introduced all the visual techniques of the art movement in photography to his work at *Vogue*. His first fashion essay, on May 1, 1917, was a two-page spread featuring bridal lace and included a full-length image of actress Jeanne Eagels, in the rhetoric of the society portrait; a small still-life of lace, candles, and a fan; and a stunning image of a young film actress, Vera Beresford (daughter of actress Kitty Gordon), modeling a bridal veil of white tulle bound by a wreath of orange blossoms. De Meyer lit Beresford from below; the camera picks up illuminated details of orange petals and delicate lips while casting dramatic shadows (later critics would say, "melodramatic")



against the wainscoting above. With these images, de Meyer announced a technical virtuosity in photographing transparent and opaque materials while bringing to the work all the mystery and aesthetic feeling of art photography.

### **De Meyer's Queer Affective Excess**

De Meyer brought to *Vogue* a specific Edwardian "structure of feeling" defined by a revolt against the rationality of the second industrial revolution, and an oppositional celebration of aesthetic feeling. Raymond Williams used the term "structure of feeling" in an effort to link a culture's documentary expressions ("from poems to buildings to dress-fashions") to "all the elements in the general organization," what he has described as a culture's "whole way of life" (Williams 1961: 48–49). Pictorialist photography joined with other cultural documents, including Debussy's music, Nijinsky's dancing, and Whistler's painting to create an oppositional culture that valorized feeling and emotion over rationality and system, the era's dominant culture. But there is another aspect of this transatlantic aesthetic culture that bears mentioning: its queerness. Borrowing from Williams once again, this culture's documentary expressions (Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, F. Holland Day's photographs) are constituent of a whole way of queer life for a transatlantic counterculture that saw its aesthetic vocabulary and emphasis on feeling emerge as a dominant cultural formation during the Edwardian era, before becoming a residual formation during the modernist period following the First World War. De Meyer was at the centre of these queer cosmopolitan circles on both sides of the Atlantic, and his aesthetic

contributions played an important role in the transition of modernism in American fashion photography.

How might we understand the aesthetics of queer feeling during this transitional period, as the aesthetic movement gave way to modernism's clean lines and disciplining eye? Borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz's work on "feeling brown," I'd like to suggest that de Meyer's *Vogue* aesthetic is marked by an "affective excess" that can be seen in the profusion of objects, textures, fabrics, and flowers that provide his work with his signature style. In his work on contemporary Latino/a performance, Muñoz describes a normative public sphere defined through a subdued performance of whiteness that can be characterized, essentially, as without affect. What unites non-normative groups, in Muñoz's analysis, "is not simply the fact of identity but the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to the 'national affect' that is aligned with a hegemonic class" (Muñoz 2000: 68). Specifically, in Muñoz's analysis, Latino/a affect reads as "over the top and excessive," a performance of ethnic self that is seen as "inappropriate" from the perspective of the white middle-class subjectivity that dominates what he calls the national affect. While Muñoz doesn't explicitly extend his analysis in this essay to queer non-Latino/a subcultural styles, his identification of "affective excess" as the marker of the non-normative is useful in understanding de Meyer's "over the top and excessive" aesthetic.

Baron Adolph de Meyer was both "excessive" and "affected" (to borrow from Cecil Beaton) in both his personal life and in his photographic work. Worldly, cultured, and multi-lingual, de Meyer was a part of the

(effeminate) male aesthete circle in New York that included Carl Van Vechten and other creative artists. In a recent article, art historian Cecile Whiting provides as evidence Florine Stettheimer's 1923 oil portrait of her friend de Meyer; an intimate in this effete circle of queer artists and decorators. Stettheimer's portrait represents an effeminate dandy figure: standing in front of his camera and tripod, draped with the lace through which de Meyer made many of his images, de Meyer gazes to one side, his lips delicately pursed, his arms girlishly akimbo on his slender-yet-accentuated hips (Whiting 2000). De Meyer not only photographed the decorative works of his friends, he himself also, after 1916, wrote articles on decoration and entertaining, accompanied by his own table settings and flower arrangements (which he photographed for *Vogue*). As one of the earlier examples, in *Vogue's* August 1, 1917 "interior decorations" number de Meyer is credited as "decorator" for several interiors, including the dining room at Mrs. Miles B. Carpenter's house in Bar Harbor, Maine, and one of his own rooms at his New York residence, "Gayne House." His decorating aesthetic is eclectic and Victorian in its compulsive accumulation of objects (one caption describing a room at Gayne House, in fact, suggests that he had "indulged to the full his hobby of Victorianism"); his work contrasts with his queer contemporary, Elsie de Wolfe, whose interiors for the Colony Club signaled a more modern, restrained style that prefigured modernism's aversion to "decoration" (Marra 1994, 1998).<sup>6</sup> De Meyer's fashion and design journalism flourished once he moved to *Harper's Bazaar* (and Paris) after 1922, where his writing

emphasized the newest trends in European taste (de Meyer 1922).

Around this time, both de Meyers visited an astrologer for spiritual guidance, who gave them new names: Olga changed her name to "Mhahra" (a place name for a region now in Yemen) and Adolph changed his name to "Gayne." Even in the height of transatlantic orientalism, changing one's name might be considered a bit "excessive," at least outside of fairy circles where name changes were more common. De Meyer soon had established a shop at his home, Gayne House, an "elaborately decorated town house at 59 East 52nd Street in New York, filled with antique European furniture, glass, silver, and tapestries" (many of de Meyer's photographs were taken at Gayne House, and it is possible to detect his interiors in these images).<sup>7</sup> As if photographing for *Vogue*, designing interiors in Maine, Florida and New York, and keeping a shop were insufficient creative outlets, de Meyer began designing his own clothes in 1918. The July 15, 1918 issue of *Vogue* published a two-page spread of his designs, announcing that "a new designer has been added to New York's list: at Gayne House Baron de Meyer has created a charming collection of Models for Autumn" (*Vogue* 1918).

As George Chauncey has shown, in the pre-war years it was gender, not sexual object choice, which defined contemporary queer cultures. In using the term "queer," then, I am both seeking to destabilize the fixity of categories in the vein of contemporary queer scholarship but also, importantly, using the term in its historically specific meaning (Somerville 2000: 6). By the 1910s and 1920s, men in New York City who identified themselves on the basis of

their homosexual object choices, rather than an effeminate gender style, usually called themselves “queer,” reserving the terms “pansy” or “fairy” to describe womanly men whose sub-cultural style of “affective excess” became known as “camp” as early as 1909, as in “ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual” (Chauncey 1994: 16; OED online). The fundamental division of male sexual actors was not between “heterosexual” and “homosexual” men, then, but between two types of men: the gender-normative “normals,” and the gender-queer (effeminate) males, known as fairies. The fairy, in other words, represented a gender inversion, more than a sexual identity; as Chauncey argues, the bisexual was not a person who slept with both men and women (as we might think of both de Meyers today, perhaps), but was someone who “was both male and female” (Chauncey 1994: 49).

De Meyer’s camp theatricality, while queer in a broad sense, especially by contemporary usage, was historically more specifically a part of New York’s fairy culture of the First World War era. The flamboyant public styles during the era of the NYC fairy were signified most consistently through references to flowers (references to pansies, daisies and buttercups were condensed in the code “horticultural lads”); the adoption of faux titles (the Duchess of Marlboro, Baron de Meyer); and feminine nicknames, often inspired by contemporary feminine icons (Salomé, for example, popularized by the many adaptations of Oscar Wilde’s scandalous 1892 play). Baron de Meyer, an original horticultural lad, already had the title, which although always disputed, seems to have been accepted by his social circle

and by *Vogue*. With the adoption of a new name, Gayne, de Meyer enacted (perhaps coincidentally, to be sure) a pervasive cultural ritual central to the fairy culture of the First World War era. The name was an inspired choice: the word “gay,” which begins the name was, as Chauncey shows, a contemporary code word that signified “the flamboyance in dress and speech associated with the fairies” (Chauncey 1994: 17). The name, an unusual but not-unheard-of boy’s name in this period, takes its meaning from “gain” or “to get”—an interpretation that resonates with de Meyer’s central role in aestheticizing the commodity form in his *Vogue* work. As this brief discussion of fairy culture suggests, one of its defining attributes was the public display of flamboyant style in dress, speech, mannerisms, and expressions: the “affective excess” of camp performativity.

De Meyer’s camp affective excess can be clearly seen in his photographic work for *Vogue*. In these technically brilliant images, de Meyer lovingly delineates each flower petal, bridal jewel, and trailing ribbon. His work is exceptional in large part because of his success in using his innovative lighting techniques to illuminate the material objects—lace, tulle, crystal—that other photographers, such as Hill, had been unable to bring alive through the camera. De Meyer’s brilliance in animating the material goods of luxury commodity culture made his work indispensable to *Nast*, whose growing magazine empire depended upon the support of luxury retailers such as Cartier.

### **Performing White Affect: Dolores as Mannequin**

De Meyer’s expressionless collaborator in some of the most spectacular fashion essays

was the British mannequin Dolores (née Kathleen Rose). Dolores was a working-class Londoner who had been transformed into one of the first Anglo-American mannequins by the British couturier, Lady Duff Gordon (business name, Lucile, Ltd.). When Lucile opened a Fifth Avenue salon in 1910, four of her mannequins were sent to New York along with Lucile's signature dresses: internationally famous "gowns of emotion" representing "love and hate, joy and sorrow, life and death" (*New York Times* 1910; Duff Gordon 1932; Etherington-Smith and Pilcher 1986). Lucile was the first Anglo-American clothing designer to present her work on what was known then as the "living model;" her mannequin parades became a sensation in New York, and helped spark the mid-teens fashion show craze in department stores and charity events, such as *Vogue's* 1914 fashion fête (Brown 2009). By 1918, when de Meyer first photographed her, Dolores had moved from Lucile's showroom to become one of the very first "model-showgirls" in the Ziegfeld Follies, for which Lucile often designed the costumes (Schweitzer 2009). In other words, Dolores was the first celebrity clothes model: famous not for singing and dancing (she did neither), but for modeling high-end designs on stages, both on Fifth Avenue (couture) and Broadway (musical revues). Dolores's carefully honed performance of white affect—on stage and in the photographer's studio—functioned as the "straight man" for de Meyer's photographic excessiveness, where luxury goods took center stage.

De Meyer photographed both Lucile gowns and Dolores numerous times in this period, but I will focus here on one of seven pages in an April 15, 1919 *Vogue* fashion

essay entitled "Pearls and Tulle Spin Bridal Witcheries." The article featured fourteen de Meyer photographs of bridal gowns (some also designed by de Meyer) and accessories, including "lustrous jewels" and a "silver net embroidered delicately with pearls" (*Vogue* 1919). The second page of the spread (Figure 2) joins a portrait of Dolores modeling a de Meyer gown with three smaller still-lives of the bride's accessories. These accessories—a diamond barrette, for example, or an amber-handled white ostrich feather fan, both provided by Cartier—are, according to a caption, "almost as necessary to a wedding as the bride herself" (surely an understatement from the perspective of Cartier). De Meyer's arrangement of these accessories is effusive yet studied: in each corner image, a satin slipper unsuccessfully competes for the viewer's attention, drowned out by a cacophonous profusion of cut flowers, lace, feathers, garlands, jewelry and fruit blossoms. Yet his brilliant lighting, emanating from behind and below the central arrangement, and complemented by smaller lights that selectively illuminate pearls and diamonds, successfully draws the eye. Here, de Meyer's decorative excess perfectly complements the conspicuous consumption of a *nouveau riche* leisure class (Veblen 1899).

Dominating the page spread, however, Dolores models a platinum-and-diamond Mercury headdress and a gown of silver cloth. De Meyer's lighting (from behind and below the model), as well as the Mercury wings, leads the viewer to Dolores's face, especially her piercing gaze. She stares back at the viewer with supreme affectlessness, her blank expression creating a somewhat intimidating canvas for de Meyer's



**Fig 2** “Pearls and Tulle Spin Bridal Witcheries,” *Vogue*, April 15, 1919, p. 44. Baron Adolph de Meyer; photographer and designer; Dolores (Kathleen Rose), model. Text by staff, © Condé Nast Publications; scan courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

accessorizing. This lack of expression was, in fact, one of Dolores’s defining performances both on the stage and in her photographic modeling; her style of blank hauteur marks not only all her work for de Meyer; but also, I would argue, became the template for fashion models more generally. The other performance, central to her work as a model and more difficult to signify through still photography, was her walk: the studied steps

of the couturier model, made famous after 1917 on Ziegfeld’s stage.

Dolores’s affectless performance as the first famous couturier model was well known to *Vogue* readers. As I discuss elsewhere, it was Dolores’s laconic expressions, gestures and movements, choreographed first by Lady Duff Gordon and then by Ziegfeld stage manager Ned Wayburn, that came to define the couturier model and the new chorine,

the Follies' "A" model-showgirl (Brown 2009). On stage, Dolores did not speak, sing, or dance; she simply appeared in costume, moving with slow, statuesque movements in front of her audience, punctuating her promenade with poses showcasing her stunning gown. When she appeared as the white peacock in the "Beautiful Birds" number of the 1919 *Midnight Frolic* (Figure 3), for example, her regal demeanor and fantastic costume awed contemporary audiences.

A reviewer reported an exchange between two audience members: "Is she going to dance?" A voice replied: "A woman

who can stand and walk like that doesn't have to dance."<sup>8</sup> Dolores was the popularizer of the series of Wayburn movements that later became known as the "Ziegfeld Walk," the slow promenade that became central to both Ziegfeld and Busby Berkeley's "mass ornament" of geometric showgirl formations (Kracauer 1995; Mizejewski 1999; Cohen 1980).

Dolores's corporeal performance was, explicitly, a racialized performance of white affect. In the First World War era, in the wake of the largest immigration wave in the United States, whiteness was a national project that depended upon the incorporation of



**Fig 3** Dolores as the White Peacock in the 1919 Ziegfeld show, *Midnight Frolic*. *Vanity Fair*, December 1919. Baron Adolph de Meyer, photographer; Dolores (Kathleen Rose), model. © Condé Nast Publications.

provisional whites, such as Italians and Jews, at the expense of racial others, such as blacks and Asians, whose exclusion shored up the newly stabilized category of the “Caucasian” (Rogin 1996; Jacobson 1998, 2000). As numerous scholars have argued, popular theatre, especially the Ziegfeld stage, emerged as one of the key sites through which the period’s racial logic was normalized (Mizejewski 1999; Glenn 2000; Brown, J. 2008). In choreographing Dolores’s facial expressions, gestures, and movement vocabulary, both Duff Gordon and Ned Wayburn elaborated a subdued style where limbs moved close to the body, marked by fluidity and unhurried grace (Figure 4).

These studied movements, characterized by an elite hauteur signified by an uplifted chin and unsmiling countenance, emerged from a longer history of racialized deportment and posture (Todd 1977 [1920]; Yosifon and Stearns 1998; Gordon 2006); they were synonymous with the white pretension that underlay the modern cultivated body (and it was precisely this vocabulary of white pretension that African-Americans parodied in the cake-walk, which became a national craze at just this time). The subdued gestural vocabulary of the couture mannequin provided a marked departure from the exaggerated movements of most contemporary racialized performance styles, where the tradition of blackface minstrelsy on both sides of the Atlantic conscripted black bodies into a performance style recognizable by exaggerated motions and expressions: “eccentric” dance styles marked by arms and legs akimbo, staring eyes and clown smiles (Lott 1993; Lhamon 1998; Ullman 1997; Kibler 1999; Glenn 2000; Sotiropoulos



**Fig 4** *Vogue*, September 15, 1918, p. 29. Baron Adolph de Meyer, photographer; Dolores (Kathleen Rose), model. Text by staff, © Condé Nast Publications; scan courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

2006; Brooks 2006). In contrast with these “primitive” displays, the subdued gestures of the couturier model performed a corporeal language that consolidated a discourse of Anglo-Saxon white supremacy for its elite viewers. While Dolores’s performance was certainly one of class passing, her expressionless demeanor also signified the hauteur of elite whiteness.

In these de Meyer images, the complex history and cultural significance of racialization and class passing are condensed in Dolores's expressionless visage. A working-class immigrant herself, but one privileged with impeccable Anglo-Saxon credentials, Dolores's performance of elite whiteness helped consolidate what Muñoz has called a "standard national affect" in the United States, against which other affective codes appear as "over the top and excessive" (Muñoz 2000: 69). Here, Dolores's lack of affect serves as an ideal canvas for both de Meyer's accessorizing and for the implied viewer's commodity longings. At this historical moment, this combination of de Meyer's queer pictorialist excessiveness and Dolores's laconic whiteness proved a powerful combination for Nast's elite readership.

Queer excess is registered in these essays in two ways: through both de Meyer's accumulation of detail and objects, and through Dolores's affectlessness. Her intimidating countenance could be read, perhaps only by theatre and fashion insiders, as a queer performance, an over-the-top display of icy hauteur that parodies the class performance of celebrity sitters such as Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney (Figure 1). Not much is known about Dolores's life after 1923, when she married an American art collector and son of a St. Louis dry goods merchant, William Tudor Wilkinson, and moved to France—where she remained until her death in 1975. The one picture I have found of Dolores in her post-New York years supports the extant textual sources in suggesting her participation in the politically left and queer bohemian circles of New York's Greenwich Village



**Fig 5** Mrs. Tudor Wilkinson (nee Kathleen Rose, aka Dolores), from *Eve: The Lady's Pictorial*, March 25, 1925.

and interwar European countercultures (Figure 5).<sup>9</sup> The barest hint of a smile in this striking portrait whispers the intriguing possibility that Dolores's performance of white affectlessness may have doubled as a performance of queer excess, at least to those in the know. Queer or not, her performance of affectlessness also functioned as a racial project, one that re-emphasized the corporeal meanings of the elite's whiteness as controlled, constrained, and understated.

### **Commodifying Queer Affect**

De Meyer's fashion photography brought an aesthetic vocabulary to a commercial medium (fashion) precisely at the historical moment when merchandisers teamed up



with psychologists and advertisers to harness consumer longing and transform it into sales. Although it had been possible, technically, to introduce photography to advertising and fashion illustration since the half-tone was perfected in the late 1880s (Jussim 1983; Harris 1979), the medium's indexicality, combined with most photographers' lack of training in the principles of fine art, meant that most commercial photographs lacked the connotative codes necessary for commercial culture's appeals to emotion (Brown 2000; Yochelson 1996; Bogart 1995). It was pictorialism, as an aesthetic approach, that convinced art directors, account executives, and magazine editors that photography could compete with lush pen-and-ink illustrations by Charles Montgomery Flagg or Charles Dana Gibson. Pictorialism's emphasis on connoting feeling, its ability to stir the emotions, dovetailed perfectly with advertisers' increasing recognition that not only were the most effective sales appeals directed towards an emotional, rather than rational, consumer; but also that the vast majority of purchases were made by women (Marchand 1985; Scanlon 1995; Garvey 1996). In the world of advertising photography, the pictorialist incursion into commerce was indebted to the work of photographer Lejaren à Hiller; in fashion photography, Baron Adolph de Meyer's pictorialist work convinced editors that photography could compete, and eventually surpass, the work of commercial illustrators (Brown 2000).

De Meyer brought together pictorialism's aesthetic vocabulary with a queer cosmopolitan sensibility characterized by affective excess to create stunning fashion photographs that perfectly matched Condé

Nast's needs. Unlike the flat documents of his photographic competitors, de Meyer's photographs animated the magazine's luxurious commodity culture. De Meyer's photographs sought to produce a utopian flight of aesthetic feeling which the text then tethered to a specific, preferred outcome: sales. As the caption for de Meyer's portrait of Jeanne Eagels notes, the arrangement of a "real lace veil . . . is one of the highest forms of art . . . if one craves it—and what bride wouldn't?—it can be purchased for five thousand dollars."<sup>10</sup> His photographs, emerging from a queer cosmopolitanism that had once privileged the aesthetic movement's "art for art's sake," tied the utopian performative's desire for a better life to the accumulation of luxury goods (Dolan 2001; Jameson 1979). De Meyer himself was deeply conflicted about his central role in commodifying aesthetic feeling. Towards the end of his life, de Meyer wrote to Stieglitz for reassurance that he had not betrayed his talent in committing to commercial photography; Stieglitz obliged, writing to him in 1940 that "no, you have not prostituted photography" (Ehrenkranz 1994: 16). Ironically, the man who had once called de Meyer "a pimp of a man," Edward Steichen, not only replaced de Meyer at Condé Nast in 1923, but also began then his lucrative, twenty-year relationship with the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency (Niven 1997: 231; Johnston 1997; Brandow and Ewing 2008). This is not to pass judgment on either photographer or the historical relationship between aesthetics and commerce; as even the purist Stieglitz recognized, anyone who would suggest that the lines could be so clearly drawn "does not know what he or she is talking about" (Ehrenkranz 1994: 16).

## Conclusion

The First World War years mark pictorialism's last gasp as the dominant aesthetic within art photography. In the 1915–17 period, Paul Strand abandoned the pictorialists' soft focus in favor of the hard edges and formal emphases of straight photography. Though art photography's move towards modernism is certainly more complex than this single marker, in hindsight it is clearly the case that de Meyer's *Vogue* years corresponded with art photography's rejection of pictorialism's technical and emotional excessiveness in favor of modernism's sharp lines and camera eye (Strand 1980 [1917]; Bochner 2005; Yochelson 1996). Nothing signaled this transition more clearly than the staff changes at *Vogue*. De Meyer had been the first of several key defections from Condé Nast to Hearst; he left for *Harper's Bazaar* for a much greater salary, more creative control over magazine layouts, and a Hearst-funded apartment in Paris (where he and Olga moved in 1922). In 1923, the year Steichen returned from France, Nast hired him as his magazines' chief staff photographer (in Brandow and Ewing 2008). As Nast's biographer writes in what is generally representative of scholars' descriptions of the shift from pictorialism to modernism, "Steichen swept away de Meyer's unreal, filmy creations and replaced them with a sculptural, clean, pure, realism" (Seebohm 1982: 201). This transition, however, can be understood in gendered terms as well, away from (female) "filmy" feeling towards the "pure" and "real" heteronormative masculinity of the conservative 1920s. De Meyer's gender and sexual queerness, inseparable from his photographic aesthetic,

would find fewer outlets in the Coolidge-era "return to normalcy."

## Notes

- 1 I would like to express my thanks to the Toronto Photography Seminar; especially Thy Phu and Linda Steer; to Ann Cvetkovich, who first got me started on thinking about feeling as an analytic category; and to Jaipreet Virda, whose research assistance for this article has been very helpful.
- 2 The quote is from a letter de Meyer wrote to Alfred Stieglitz in 1940, located in the Stieglitz Archive, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, Yale University and quoted in Anne Ehrenkranz, "A Singular Elegance," 1994, p. 13. The biographical information about de Meyer is drawn from Ehrenkranz's essay, as well as from Philippe Julian, "De Meyer," in Robert Brandau, ed., *De Meyer* (1976); Nancy Hall-Duncan, *The History Of Fashion Photography* (1979), pp. 32–43; and Arthur Ollman, *The Model Wife* (1999) (Ollman draws heavily on the Ehrenkranz essay of 1994).
- 3 The pun references both Maurice Maeterlinck's 1893 play and Claude Debussy's 1902 opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), central artifacts of the European Symbolists. See Caroline Seebohm, *The Man Who Was Vogue*, p. 194.
- 4 For useful insights into the changing nature of magazine publishing in these years, see Jennifer Scanlon (1995) and Ellen G. Garvey (1996).
- 5 See Ehrenkranz, "A Singular Elegance," p. 37, for the claim that "not until 1917 did fashion photography appear in *Vogue* as a distinct genre" and the dubious claim that "De Meyer hit his stride at *Vogue* early in 1914," p. 39, for which I've found little evidence; Ehrenkranz does not provide references for her assertions. Referencing Ehrenkranz, Arthur Ollman writes, incorrectly I would argue, based upon looking through the magazine, that "from 1913–1922 he worked as a staff photographer for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*" in Ollman, *The Model Wife*, p. 37. I think these errors stem from Ehrenkranz's reading of Seebohm's biography of Nast. Seebohm argues that Nast

hired de Meyer as a staff photographer, but she does not mention 1913 as the date of contract (Seebohm, *The Man Who Was Vogue*, 195). Seebohm had access to the Condé Nast family for her biography. According to Cynthia Cathcart, Director of Library and Information Services at Condé Nast Publications in New York, there is next to no archival material extant from these years.

- 6 The quote is from "Versatility is the First Principle of Decoration," *Vogue* August 1, 1917, pp. 46–47.
- 7 Quote is from Ehrenkranz, "A Singular Elegance," p. 40.
- 8 Quote from October 3, 1919, reviews microfilm roll 1917/1918–1919/1920, Robinson Locke Collection of Theatrical Scrapbooks, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, NYC.
- 9 The only witnesses to the 1923 wedding of the Wilkinsons were the very well-known Greenwich Village bohemians and political activists Doris Stevens (a suffragist and feminist who was famously arrested for picketing Wilson's White House) and her husband Dudley Field Malone, a left lawyer and Democratic party activist. There is some suggestion that Dolores shared the left politics of her wedding witnesses; during the Second World War she was arrested by the German government for her work in the French resistance, and kept in prison until France was liberated in 1944. She led a very private life with close friends drawn from bohemian circles; she had no children. Obituary, *New York Times*, p. 44, Nov. 20, 1975; clippings, Dolores file, BRTC; "W.T. Wilkinson Weds American 'Dolores,'" *New York Times*, May 15, 1923, p. 19; Doris Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920).
- 10 Miss Jeanne Eagels, *Vogue*, May 1, 1917, p. 54.

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