

Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: Performance and Male Impersonation in Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

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In Malinda Lo's novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021), Lily Hu's journey of self-discovery and exploration of her sexuality is intricately woven into the fabric of various performances she both witnesses and participates in. The novel begins with Lily at San Francisco's Miss Chinatown Contest, where she feels a stark contrast between her own discomfort and the enjoyment of those around her. This discomfort signals Lily's internal struggle with the gender and sexual norms imposed on her. Through Lo's narrative, performances serve as pivotal moments for Lily, acting as catalysts that push her to question and understand her identity. The portrayal of male impersonator Tommy Andrews is particularly significant, as it not only highlights the historical context of gender performance but also prompts Lily's awakening to her own desires. Through interactions with Tommy and experiences at the Telegraph Club, Lily begins to embrace her true self, challenging societal expectations. Lo uses performances as a means to reveal Lily's inner conflict and ultimate acceptance of her sexuality, drawing connections to historical instances of gender nonconformity and the broader implications of these performances in shaping individual and collective identities.

When we are first introduced to Lily at age thirteen, she is watching the 1950 Miss Chinatown Contest with her family and peers. While observing these idealized Chinese American women perform for their audience, one contestant glances "back over her shoulder coquettishly" (6), much to the delight of the male viewers. Lily finds herself unable to watch the proceedings with the same delight as those surrounding her. She doesn't understand what it is about this performance of femininity that makes her avert her eyes like "she shouldn't be caught looking at those girls" (6), when men sitting nearby have no issues studying the contestants lewdly and Lily's best friend Shirley is easily able to choose a favorite contestant of her own. Others feel comfortable with these women flaunting their femininity for the world to see, since Chinese American women of this time and place were expected to present themselves in a certain way.

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However, for Lily, something about this celebration of gender norms makes her uncomfortable, alerting the reader to Lily's own internal struggle with her gender and sexuality.

In her work *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage*, Gillian Rodger discusses how attitudes towards gender shifted in the late nineteenth century, and suddenly both women and men were encouraged to stay within their own separate spheres. American men encouraged the idea of separate spheres because it allowed them to not have to compete for jobs with women, since there was already anxiety surrounding competing with recent immigrants to America for jobs that paid well enough to allow men to provide for their families. Meanwhile, middle-class women were encouraged to—and did—want a husband with a job that allowed them to stay at home to care for the family, as this also was a sign of wealth (Rodger 169–172). While *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is set a bit later than Rodger's work covers, this information still helps explain why performances emphasizing and celebrating femininity, such as the Miss Chinatown Contest, were a fun community pastime. But, unlike the other residents of Chinatown, this performance isn't to Lily's taste, as the pageant makes her question "what a Chinese girl should look like" (9). This pageant is the first indication the reader gets that Lily doesn't quite feel comfortable in the sphere she's been assigned to due to her sex at birth. That she makes this discovery at a performance is also very important, since the reader will soon learn the importance of performances in Lily coming to understand not only her sexuality but also how she can still be a feminine woman without having to conform to the gender norms society expects her to.

As Lily ages, she continues to follow the path that is expected of her. However, one day Lily sees an advertisement that sparks feelings within her reminiscent of how she felt watching the Miss Chinatown Contest many years ago, but more sexually charged. When Lily's friend Shirley urges Lily to look at her family restaurant's advertisement in the local paper, it isn't the simple restaurant ad that catches Lily's eye. Instead, it is "a relatively large ad that included a photo of a person who looked like a handsome man with his hair slicked back, dressed in a tuxedo" (16). This is the first time Lily becomes aware of Tommy Andrews, a male impersonator, and just the sight of the performer's photo causes "[s]omething [to go] still inside Lily, as if her heart had taken a breath before it continued beating" (16). Lily is completely captured by this male impersonator, and the reader soon learns that this isn't the first time Lily has found herself drawn to pictures of women not conforming to the gender norms of the time.

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Lily also ripped out a picture of Katherine Hepburn from a magazine because Lily was drawn to the “confidence in [Katherine’s] expression, a hint of masculine attitude in her shoulders” (22). These unabashedly masculine women, Tommy Andrews and Katherine Hepburn, exude a confidence that Lily can’t take her eyes from, while the easy femininity of the contestants of the Miss Chinatown Contest had caused Lily to turn away. And though Lily “couldn’t put into words why she had gathered these photos” (23), she couldn’t help herself from looking “and, by looking, to know” (23). If Lily keeps looking, maybe she can finally learn what she finds so compelling about these photos and, in turn, learn more about herself and her own feelings.

Lily is not the first, nor will she be the last, woman to long for the freedom and confidence that came with being male. In his work *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, Peter Boag discusses Sammy Williams, who died in Manhattan in 1908 at the age of 80. Williams was a respected man in the community, so when the coroner came back to tell the town that Williams was actually a woman, the locals were shocked (31). Williams had never married and never had female companionship as far as the community knew, begging the question of why Williams chose to disguise herself as a man. It could be that she was what was then called a “sexual invert,” or she could have chosen to portray herself as a man for the freedoms being a man offered her (Boag 29-39). Being a woman living alone and single during Williams’s time would have been considered odd, but men could live as bachelors with no one blinking an eye. Considering those circumstances, it’s no surprise that Williams chose to cross-dress in order to live a life without scrutiny.

When Lily finally has the chance to go to the Telegraph Club herself to see Tommy Andrews perform live, she is introduced to a whole new world. When Lily first arrives at the Telegraph Club, the bouncer at the door looks like a man to Lily at first until she quickly realizes that it’s a woman. While Lily had noticed women like this before as “they had drawn her eye magnetically” (143), she is taken with how, in the context of the Telegraph Club, it is “natural, and even expected” (143) for women to dress closer to men than women. In her work *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, Nan Alamilla Boyd talks about the rise of gay and lesbian bars in San Francisco after Prohibition and how police officers who would routinely check on these bars couldn’t tell which of the performers “were the men and which were the women” (68). These clubs and bars were places where both lesbians and gays felt free to be themselves, and now Lily is witnessing this freedom for herself. While it might seem unnatural to Lily’s

Chinatown peers, for Lily, seeing these people in their element starts to help her understand her own feelings and sexuality.

When Lily finally sees Tommy Andrews perform, everything changes for her. When Tommy Andrews takes the stage to perform a popular song of the time, “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered,” Lily is faced with Tommy’s “physicality. The way [Tommy] stood, the way she moved – her swagger – so like a man and yet . . . [i]t was that yet that made Lily’s skin flush warm” (146). Tommy didn’t change any of the lyrics to the song she was performing, so she was singing “to an unnamed ‘him’ while dressed as a man” (146). This engaged the audience. They loved Tommy, and Tommy seemed to love them back. Seeing all of this made Lily feel “as if all of [her] most secret desires had been laid bare onstage” (146). Lily is realizing her secret desires aren’t so secret for some. Seeing Tommy now is sparking something inside of Lily that she hadn’t yet given the chance to grow. Lily “didn’t want Tommy ever to stop” (146), because this performance has given her the chance to unashamedly acknowledge that this is why she doesn’t feel comfortable in the sphere she was born into. She belongs in a different sphere; she belongs here at the Telegraph Club with all the women living their truths, who look at Tommy without fear of showing their enjoyment or admiration. This moment, watching Tommy Andrews perform, is a catalyst for Lily, and moving forward she will find it harder and harder to hide the truth of her sexuality from her family and friends. Most importantly, this is when Lily can start to explore her budding feelings for Kath.

Tommy’s first performance is also a beautiful nod from author Malinda Lo to the history of male impersonation itself. As explained by Rodger in *Just One of the Boys*, “by the early twentieth century, male impersonation had become a novelty” (169). This would explain the general appeal of Tommy’s act. Men with their wives seem to enjoy seeking out the excitement of a male impersonator, especially if they are tourists visiting San Francisco. Boyd explains in her work how San Francisco had always been considered more open and free than other cities in America. This allowed gay and lesbian clubs to flourish in part due to the tourism they attracted. The first lesbian nightclub opened in San Francisco, Mona’s, was listed in magazines that advertised to tourists who were looking for something a little more scandalous to do on their travels (Boyd 68–73). While male impersonation itself is dwindling in popularity by the time Tommy takes the stage in 1954, San Francisco is still a place where she can perform, thanks to the tourism that gay nightclubs in the city attracted. Tommy’s performance itself is based on real male

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impersonators such as Annie Hindle, who was the first male impersonator to take the American stage in the nineteenth century (Rodger, “Annie Hindle”). The reader can also catch glimpses of Gladys Bentley in Tommy’s dress and swagger, who did perform at Mona’s in the 1940s after she had moved to San Francisco. After WWII, San Francisco’s gay nightclub scene exploded in popularity, allowing Bentley’s popularity to rise in San Francisco (*Drag King History*). Like Tommy, Bentley was incredibly popular and relevant in San Francisco because the unique gay scene in the city allowed their acts to flourish. Tommy also highlights the importance of seeing yourself represented on stage. Seeing Tommy helps Lily find her truth, and historical male impersonators such as Hindle and Bentley pushing gender stereotypes onstage helped countless others find themselves. While performances have an important role in Lo’s novel, we must remember that they also play an important role historically.

When Lily next sees a performance, it isn’t at the Telegraph Club, but witnessing this performance once again causes Lily to question her sexuality. This time, Lily is watching ballet dancers perform in her school’s Christmas pageant. After seeing Tommy Andrews at the Telegraph Club, Lily finds herself “newly aware of what she was watching” (217). When teenage boys sitting near Lily whistle and call out lewdly to the ballerinas, Lily finds herself questioning the “difference between those boys’ whistles and what she had been thinking” when watching the dancers herself (217). She knows in her heart that she isn’t being disrespectful like those boys, but she also knows that what she is feeling when watching the ballerinas is closer to the feelings of those boys than it is to Shirley’s, who is watching the dance performance beside her. Lily can’t help but think of the Telegraph Club and Kath in this moment, since, if she were sitting in the audience there, she wouldn’t have to feel ashamed of admiring the ballet dancers or hide her blushes in the dark auditorium. The Telegraph Club gives Lily the freedom to explore her sexuality within its bounds, but Lily doesn’t yet feel comfortable doing that exploration outside the Telegraph Club.

The next time Tommy helps Lily explore her sexuality isn’t when performing, but instead when the two have a brief moment alone at Tommy’s home. Lily and Kath are invited together to Tommy’s home for a party after a night at the Telegraph Club. It’s at Tommy’s home that Lily first comes face to face with the idea of two women living together as a couple. When Lily snoops in Tommy and her partner Lana’s room, she is suddenly caught by Tommy. When Tommy

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confronts Lily, she feels “as if Tommy [was] onstage again” (258). Tommy is once again performing for her audience, Lily, “a performance that [Tommy] had slipped into effortlessly, like water” (258). Even alone, Lily sees her interaction with Tommy as a performance on Tommy’s part, and this performance makes Lily come face to face with her feelings for Kath. Tommy referring to Kath as Lily’s girlfriend allows Lily to confront her feelings because when she tries to tell Tommy Kath isn’t her girlfriend, it makes Lily feel like “she had betrayed Kath” (259). It is right after this confrontation with Tommy that Lily and Kath finally share their first kiss, a tender moment that allows the reader to cheer with delight. Watching Tommy’s performances allows Lily to open her heart not only to the truth of herself but also to Kath.

In *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* Malinda Lo masterfully uses the theme of performance to navigate Lily Hu’s journey of self-discovery and acceptance of her sexuality. From the discomfort Lily feels at the Miss Chinatown Contest to the profound impact of witnessing Tommy Andrews’s male impersonation act, performances are pivotal in Lily’s realization of her true self. These moments not only highlight her internal struggle but also provide a space where she can safely explore her identity away from societal expectations. The historical context provided by figures like Annie Hindle and Gladys Bentley enriches the narrative, connecting Lily’s personal journey to a broader history of gender nonconformity. Through the lens of these performances, Lo emphasizes the importance of representation and visibility in the process of self-acceptance. Ultimately, Lily’s experiences at the Telegraph Club and her interactions with Tommy Andrews illustrate how performances can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth and the embracing of one’s identity. In a way, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is Malinda Lo performing for her readers, especially her lesbian and bisexual adolescent readers, providing for us opportunities to determine how we as readers feel about gender expectations, about femininity and masculinity, about confident identity, and about finding a community.

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