Normative drag culture and the making of precarity

Fenton Litwiller

Published online: 06 Aug 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 4497

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Normative drag culture and the making of precarity

Fenton Litwiller

Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

ABSTRACT

Foundational scholars delimit drag performance as imprecise and exaggerated imitations of masculinities or femininities in a public forum, usually clubs or bars. The purpose of this paper is to show the ways that performativity operates within a normative (i.e., heavily policed, binary oriented) drag culture (i.e., Kings and Queens). I articulate how the discursive production of gender performance is relational and creates fleeting moments of hegemonic rupture, but, this leisure practice, as with all leisure practices, is both enacted by agentic bodies and heavily informed by the cultural scripts of binary oriented gender. Within this particular drag community, I show how the practice of gender subversive drag has been culturally seized as a weapon of transphobia.

"A couple of Queens had made comments that Kings were showing their tape and that it ruined the illusion. And then everybody got into it on Facebook, and there was this big back and forth of vague Facebook statuses that were made. I just stayed out of it cause I was like 'I'm not going anywhere near that.' You don't need to put it on social networking like Facebook where everyone sees it and then questions themselves and questions what they're going to do". (Pretty Boi)

"All this gender-bending and gender fuck and everything are, whether they're accepted or not, they're I think a challenge to those socialised norms within the drag community just as much as trans people initially, or genderqueer or gender non-conforming adults in the non-drag community do on a daily basis". (Divine)

Introduction

Foundational scholars who wrote about drag King and Queen performance delimit these queer acts as imprecise and exaggerated imitations of masculinities or femininities that take place in a public forum, usually in clubs or bars (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). For individuals who are assigned female at birth[1] (AFAB) or assigned male at birth (AMAB), drag has traditionally been and can continue to be, a context to perform an oppositional gender (Murray, 1994) through acts of illusion that insist the outward appearance does not align with the inner self and body (Newton, 1979).

However, many drag contexts challenge these aforementioned binary presentations of drag. Some examples include the offensively named 'bioqueens' (cisgender[2] women who claim to be 'real' women and perform as drag Queens), transgender[3] or genderqueer people performing as Queens or Kings, and transgender, genderqueer and cisgender people performing genderfuck (e.g., using sparkly beards to queer masculinity, or a combination of beards and skirts). Drag artists perform renditions of gender that have multiple and varied meanings for the artist and audience (Rupp et al., 2010). For example, Halberstam (1997) writes of the drag King performer who:

---

can be male or female; she can be transgender; she can be butch or femme. The drag king might make no distinction between her off-stage and on-stage persona, or she may make an absolute distinction; she may say that on- and off-stage personae bleed into each other in unpredictable and even uncontrollable ways. The drag king may be extremely self-conscious about her performance and may have elaborate justifications and theories about what she is doing, or she may just think of her act as "having fun" and make no further claims for it. (p. 104)

Within the performance, gender categories of the everyday are challenged by artists who intentionally sculpt a gender and production that creates gender difference. To further explain, the drag artist, by producing a gender expression (e.g., dress, mannerisms) that does not match what is expected, contests the notion that several axes of gender, including sex assigned at birth, gender expression, gender identity, and sexuality are congruent (e.g., at once assigned female at birth, with feminine expression, identify as a woman and heterosexual). In fact, as Butler (1990) notes, the reason why audiences take so much pleasure and joy in consuming all types of drag is that the performance illuminates quite clearly that the everyday normative gender framework is shown to be fabricated. A drag artist shows the axes not in alignment, and as such, they are made to be visible (e.g., at once assigned female at birth, with masculine expression, identify as nonbinary and queer). As such, drag performance is an embodied practice, an act that often succeeds at contesting the natural boundedness of culturally understood everyday gender through the deviance of body presentation and behaviour and by playing with binary oriented conformity (Hanson, 2007). Many renditions of drag (e.g., white drag Kings) rupture and differentiate the axis of gender because the imitative gender performance is theatrical, slightly imperfect, and campy (or so extreme as to be amusing) in ways that intentionally mock the gender framework (Moore, 2013). As Halberstam (1998) explains, in everyday culture, cisgender male identity and masculine expression are ultimately fused and heavily policed to remain unseen through violence and harassment – and this is what makes all types of drag subversive. Rupp et al. (2010) also maintain that Queen and King culture trouble hegemonic gender, sexuality and desire. For example, Queens challenge hegemonic masculinity through their expressions of femininity, and Kings through their presentation of gender fluidity and non-normative gender. However, the performed body signifies deviance or conformity according to local cultural scripts of how to interpret a particular body's expression of gender. In this way, Hoogland (2002) suggests that bodies are 'plastic' because social norms of gender fluctuate, and signifiers are temporally and geographically understood. Further, scholars point out that, in addition to being a subversive or conformist gender practice, drag performance can perpetuate oppressions such as misogyny and racism (e.g., McNeal, 1999)

In what follows, I observe the productivity of Butler's (1990) gender framework by focusing on how the artists in one particular drag context sculpt performance and everyday gender through micro-interactions in the leisure sphere. As Butler (1990) notes, any attempt to create new possibilities for gender is always informed by culture. My purpose with this paper, therefore, is to work through how a specific drag culture is both deviant and conformist, subversive and oppressive, in particular, how this drag culture actively marginalises members of their queer community.

Background

Everyday gender and drag performance

Judith Butler (1990) suggests that gender is performative; that is, gender is not something that one 'is,' rather, it is an identity that one 'does.' This doing is enacted through expression and acts of repetition that work together to produce certain realities (i.e., read by observers as male or female). We enter this cyclically produced gender framework at birth already acted upon; we are the effects, rather than the causes, of discourse (Butler, 1990). Nelson (1999) outlines that Butler's most important theoretical contribution is the unpacking of what appears to be natural, illustrating

that gender is fictive and 'something that is *done over and over* instead of something that is an *inherent* characteristic' (p. 339).

For everyday gender, 'acting and then becoming' does not necessarily preclude choice, but agency occurs almost accidentally and spontaneously, without fully knowing how gender acts upon us. Personal choice is negotiated from within the confines of social norms that encourage accurate imitations of an acceptable gender (Butler, 2004). Related to this point, scholars have critiqued Butler's ontology of this supposedly agentless subject, meaning that performativity described as repetitive imitation denotes a framework somewhat frozen in time, with discursive effects of imposed identity-making and an entirely abstracted subject (for example, isolated from one's context, personal history, or desire). By emphasising repetition as how identity is assured, Nelson (1999) claims that Butler (1990) sets up an inescapable dichotomy between the fully autonomous subject capable of conscious action and discourses of sex and gender that are so ultimately compelling they seem to be inescapable. Therefore, to find intentional ruptures and change, we must move beyond an unrelenting framework that works on unconscious doing subjects. As such, rather than describing the productivity of the gender framework through repetition, we can insist that gender is performed relationally.

All drag performances are understood within the particular context in which they are practiced and against contextual rules that create boundedness for the performance. The felt experience of the performer, therefore, is made possible by the social response and meaning-making of the audience (Hanson, 2007). Drag performers and drag performances are interpreted based on the embodied difference between read sex assigned at birth and gender expression through the minutiae of the 'perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical' (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 9). For many audiences that consume drag, there is desire, attraction, and a physical thirst for these non-normative gender expressions and identities. Drag performers who can illustrate the fictive nature of normative gender by mocking the gender framework are often granted a celebrity-like status (Rupp et al., 2010).

Drag culture and performance

Despite the diverse ways that drag can be expressed, much of scholarly literature has explicitly focused on King and Queen's performance and culture. In their extensive study of Key West drag culture in the early 2000's Rupp et al. (2010) stated that before performing drag, most Queens were cisgender men already engaged in effeminate behaviour in their everyday lives and claimed a gay identity. Drag performance was an opportunity to express amplified femininity that was stigmatised in the everyday, and a way to pursue same-sex attention in a performance setting. Within the performance itself, although Queens were hyper-feminine, they never tried to pass as female, constantly articulating their gay and male positionality by joking about their 'large clitorises' and speaking in their everyday and masculine-sounding voices. The stated appeal of the performance was to work deliberately to elicit erotic desire, where perhaps there was none before, in both gay and straight men, by touching or fondling audience members. One artist articulates this as intentionally breaking down the barriers of labels: "as Milla put it, 'we are attractive to everybody. We have taken gender and thrown it out of the way, and we've crossed a bridge here. And when we are all up there, there is no gay/straight or anything'" (Rupp et al., 2010, p. 289).

In contrast, these same scholars show that while many Kings had a masculine identity (e.g., butch) before performing in a drag troupe, the performance often influenced self-understandings. King performances, music choices, and movement were also more likely to be intentionally shaped by feminism and queer theory, prioritising presentations of the fluidity and non-normativity of gender rather than necessarily presenting hyper-masculinity. The attraction to perform as a King was often to seek out queer community, spend time with friends who were already Kinging, and for the allure of the performance itself (Rupp et al., 2010).

Other scholars who have studied drag culture have shown that Kings felt sexually attractive and confident, and accessed masculine parts of the self or embodied masculinity and aggression in ways that were empowering and then spilled over into everyday life (Halberstam, 1997; Hanson, 2007; Shapiro, 2007). Previous work has also shown that while both Kings and Queens act to provoke desire and fantasy in audience members, Queens often endorsed a literal 'hands-on' entitlement to the attention of the crowd. In contrast, Kings cultivated audience desire through more indirect elicitation, such as eye contact and dance moves (Horowitz, 2013). Both cultures work to elicit queer cravings within queer and straight-identified audience members through entertainment spectacles.

However, despite the clear role that erotic desire plays in the performance-audience relationship, the intentional mockery of normative gender is often overwhelmingly central. For example, some AFAB drag King performers who medically, legally, and socially transitioned to a male identity stopped doing drag because they feel like they were making fun of themselves by performing as a drag King (Berbary & Johnson, 2016). However, there is more to drag than a deep desire to make a mockery of gender for its own sake. As I will illustrate throughout this paper, insisting that drag is only a mockery of gender has some problematic implications. For example, the act of a cisgender woman performing masculine drag, cannot, and must not, solely be a mockery of gender because it contests what Butler (1990) has so carefully shown to be an assumed natural order. As Hanson (2007) states, 'female embodied masculinity should be regarded to be as equally "real" as any other embod[iment]' (p. 79). Female masculinity in the drag context may be seen as a mockery of gender because female or genderqueer masculinities in the everyday performance of gender is often 'framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing' (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1). The drag context, therefore, must be an opportunity to create and express equally real versions of gender if it is to destabilise everyday gender. Any performance, however, must be both informed by, and contest, cultural scripts of gender. For example, were

> drag Kings to . . . completely repudiate Western culture's and their own reality of what it means to be a female in our society, there would be no tension . . . and 'without tension, there would be [none of Butler's] pleasure' – hence, the tantalizing paradox of the experience and meaningfulness of drag embodiment as both conformist and subversive. (Cavallaro & Warwick, 1998, p. 95)

Drag performance as agency and oppression

Scholars have revealed drag to be a potential site of intentional political activism and resistance through visible representations of subversive and queer genders that challenge normativity through the spectacle of queer desire (Barnett & Johnson, 2013; Shapiro, 2007). Drag can also be an opportunity to call out misogyny, patriarchy, and racism through audience-performer dialogue (Rupp et al., 2010). Performance and drag culture, however, are not necessarily activist-oriented (Horowitz, 2013). As Butler (1990) notes, it should not be news that any attempt to rewrite gender norms risks reifying the naturalised framework and oppressions. For example, drag Queens can provoke laughter at what society mocks them for, namely their sexuality and feminine gender expression. However, this production of humour, claims McNeal (1999) in his psychoanalytic analysis, is a thinly disguised self-hate that manifests as misogyny. This scholar proposes that the anger of experiencing harassment for feminine expression in everyday life is then channelled on stage through exaggerated femininity, coupled with misogyny, through a cathartic group experience. Berbary and Johnson (2016) eloquently point this out in their interviews with drag Kings and Queens:

> A common complaint that the drag Kings had was that drag Queens performed femininity and expected the privileges that came with femininity – such as being told they were beautiful, being called she, getting appreciation for their style—yet Queens simultaneously also still expected male privileges and maintained

masculine privilege such as using space, intimidation, misogyny, and patriarchy to lay claim to drag stages, notoriety, and social and economic capital. (p.312)

Clear from above is that drag performance and drag culture are productive in many ways, including social change and hegemonic continuity. For example, drag performance can be a narrowly conceived gender expression that is heavily surveilled. This influences how drag bodies are sculpted, the environment within which the performance takes place, the artist-audience relationship, and everyday gender.

In this paper, I show the productivity of Butler's performativity within a particular drag culture, noting the limitations of performativity as repetition. As Nelson (1999) writes: 'human subjects, located in time and space, do identities in much more complex ways than performativity allows' (p. 348), including through actions of agency and reification. Horowitz (2013) calls on scholars to trouble performativity as an iterative production and suggests instead to frame how performativity operates relationally, mainly through the central role of desire. A relationally based performativity allows me to explore the discursive effect of performativity with knowing subjects who create contextualised meaning from their experiences. As such, within the analysis I work to understand the individuals who participated in this study as knowers and agents within the production of the performance, as situated subjects who articulate normative and subversive identities, perhaps simultaneously, as well as break down and perpetuate oppressions. In particular, my purpose here is to extend the scholarly conversation on drag performance to include an interrogation of how transphobia, trans exclusion and cisgender privilege function within normative drag culture.

Methods and methodology

I used poststructuralism (Denzin, 1997) to frame the research and analysis of discourses of drag performance within one Canadian drag community. For Butler (1990), discourse creates the regulatory frame for gender and the subsequent recognisable embodiment of a worthwhile and worthy person. Within this analysis, locating the materiality of power as relational rather than inherently structural allows for the acceptance of the existence of multiple discourses and the subsequent interrogation of how they might work, facilitating nuanced discussion and insight. For example, this lens allows me to challenge normative assumptions around everyday gender as either/or and the social investment, (re)production, and contestation of this binary discourse in drag culture and performance.

The drag institution I studied is particular to one city and was described by my interviewees as predominately under forty, white, and middle class. Through a convenience style of sampling, I interviewed artists and community members associated with a drag mentorship project. Five individuals, for whom I provide pseudonyms, participated in a single interview: Dolly Hardon and Divine (white cisgender gay men with over five years of drag queen performance experience each); Sham Payne (person of colour) and Pretty Boi (white), both genderqueer drag King performers with two and five years of drag performance experience each; and Sarah (white transgender woman with no drag experience), a community member who insisted on being interviewed because she heard about the project and wanted to voice her critical perspective. My positionality includes that I am a middle-aged white genderqueer researcher with a short history in drag King performance.

All artists participated in either face to face or over the phone semi-structured interviews between one hour and 90 minutes that were digitally audio recorded. Participants responded to an interview guide that used open-ended questions and a conversation style to strive for in-depth storytelling. I produced the interview guide with the express purpose of helping all of us reflect critically on the local drag performance and drag culture. I asked, why and how did you participate in drag performance and drag culture? What did this performance mean to you and the audience members? How is drag political? Apolitical?

The interviews were a collaborative dialogue with participants, and I freely shared my musings and observations. I asked participants for their responses to my thoughts and experiences as a way to increase the trustworthiness of the data and create a reflexive practice. Within this reflexive practise was an opportunity to alter or sustain discourses of drag or engage in agency and reproduction (Alcoff, 1988). Each interview, therefore, was a joint production of stories, incidences, and contemplations

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and uploaded into the data analysis software Nvivo 11 and reread several times. I then used a systematic method of critical thematic analysis (CTA) to examine the interrelationships between interview talk, social practices, power relations, and Butler's discourse. Lawless and Chen (2019) propose CTA as an extension of Owen's (1984) interpretive thematic analysis, which searches the transcripts for recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness and what the interviewee identifies as important or salient. Lawless and Chen also encourage a critical reading of interview data that asks why and how codes are recurrent, repeating, and forceful. In short, why is such a thing said, and what is its usefulness? That is, how is what is said productive in ways that are connected to discourse? How does it reproduce and challenge social inequalities? In practice, Step 1 included open coding that stayed close to the transcripts, and I was guided by paying close attention to what the interviewee identified as meaningful in ways that added social insight to the already existing literature. Step 2 included linking the interview talk with the productivity of the everyday gender framework in producing this local normative drag culture.

As human subjectivities are diverse, I did not seek to represent a cohesive narrative of the data. Instead, I worked to undertake an analysis and representation that would move the conversation about drag and drag performance in new directions. Although many of my interviews spoke passionately and insisted on the import of their words, it is I, in the end, who gave weight and presence to the themes below. Within this paradigmatic stance, I must outline a scope of validity that does not inherently rely on confirming the existence of a singular notion of truth (Lather, 1993), but undertake what Woolgar (1988) calls a 'reflexive exploration.' Rather than this work being validified, it is legitimised by its contribution to 'an "unjam-ming" effect in relation to the closed truths of the past, thereby freeing up the present for new forms of thought and practice' (Bennett, 1990, p. 277). It is with this in mind that I present the findings as a way to extend the conversation and ways of thinking about drag culture and performance.

Findings

Below I argue that this particular drag culture is normative, not necessarily due to the emphasis on binary oriented drag performance (i.e., heavily sculpted King and Queen performance), but the insistence on narrow versions of gender performance to the exclusion of artists who did not conform. Conformity was enforced by Queens who had the most cultural capital (i.e., the ones who got the most gigs, won the most prizes, and held positions in the Imperial Court System – an annual competition whose winner(s) are the face of the local drag scene and fundraise for local organisations). These Queens were consistently asked to judge drag performances and openly shared their opinions on the local drag performance Facebook page. Their opinions mattered, their style of drag emulated (but not too closely), and they influenced an artist's ability to get future gigs at local bars and events. Below I articulate how this drag culture facilitates normativity through a relational drag practice, the implications for drag culture and everyday gender (e.g., transmiso-gyny), and how straight culture consumes and realises this normativity.

Drag as a normative relational practice

Within this community, the satirical illusion of performance was an opportunity to get attention through an amplified presentation of the feminine or masculine. We: 'take that epitome of what it is supposed to be a woman and try to shine a very bright light on it in a way' (Divine). Divine

recognised the purpose of this illusion as predominately for amusement: 'I would view it more as entertainment than pushing any kind of gender boundaries or societal norms.' The goal of the artists in this particular drag community was to create an imitation or parody of gender as a Queen or King on stage:

> all my impersonations are called 'esque' because I don't look like Marilyn Munroe, but if you have the blond hair and the pink dress, you're Marilyn right. I do Dolly, but I don't look like Dolly Parton, but if you've got big boobs and big hair, you're Dolly (Dolly Hardon).

and

> If I just kind of look like Elvis and I'm performing an Elvis song, the audience is immediately already caught up in Elvis so I can wiggle my hips a little bit, and it's fine, and people are going to lose their minds. It's not about me, it's about Elvis (Sham Payne).

While these characters were 'esque,' that is they were a likeness but not really Dolly or Elvis, there were still unspoken and openly policed rules of behaviour about how this gender mismatch can materialise. Queens 'look for polish; you know, are your arms shaved? You better have nails on. If you have [on] open-toed shoes and pantyhose, I'm throwing my drink at you' (Dolly Hardon). Artists paid 'attention to detail, built a brand,' and if perfection could not be achieved, 'I'm staying the hell home' (Dolly Hardon). The code of practice included the expectation that drag Queens will perform late, even on weekdays, consume alcohol and drugs, use the common vernacular (e.g., hey girl!) and adhere to perfection:

> there is this social expectation within the gay community, or the queer community that drag Queens will present as these hyper-feminized women, and as soon as you see a drag Queen who gets up and is a little clumsy or is a little more masculine, you clock them right away for it because they're not draggy enough, they're not feminine enough. So, I think we almost perpetuated in and of ourselves. God forbid you don't wear boobs, or you wear flat shoes, or you have short hair. There are these internalized expectations within the drag community of what drag expression is or what the gender expression for a drag Queen is (Divine).

Kings were also held to specific standards of performance and expression. At judged events where Kings and Queens performed in the same venue, there was little tolerance for playing with, bending, or restyling the artistry. At one such event, 'a couple of Queens had made comments that Kings were showing their tape [that was used to bind their breasts] and said that it ruined the illusion' (Pretty Boi). Previous research shows that King cultures typically have more flexibility around performing many forms of masculine genders (Rupp et al., 2010) and there is a similar sentiment in this particular locale, where Kings are beginning to flagrantly play with the illusion, by intentionally opening up shirts to show tape. However, the Queens in this community responded negatively to visible tape because they are 'holding tighter to the [King and Queen] gender binary' (Pretty Boi) and 'there's this perpetuation of what a King is and that drag has to be a certain way' (Sham Payne). This need for the perfect illusion infuses all aspects of presentation, especially make-up application. In my interview with Dolly Hardon, we were planning a session to show young queer people how to do drag make up, in particular, discussing how to paint one face as a demo. I offered to sit in on the session and have her do my face so that the youth could see the process as it unfolded, but she was quite reluctant. Finally, she agreed, on a condition that she so *very* carefully stated: 'just ... be shaved'. Her reluctance to paint my face stemmed from my everyday presentation of genderqueer-ness and hairy chin, a presentation that, if not dealt with, would not make for an easy, nor perfect, make up application. Divine articulated that the drag process necessarily begins with a so-called blank canvas:

> The first steps are removing all outward presentations of your existing gender; we're kind of starting from square one. You know we've all taped things down, backed things in, covered things over, and now we're all starting from this androgynous state and then we kind of go from there. So, I think we can relate [King and

> Queen] stories together in that way in that we all kind of de-drag ourselves from our normal gender presentations, and then we re-drag ourselves to go out and present.

Butler (1990) would contest this notion of a blank canvas as if the artist begins from nothing. She would insist that there is no place that culture does not reach, that there is no mind/body divide, no pause in the absorption of culture; there is only inscription on body-minds. This inscription means that what is typically thought of as our internal, private, and uninfluenced terrain, such as gender identity or inner character, is as much a cultural product as gender expression. This does not mean that gender identity is not visceral, experienced, or felt, but that the possibilities for what might be considered as transgressing gender, such as drag performance, are influenced by the pre-discursive limitations of the binary orientated gender framework. Drag Kinging and Queening, therefore, is both a subversive practice and identity, as well as necessarily limited in scope. In this community, it was an expectation that artists intentionally perform to a stylised binary perfection.

Other scholars have noted that drag relies on the exaggerated performance of either/or notions of masculinity or femininity on stage, leaving little room for the artists to play with non-binary forms of gender (e.g., genderfuck)(Barnett & Johnson, 2013). However, some drag communities celebrate the performance of many genders (Berbary & Johnson, 2016). In this particular community, normative drag occurred when cisgender women performed as Kings and cisgender men performed as Queens. Most importantly, these performances adhered to hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity, to the active exclusion of other productions of gender. The performance of other kinds of gender difference was, therefore, was quite noticeable:

> There's someone who is fairly new who came out for a pageant, and they were really incredible. They played femininity in a different way, like your sassy, not well put together drunk aunt, that was what it conjured up for me. So, it was during a pageant and one of the judges, you know when they did the thing around what are you looking to see in the Queens, one of the judges was like I just want to see a handbag, I love handbags, so if you've got something back there, bring it out. She didn't have a handbag with her but brought out her plastic grocery bag and sort of played on like yah this is what I've got. Her whole aesthetic wasn't that high glam (Sham Payne).

Although performing a gender difference that was 'incredible,' without receiving the accolades of the other Queens, being invited into the social circles of other drag performers, or put on the billfold of other gigs, performers that stray from norms make only a brief or occasional appearance on the scene. Having a drag mom (a mentor) plays a pivotal role in the success of Queens, but: 'I've heard some Queens say that they don't adopt someone unless they've won a title. It's like all my kids are titleholders' (Sham Payne).

Normative drag perpetuates transmisogyny and cisgender privilege

While drag performers often signal another gender that is different from their everyday gender, the performance of drag and being transgender or genderqueer were not the same thing, although, similar to what previous scholars have ascertained, some artists used drag as a space of self-exploration that culminated in transition to another everyday gender identity. In this community, transgender men who used drag as a way to explore gender identity and then socially, legally, and medically transitioned often decided to walk away from performance all together because they felt as though they were mocking themselves. Sarah outlined that if a transgender person should do drag in a gender that aligns with their gender identity (for example, a transgender woman performing as a drag Queen): 'talk about undermining our own message.' Because the goal of normative drag (that is, cisgender artists who perform an oppositional gender to the active exclusion of gender multiplicity) is to transgressively illuminate the axis of gender, Sarah shared that normative drag Queen performance and culture: 'doesn't include, trans women and it can't answer the question of what drag looks like for us that doesn't undermine our gender, doesn't re-establish us as men, doesn't provoke our own dysphoria,[4] profoundly.' Normative drag culture

seeks to make visible the axis of gender, to actively mock this visibility. However, for Sarah, *erasing* the visibility of sex assigned at birth, gender expression, and gender identity is to be recognisable as a cisgender woman, would allow her to live at the centre in her everyday life, and, for example, earn a living. Butler (2009) explains Sarah's lack of recognition, worthiness and personhood as precarity, a vulnerable non-existence that increases exposure to food and housing insecurity, physical injury, and even death.

Normative drag then is 'not a form that includes, trans women, and it's as much parodying us and perpetuating those things which marginalise us' (Sarah). Just as the drag Queens in Rupp et al. (2010) study who constantly joked about their large clitoris's, normative drag Queens actively mock the alignment of sex assigned at birth, gender expression, and gender identity, to show that multiple axes of gender exist, are imperfect, or queer. However, what this 'joke' also does is publicly proclaim that 'of course drag Queens are not real women because real women don't have penises.' But, some women and transgender women *do* have penises because sex organs do not determine gender (Kessler, 1998). This joke, therefore, is an act of cisgender privilege and transgender exclusion rather than just a mockery of the everyday gender framework. The then heralded drag artist gains social, cultural, and economic capital in the queer community and yet does not have to live in the same day to day microaggressions, physical violence, and turmoil of living at the margins as transwomen do: 'the privilege of drag is you already have your gender and your identity that's accepted and in place in the community' (Sarah). Normative drag culture, therefore, simultaneously unpacks and reinforces everyday gender normativity in ways that are not always benign. As Hanson (2007) notes, in the contestation of everyday binary identities, and within constructions of performance, it is just other rigid forms of gender that are produced. As such, the making and reproduction of these gender alternatives are not, as Butler (1990) explains, 'outside' of discourse, 'natural' or 'pre-discursive' and therefore cannot stand for truth or goodness. Despite this, normative Queens in this community had all the 'opportunities to be on stage' (Pretty Boi). Exclusion from this drag culture meant that one transgender community member had no access to the economic capital garnered from the performance, nor the endearment and sexualised response from the audience: 'and so it's another little side gig that a cisgender person can do and be cool and meanwhile I've got to fucking pay the price of admission, which I usually can't afford. That's the reality' (Sarah). Even when drag artists are explicitly activist within their performance, for example, choosing a song or story to perform with goals of social justice, the forces of social and economic capital worked to exclude the most marginalised queer citizens.

Drag race, straight culture, and the everyday performance of gender

Drag Queens have played and continue to play a visible role in bridging gay culture and the surrounding community, for example, through the annual pride parade. For some interviewees, there was the perception that the annual pride celebrations had recently become more inclusive of straight communities and families who are coming out to watch the pride parade. Many artists described this change and seemingly increased acceptance of drag as an opportunity to share queer culture, expand the horizons of the viewing audience, and garner acceptance: 'this integration is a good thing because it increases nonqueer identified people's exposure to another aspect of queer culture. You don't have to be gay to be intrigued by drag Queens' (Pretty Boi).

Artists attributed increased visibility to the success of RuPaul's Drag Race, which was credited with influencing broader cultural knowledge about and seeming acceptance of drag Queens. Drag Race has had the effect of inserting what was once a subculture into mainstream pop culture, with myriad consequences. Queens in this community felt more comfortable presenting their drag in public while engaging in day to day activities, like grocery shopping, because their gender was recognised and attributed star-like status. The increased exposure also influenced 'expectations around what these [straight] communities want to see [at pride]. And so, it's almost like the general

public's expectations keep pigeon-holing drag Queens to do the same thing' (Divine). These expectations have also intensified:

> When I first started, I look back at pictures of myself, and I was like, 'did I have any make-up on'? The extreme contouring, now the face has changed, the way it's applied. I used to be able to do my make-up in an hour. Now it's like an hour and a half because you got to, there's just more, and you're really painting outside the lines, and it's like the volume is turned up, cause I mean drag is like turning up the volume on femininity sky high and now it's like in hyper-space (Dolly Hardon).

Drag Race was viewed by participants to have influenced drag culture through a privileging of professionalised drag Queens; a heightened expectation of the performance of thin bodies and almost perfect, yet still campy, gender imitations. The show was seen to influence a cultural recognition of this type of drag as a particular kind of gender identity that all people who queer gender in the everyday (and not just in performance) should strive. For Sarah, this increased influence and visibility of the professionalised drag Queen included negative consequences of experiencing increased transmisogyny, the aggressive targeting of transgender femininity as vain and not real, through the bulk of the attention, fetishisation, and violence in the trans community (Serano, 2012):

> every Pride season, it gets more and more oppressive because that's when rural [people] come to the city to look at the queers. They all think I'm a drag Queen, and they all think I'm bad at it because I'm not high femme. I find my lack of attention to the details that would have me regarded as a cisgender woman is an obstacle to my inclusion among trans women my own age and this [queer] community, and I think that it comes very much from [drag] culture (Sarah).

Drag Race perpetuates the drag context as solely a mockery of the gender framework, through explicit and persistent, trans exclusion. For example, the show continually highlights the juxtaposition of performers in everyday dress and drag. Rupaul uses constant repetition to name the contestants as cisgender men to prove cisgender identities and show that drag is a performed identity that is oppositional to everyday presentation: 'gentlemen, start your engines . . . and may the best *woman* win' [emphasis added]) (Moore, 2013). The show has also further perpetuated Queens as natural leaders and spokespeople within and for the queer community, in part by explicitly excluding drag King performers from participating.

Drag is a particular gender presentation and identity that makes clear that gender expression, gender identity, and sex assigned at birth, are differentiated, yet beautifully and theatrically so. Post Drag Race, professionalised normative drag culture influences transgender women being read as is in drag (look at her large clitoris!), yet poorly performing. If there is a failure on the part of the transgender person to pass as cisgender, and also a failure to adhere to a gender perceived as drag, the transgender person is thus read as a failed drag artist rather than read as transgender or genderqueer because there is currently little cultural imagination for these identities. Therefore, the culturally understood identity of the drag artist becomes a mechanism through which transgender people are policed: 'people think that I am just a bad drag Queen' (Sarah). For Butler (1990), the pre-discursive effect of the gender framework is that the possibilities for transgender and genderqueer identities are influenced by the cultural imagination of the public and what it means to be read as having a gender expression that does not align with sex assigned at birth – it means you are a drag artist.

Conclusion

The distinction between performativity (i.e., culture) and performance (i.e., leisure) ceases to become useful when drag can be shown to both counter hegemony and have pre-discursive limits that impact performance and the everyday. As Horowitz (2013) states: 'simply put, I think that drag does far more identity work than an argument premised on the distinction between stage performance and the performance of everyday life can convey' (p. 311). This identity work is informed by

cultural scripts of gender, such as when artists hold each other rigidly accountable to professiona-lised and normative possibilities for drag by explicitly stating what is and is not, acceptable on Facebook posts, judged events, and in community talk. These then enforced rules of engagement sculpt how drag can successfully be performed. Horowitz (2013) also suggests that performativity is activated through cues or markers that are contextually meaningful: 'thus, one might be gay or masculine or genderqueer but only inasmuch as one does (agentizes) intra-actions that give meaning to gayness or masculinity or genderqueerness' (p. 320). Local cultural scripts thus inform the performance and, in this context, the labour invested in policing performances privileged cisgender men who were thin and performed as perfectly sculpted Queens. A relationally oriented gender framework allows for ruptures and change, even if only briefly, but these gender practices can only take hold if they are rewarded socially and economically by other artists, audience members, and the local queer community.

Drag performance as a leisure practise is sculpted by the micro-politics of a locale that determines how gender can be embodied in the everyday and on stage. The leisure space within which the drag performances occurred (queer bars) was ostensibly a safer space for all queer people to gather, build social ties, create community, express and be affirmed in gender and sexuality (Lewis & Johnson, 2011). However, scholars have argued that the gay bar mobilises only a certain kind of visibility and recognition of queer identities to the outside world and that the gay bar is used, coded, and experienced differently by various patron groups. As Skeggs (1999) showed, queer space was occupied by gay men to be noticed by other gay men, by white straight women *not* to be noticed by straight men, and by lesbian women, whose discomfort about the presence of straight women was noticeable. Taylor (2007) argued that the capitalist and commercialised space of the gay bar influenced social norms and acceptable appearances (the 'right' hair, the 'right' clothes) in ways that actively and subtlety excluded working-class lesbians, which denied them a sense of belonging. Lisa Duggan (2002) coined the term homonormativity to name these social norms of consumerism, individualism, and sexual relations that mirror heteronormativity (e.g., monogamy). Taken all together, Browne and Bakshi (2011) argue that the queer community is not a homogenous group that shares a singular experience at the bar. Nor are these communities 'characterized by an absence of power relations or social and political hierarchies. Instead, homonormativity can be read as structuring the relations amongst LGBT people, marginalizing certain groups and individuals' (p. 182). Therefore, there is no certainty in queer spaces that subversion will be present, even as scholars have articulated drag is inherently subversive (e.g., Rupp et al., 2010). As Butler (2011) states, 'there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (p. 125).

To conclude, even though my work and the work of other scholars show that drag is, in some cases, a journey to another identity, and historically drag performance has been an essential and safe venue for transgender and genderqueer people, I must be clear: to be in drag is not necessarily to be transgender or genderqueer and to be transgender is *not* to be in drag. However, there is a public imaginary influenced by Drag Race that associates transgender expressions and identities with professionalised notions of drag. Equating drag and transgender identities "misconstrues what gender expression is for many [trans] people in their everyday lives " (Sarah). In the everyday, there must be the possibility that imperfect or nonbinary gender expression is *not* intended to be a mockery of normative gender and that this expression should be considered a real gender identity – as real as any other binary oriented everyday or drag performance identity.

Drag performance is often an opportunity to counter hegemony, express joy about a gender identity that feels real, or an attempt to align the doing and being of gender. It is, therefore, not the practice of drag performance that is necessarily inherently transphobic and transmisogynist. Problematic are drag cultures and cisgender men who perform as drag Queens that lay a possessive claim to a singular professionalised notion of drag, who make visible the axis of gender

through transphobic mockery, as well as a public that fetishises drag identities as a public spectacle of allyship.

Notes

1. At birth, each person is assigned a binary sex (female or male)
2. A person whose gender identity (internal sense of gender) aligns with binary oriented sex assigned at birth (e.g., identify as a women and assigned female at birth)
3. For the purpose of this paper I use transgender to mean people who have a gender identity that does not align with binary oriented sex assigned at birth and genderqueer to mean individuals who do not identify with a binary gender (man/woman)
4. feelings of difference, distress, discord, or discomfort related to one's body due to misgendering, discrimination, and harassment faced in the public sphere (Schulz, 2018).

Notes on contributor

Fenton Litwiller is working on a project using gender play and drag performance to explore gender with 2SLGBTQ youth.

References

Alcoff, L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus poststructuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *13*(3), 405–436. https://doi.org/10.1086/494426

Barnett, J. T., & Johnson, C. W. (2013). We are all royalty: Narrative comparison of a drag Queen and King. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *45*(5), 677. https://doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i5-4369

Bennett, T. (1990). *Outside Literature*. Routledge.

Berbary, L. A., & Johnson, C. W. (2016). En/activist drag: Kings reflect on queerness, queens, and questionable masculinities. *Leisure Sciences*, *39*(4), 305–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2016.1194791

Browne, K., & Bakshi, L. (2011). We are here to party? Lesbian, gay, bisexual and, trans leisurescapes beyond commercial gay scenes. *Leisure Studies*, *30*(2), 179–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2010.506651

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, precarity, and sexual politics. *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, *4*(3), i–xiii. https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.040303e

Butler, J. (2011). Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex. Routlege. doi:10.4324/9780203828274

Cavallaro, D., & Warwick, A. (1998). *Fashioning the frame: Boundaries, dress and body*.

Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Sage.

Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neolibralism. In Castronovo, R. & D. Nelson (eds.). Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics. (pp 175-194). Duke University Press.

Halberstam, J. (1997). Mackdaddy, superfly, rapper: Gender, race, and masculinity in the drag King scene. *Social Text*, *52*(53), 105–131.doi: 10.2307/466736

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Duke University Press.

Hanson, J. (2007). Drag Kinging: Embodied acts and acts of embodiment. *Body & Society*, *13*(1), 61–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X07074779

Hoogland, R. C. (2002). Fact and fantasy: The body of desire in the age of posthumanism. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *11*(3), 213–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/0958923022000021296

Horowitz, K. R. (2013). The trouble with 'queerness': Drag and the maKing of two cultures. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *38*(2), 303–326. https://doi.org/10.1086/667199

Kessler, S. J. (1998). *Lessons from the Intersexed*. Rutgers University Press.

Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsession: Validity after poststructuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *34*(4), 673–693. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1993.tb00112.x

Lawless, B., & Chen, Y. (2019). Developing a method of critical thematic analysis for qualitative communication inquiry. *Howard Journal of Communications*, *30*(1), 92–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2018.1439423

Lewis, S. T., & Johnson, C. W. (2011). "But it's not that easy": Negotiating (trans) gender expressions in leisure spaces. *Leisure/Loisir*, *35*(2), 115–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2011.567062

McNeal, K. E. (1999). Behind the make-up: Gender ambivalence and the double-bind of gay selfhood in drag performance. *Ethos*, *27*(3), 344–378. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1999.27.3.344

Moore, R. (2013). Everything else is drag: Linguistic drag and gender parody on rupaul's drag race. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, *3*(2), 15–26.

Murray, S. (1994). Dragon ladies, draggin' men: Some reflections on gender, drag and homosexual communities. *Public Culture*, *6*(2), 343–364. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-6-2-343

Nelson, L. (1999). Bodies (and spaces) do matter: The limits of performativity. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, *6*(4), 331–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/09663699924926

Newton, E. (1979). *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. University Of Chicago Press.

Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *70*(3), 274–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697

Rupp, L. J., Taylor, V., & Shapiro, E. I. (2010). Drag queens and drag kings: The difference gender makes. *Sexualities*, *13*(3), 275–294. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709352725

Schulz, S. L. (2018). The informed consent model of transgender care: An alternative to the diagnosis of gender dysphoria. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *58*(1), 72–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167817745217

Serano, J. (2012). Reclaiming femininity. In F. Enke (Ed.), *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender and gender studies*, pp. 170-183. Temple University Press.

Shapiro, E. (2007). Drag Kinging and the transformation of gender identities. *Gender and Society*, *21*(2), 250–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206294509

Skeggs, B. (1999). Matter out of place: Visibility and sexuality in leisure spaces. *Leisure Studies*, *18*(3), 213–232. https://doi.org/10.1080/026143699374934

Taylor, Y. (2007). 'If your face doesn't fit ... ': The misrecognition of working-class lesbians in scene space. *Leisure Studies*, *26*(2), 161–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360600661211

West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, *9*(1), 8–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009001002

Woolgar, S. (1988). *Science: The very idea*. New York, NY: Routlege.