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Kathryn Hobson

Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

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Performative Tensions in Female Drag Performances

Kathryn Hobson, Ph.D.
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania
khobson@bloomu.edu

Using an intersectional queer theory lens, I employ critical performance autoethnography to argue that female drag performances do the work of oppression and social justice simultaneously to question whether queer spaces are actually places of freedom and liberation. First, I explore existing literature of drag, female masculinities, and femme-drag performance; second, I detail intersectional queer theory and critical performance autoethnography; third, I offer my autoethnographic narrative from the site of a drag performance because it is imperative for problematizing female drag performance and the perpetuation of whiteness and misogyny in drag performance; finally, I offer remarks for further justification for intersectional analysis for female drag performance.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Queer; Female Drag Performances; Sexuality; Whiteness

In the vein of Bryant Alexander, “I begin with a confession” (*Performing Black* 100). I have often both dreaded and loved attending drag shows. Drag queen shows highlight my appreciation of perfect makeup, glamorous outfits, and killer calf muscles; while drag king shows titillate, excite, and anger me. As a white, queer cisgender,¹ femme,² theorizing through my performances of race, class, gender, sex, and sexuality, sometimes when I go to a drag show, where the boys look like girls, and the girls look like boys, I get all

1 According to Julia R. Johnson, “If one’s sex identity matches her/his morphology, then s/he is cissexual. If one’s gender identity aligns with sex morphology, s/he is said to be cisgender” (138). Whereas transgender is, “An umbrella term for persons who challenge gender normativity, which includes persons who identify as transfeminine, transmasculine, transsexual, Two-Spirit, cross-dresser, genderqueer, same-genderloving, in the life, female-to-male (FTM), male-to-female (MTF), intersex and more (138).

2 Drawing on Brushwood and Camilleri, I define femme, “As ‘femininity gone wrong’—bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy.... Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies and femme is the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine” (13).

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hot and bothered and I can forget how to be critical. There is so much flesh I want to know intimately.

I desire the raw kind of drag that showcases the liminal space between tender and tough, pain and pleasure, masculine and feminine. In my experience, drag kings tend toward this type of drag more than drag queens, but generalizations are almost always problematic. I am also a sucker for clever choreography, good song choices, and costumes that express the drag personae a performer is performing. Mostly, I want drag performances to offer new insights for the potential of queering gender, sexual, racial, and class expressions. I want drag to challenge and subvert our notions about normativity and all of the racist, capitalist, classist, sexist, misogynist systems that place demands and regulations on certain bodies to dress in certain ways, relate with certain people, marry those people, and reproduce new people. I want drag to pull back the veil of mystification regarding intersectional identities so that everyone is expressing their gender authentically, being aroused sufficiently, and liberating themselves appropriately.

Instead, I find drag king performances as sites filled with tension, glorifying a white, masculine-expressing butch or tomboy³ aesthetic, at the expense of drag kings of color, lower-class kings, femme-drag performers, and burlesque queens who often occupy the same stage. Some performers may argue that drag is “just for fun” or “just a performance,” but it is inevitable that audience members and other performers will receive ideological messages from these performances and the performers who embody them. Performance is truly theory and method (Conquergood; Madison), and as such we learn our identities, including gender, sexuality, race, and class, through seeing, doing, watching, and participating in performances that showcase various ways of embodying these differing identities.

Utilizing a methodology of critical performance autoethnography, I examine a drag king performance at a gay bar in a midsize Midwestern city. Although I have performed in femme-drag before, I was solely an audience member this night, watching and learning. Although this project is about drag kings and the experience of those embodying “female masculinity” or “masculinity without men” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*), it is just as much about femininity (and the rejection of it) and misogyny (because of the rejection of femininity), and it is also about racism and classism and white and middle class privilege. It is about access and bodies and different access to different bodies. This essay explores the performative tensions inevitable in gendered drag performances and asks the audience to consider how drag teeters a jagged line between our normative ideological assumptions of gender, sexuality, race, and class and the performances that resist those norms.

3 The use of the term “boi” is used in queer-female circles to denote a younger tomboy aesthetic, affectations, and behaviors. In some cases boi may refer to a lesbian, dyke, queer, transgender, genderqueer, or intersex individual.

Using an intersectional queer lens, I argue that queer drag king performances do the work of oppression and social justice simultaneously. To demonstrate this, I first examine existing literature of drag, female masculinities, and femme-drag performance; second, I explore intersectional queer theory and critical performance autoethnography; third, I offer my autoethnographic narrative from the site of a drag performance and explore how utilizing the lens of intersectional queer theory is imperative for studying drag king performances in critical and intersectional ways; finally, I offer remarks for further justification for intersectional analysis for drag king performance and the implications such performances have for communities invested in social justice. Those in queer communities should not settle for misogynistic, racist, classist drag performances that privilege certain identities and aesthetics at the expense of others. Using an intersectional queer lens can account for multiple, intersecting, and conflicting identities that are often overlooked when focusing solely on gender and sexuality. As such, this analysis opens up discussion for those from multiply marginalized identities to speak, rather than reinforcing dominant queer ideologies.

Drag Performance and a Subversion of Gender Norms

Drag is often complex, fun, and exciting for performers and audiences alike. What drag is not—usually—is simple. Judith Butler discusses drag as a subversive practice that denaturalizes the supposed congruency of sex, gender, and sexual orientation or desire. Butler articulates that all gender is drag performance, not something that can easily be put on and taken off but is constituted by a set of re-iterative performances that can prepare someone for the theatrical stage or the stage of everyday life. Roger Baker writes about the possibilities offered for understanding gender performances more broadly through drag performance. Baker primarily refers to drag in terms of aesthetic stylings of the body, emphasizing that what one wears challenges cultural norms of gender and sexuality. Butler has noted the ambivalent nature of drag, asserting that it, “Reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (125). This suggests that drag simultaneously denaturalizes gender while at the same time reinforces it.

There is no such thing as one “drag” performance. The choices a performer makes depend on race and cultural affiliations, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as the personality, politics, and the drag traditions and lineages of the performer. Both inside and outside communication studies, several scholars theorize an intersectional conception of drag (Alexander, “Queerying Queer”; Moreman and McIntosh; Muñoz; Rhyne). There are nuances in the ways different drag performers do drag. As Moreman and McIntosh explain, when white drag performances occur, it is in order to use camp and irony to exaggerate gender performance whereas Latina drag

queens focus more on mannerisms and mimicry of the personality being portrayed. Importantly, Rhyne points out that all drag performances, including those performed by white drag performers, are intersectional performances of multiple identities. In queer communities of color, drag performance has been widely utilized as a disidentificatory tool to subvert oppressors in terms of gender, sexuality, and race—problematizing racial stereotypes as much as gender ones. For example, the documentary *Paris is Burning* details the ways that men of color in New York City collectively organized around houses named for famous designers, forming the drag ball culture of the 1980s.

Although drag queen performances have been widely theorized, drag king performances do not have the same cultural saliency (Taylor and Rupp). Del LaGrace Volcano explains that a drag king is “anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity” (qtd. in Halberstam 16). Although de la Grace’s may appear too expansive a definition for “drag king,” like femme-drag, there must be room for those expressing a cisgender identity to queer, play with, and drag the gender norms associated with their identity. Halberstam, one of the foremost theorists of female masculinity, argues that drag kings perform a parody of masculinity that subverts dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity as something that is natural, but there is little that is natural for masculinity or femininity, men or women. Masculinity is often seen as naturally occurring, the norm for gender from which femininity deviates (Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins).

Halberstam critiques the naturalization of masculinity and argues that masculine gender is not natural but, like femininity, is a performance of adopting masculine signifiers and constantly reiterating them (*Female Masculinities*). For drag kings this may occur in binding breasts (or having them removed), adding facial hair (or allowing one’s facial hair to grow), cutting hair or finding ways to make it appear shorter, and also comes in the form of adding or alluding to a phallus, whether a sock or a soft-packer.⁴ But drag kings also use physical gesture and embodiment to signify masculinity—something as simple as smoking a cigar, taking up a lot of stage space, moving smoothly, swaying to music, (lip-synch) crooning into a microphone like a lounge singer, grabbing the crotch or placing audience members’ hands on their body, or placing their body parts onto audience members. Alexander notes, “The drag king’s performance is a performance of absence—signaling what is not there magnifies the potency of what is; an organic masculinity” (*Performing Black* 118). A grab of the crotch, the bulge of a sock, all suggest that while a phallus may or may not physiologically be there, something definitely is—perhaps sexual energy, desire, and potential.

Less theorized than either drag queens or kings are the performances of femme-drag performers. Deanna Shoemaker calls this “female-to-femme drag”:

4 A soft packer refers to a phallus-like object worn in the front of the pants to give the impression of male genitals. It is often used by female-to-male transgender people or those wanting to bend and play with masculine gender expression.

The idea that a female-marked body can consciously and critically drag “femininity” in performance potentially problematizes oppositional and heteronormative categories of masculinity and femininity and contests the tradition of drag and camp as primarily gay male practices. (319)

Feminine drag consists of a cisgender female woman adopting the stereotypical traits of femininity in order to critique and denaturalize the performance of femininity as tied to any specific body. In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz uses the performances of Cuban femme performance artist Carmelita Tropicana to demonstrate the ways Tropicana challenges racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes through an exaggerated feminine performance of the highly sexualized Latina vamp archetype. In popular culture Latina women are often overtly heterosexualized (Merskin), but Tropicana defies this in her performances. In one performance, she makes overt sexual advances toward other women who are locked in a prison cell with her.

As this previous literature suggests, drag is not just one thing, as different communities and identities employ drag in differing ways. Though all gender might be drag, as Butler argues, intersectional drag scholars demonstrate that drag is not the same for all bodies.

Intersectional/Relational Queer Theory and Performative Autoethnography

Using the theoretical lens of intersectional queer theory means accounting for race, class, and gender as well as sexuality and does not assume that sexuality can usurp other identities. When performed in public space, racial and class markers inevitably influence audience and performer interactions during drag performances. For this essay, “queer” is conceptualized broadly as that which falls outside of the normative constructions for identity and behavior. It is also a social and political movement, a set of theories, and an ideology. Because queer in its very usage is indefinable, it cannot be pinned down to one meaning. However, for clarification’s sake, I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of queer as an intersectional identity: “Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes stuffed respectively with intellect, race, sex, class, vocation, gender. Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person” (166). As such, queer is an identity that is always influenced and influencing other, intersectional identities.

My use of “intersectionality” draws on the work of Kimberlee Crenshaw, who writes, “Intersectionality is a means of capturing both the *structural and dynamic* (e.g., active) aspect of multiple discrimination, thus affecting both theory and practice” (46). To use an intersectional framework for analyzing drag performances, we must understand that all drag performances, as queer performances, are a product of multiple, intersecting, and conflicting identities. To deny intersectionality in terms of queer theory is to perpetuate what Muñoz terms a “queer blind spot,” which perpetuates dominant, mainly

white understandings of queer life, queer politics, and queer identity (10). The thread of intersectionality runs through queer theory from queer scholars of color, both in and out of the Communication Studies discipline (Alexander, “Queering Queer”; Johnson, “Quare”; Moreman; Muñoz; Pattisapu and Calafell.) Queer female identities and performances of female masculinities and female femininities are complicated through an intersectional and relational queer framework.

Queer theorists have been criticized for their tendency to rely on canonical queer work and for their tendency to privilege certain queer theorists’ voices and ideas in obscure, dogmatic ways, making the already elusive “queer theory” that much more unintelligible (Smith). As Ralph R. Smith notes, “Canonical texts of queer studies by Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Butler, and Sedgwick are repetitively redescribed with increasing obscurity not required for works already remarkably obscure” (347). Smith argues that adopting a more material understanding of queer would be much more useful for political organizing around multiple and intersecting identities. To do this, E. Patrick Johnson offers scholars “Quare” theory, which bridges the discursive and material aspects of sexual identity with the contingency of other identities so that queer is understood in relationship to context, history, and other identifications. This concept provides queer theorists with a productive way for engaging in more complex performance critiques.

I utilize critical performance autoethnography because a project using queer theory must also adopt a queer methodology (Adams and Holman Jones). Autoethnography, as a qualitative method, is tied to the body in material ways that account for overlapping iterations of identities. As such, autoethnography provides one of the most productive means for engaging in intersectional queer analysis. I use “critical” and “performance” as precursors to “autoethnography” to signify that this story, MY story, is about relationships, about intersectional bodies moving in and through space with one another, and also about how power dynamics in my experience play out in connection to larger socio-political issues about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Stacy Holman Jones writes, “Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis. Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement” (764). This suggests that Holman Jones operates under the pretext of performance autoethnography, looking to bridge the gap between the body and making a larger connection between personal experience, which requires reflexivity to the larger context of the social world, thus making it critical. This approach aims to be both revelatory and reflexive about the ways bodies interact and perform in space, offering a counter perspective to dominant perspectives. As Tami Spry claims:

Performative autoethnography is designed to address the kinds of pain that occur at our social/historical/political intersections with one another—the pain caused by our “social ills”... performative autoethnography invites

critical reflection upon pain, creating a space for mutual transformation, hope, and social redress. (36-37)

As a critical performance autoethnographer, I understand that my subject positions have a direct impact on the ethnographic space, and I seek to uncover, not hide, my subjectivity or perspective from the ethnographic site. Although my positionalities as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, mixed-class femme allow me certain cultural insights, they preclude me from others. Although the narrative is about drag kings and female masculinity, it is also about queer femininities and the ways that queer femininities are in tension with queer masculinities. The narrative also shows how drag performances are embedded in systems of racialized and classed meanings. Lastly, it shows the tensions between agency and normativity that play out in queer gender performances.

You Gotta Have Faith

The lights are dim in the bar, El Cubano.⁵ It is, as the name would suggest, stereotypically Cuban themed, with palm leaves and tiki torches adorning the walls and ceiling. This bar is owned by a white, gay man, and the clientele are generally upper class, mainly white, gay men. Two of my white, gay male friends have prepared me for the experience: “Dress nicely and bring a lot of cash; they don’t take cards. Order a mojito, expect to pay at least \$12 for it.” I dress in a jean mini skirt with black tights and slouchy boots. I have on a polka-dot top that is cut low, exposing my lacey blue bra. My dark hair is cut short, but I wear copious amounts of eyeliner and blush to “make up” for any femininity my performance may seemingly lack.

Although this bar is usually packed with gay men, for this one-night-only women’s event it is brimming with a multitude of queer women’s bodies. Some are dressed similar to me, but mostly there are several androgynous and masculine-expressing queer women standing around with beers in hand. I note I need to tell my gay male friends that on “ladies” night, the beverage of choice is Miller Light, not top-shelf rum cocktails.

In a quiet corner, my small posse has been chatting about various people coming into El Cubano—noting the irony of being in a “Cuban” bar owned by a white person, occupied by mostly white people. It is not necessarily problematic that a white person would choose to open or patron a location that is reflective of a subject position or culture other than one’s own, but the stereotypical portrayal of “Cuban-ness” in this bar is disconcerting. The use of palm trees, island-themed music, and tropical drinks makes it seem as though certain parts of Cuban culture are “up for grabs.” This appropriation of “exotic” aesthetics in a bar makes it seem as though Cuban culture is just fun without recognizing the legacies of oppression and violence attached to its colonization by Christopher Columbus and Spain in the eighteenth century. The Cuban theme also fails to account for the advantages that

5 El Cubano is an alias to provide anonymity for the bar space.

privileged people have been afforded because of these colonialist legacies. For example, there are no people of color working at the bar on this night, just white men pouring shots.

Although I occupy space in this room as white and cisgender femme, I do not dismiss my identification with other feminine-expressing women but find myself particularly drawn to more masculine-presenting women as they walk by. Looking from the present to the past, I realize that this may be a manifestation of internalized misogyny and homophobia. As Lesa Lockford explains, “Increasingly I think that taste and ideology are so interconnected that they can no longer be separated” (141). My taste for masculine-presenting people is ideological in nature, and while it is not inherently a negative thing, it requires further reflexive investigation.

This is the first drag king show I have ever attended, and it is slotted to be a short show. Suddenly church-organ music begins blaring from a speaker close to my head. Two performers take the stage. One dressed as a Catholic School Boy, hands folded in prayer position, is kneeling down, his plaid shorts hugging tightly to his thighs.⁶ It is likely that this person identifies as queer, maybe a lesbian, maybe female to male (FtM)⁷ transgender, but none of these can be automatically assumed. The king’s hair is cropped short and spiky to his head. He is the epitome of a boi-ish aesthetic—young-looking, slender and muscular, and although I cannot ask him during the performance, he appears to be white.

Turning her back on him is a light-skinned feminine-expressing person who appears to be a cisgender female, but, again, there is no way to be sure or to ask during the performance. She has a shoulder-length brown bobbed haircut and is wearing a short plaid skirt; her white blouse is buttoned only twice over her cleavage. Adorning her legs is a pair of knee-high white stockings with high black heels on her feet. She is, in many ways, the stereotypic image of the Catholic School Girl that is prevalent in pornography intended for a straight, male audience. In her hand she holds a ruler, a symbol traditionally associated with teaching and punishment. This feminine woman is pretending to write on a chalkboard at the front of the class. The way she is positioned suggests that she is a teacher, although her outfit might suggest otherwise.

Her sexuality is also most likely queer given the space and her choice to perform as part of a drag show; however, it is impossible to decipher one’s sexuality by looks alone. Feminine performances, performed by cisgender women, though often read and suspected to be heteronormative, are not necessarily, as evidenced by this femme’s presence and performance in a gay bar. Although she appears to be cisgender, this is also not inevitably true—she could also be transgender, male-to-female, or a drag queen. Regardless, her body is marked as feminine in a space that has a more masculine presence.

6 I use male pronouns to describe the king, as many kings I have talked to prefer when they are dressed in male drag.

7 FtM refers to “female to male” transgender.

George Michael's voice begins blaring through the PA system. The drag king looks out to the audience and begins mouthing the words.

"Well I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body"
(Michael).

The king outlines a curvaceous hourglass figure with his hands.

"I know not everybody has got a body like you" (Michael).

He reaches out, as though to touch and grab, the feminine performer.

I am confused by my desire for this feminine-expressing woman; her beauty is the pinnacle of white feminine attractiveness—she is perfectly groomed, fit and trim, and moves her body in a fluid manner. As stated earlier, I am generally not sexually attracted to femininity in others, but this performance is making me question that. Both performers' clothing expresses a middle class and white aesthetic, associated with those able to afford private Catholic school tuition. Their characters portray this, as do the bodies portraying the characters—both performers are well-manicured and their outfits match one another—either purchased or custom made or crafted for the performance—although class is not always visible based solely on outward markers. Although the accuracy of the assumption may matter, my perception of the performance is that these are white, somewhat normatively attractive, overtly sexualized bodies interacting in space together.

The white feminine woman turns around abruptly and almost catches the white king grabbing her. The king snaps his hands back into prayer position. The feminine woman resumes her original position with her back turned toward the metaphorical chalkboard.

The audience laughs at this irony—the audience, myself included, knows something that the feminine woman does not. We see the king's performance; we know of his performed desire for her. We witness his sexual desire while the feminine woman is kept in the dark, her sexual desires left unexpressed and unacknowledged despite her highly sexualized appearance. I laugh, too, although I am not as amused with the treatment of the femme-drag performer. I do not know what else to do. This laughter is the normal reaction in this space. Femininity is often the brunt of jokes, assaults, and oppressions in queer spaces.

In this space, at this moment, the femme performer's ignorance to the masculine performance around her reinforces the norms for hegemonic masculinity and misogyny. The femme is objectified and sexualized for the drag king and his audience's (who are mostly masculine women) pleasure. Knowing that this drag king is performing a version of masculinity critiques the stability of hegemonic masculinity, revealing that it is a construction in flux. The audience knows that this masculine performance is done with the purpose of entertainment and unhinges the notion that women have to be feminine, quiet, and not express their overt sexual desires. By playing with

masculine drag, this performer is able to assert his sexual agency in a culture that desexualizes and anesthetizes female masculinity. I am drawn to this body; female masculinity in its transgression is appealing to me, but I also tentatively experience disidentification with the feminine performer and wish for her to turn around, to engage in this performance that is happening around her.

Whiteness and middle-class identities are performed with both the king and the feminine performer using the tropes of the innocent Catholic School Boy and Catholic School Girl teacher throughout, yet no one in the audience recognizes this as an explicitly racialized performance because whiteness is assumed and relegated as normal. John T. Warren explains, “Whiteness, while a systemic historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment—through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts” (92). Just as Warren asserts that whiteness generally is a performance, it also translates to whiteness as a drag performance, where the performance by two white, middle class queers is normalized because of the absence of people of color and the prevalence of a middle class aesthetics. This iterates that queer spaces are not always freeing and liberating for all bodies—feminine bodies, bodies of color, and lower class bodies face this tension in profoundly material ways and ought to try and prevent drag like this from being perpetuated.

The king turns back to the audience with a look of earnest and desire in his eyes.

*“But I’ve got to think twice before I give my heart away”
(Michael).*

The king stands; the woman begins to walk away pounding the ruler in her hand.

“And I know all the games you play” (Michael).

He begins to follow behind her gyrating his pelvis and making suggestive gestures.

“Because I play them too” (Michael).

The feminine woman turns around, again, almost catching the king in the act of fondling her.

Again, the king snaps back into place and the feminine woman resumes her turned position.

It is possible that the trope of “playing games” is a reciprocal erotic game between the two performers’ characters—a BDSM⁸ scene being played out to excite the audience. Yet, because this scene involves a teacher/student relationship, the reciprocity is inherently limited, as it is socially inappropriate for teachers to express sexual desire for students.

⁸ BDSM refers to Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism.

The feminine performer may be seen as performing inside the norms of white femininity by keeping her hair longer, wearing heels and makeup etc.; however, this privileges a rejection of norms over supposed conformity (Halberstam, “Between Butches”). Although cisgender femininity may seem to buy into a privileged identity because the gender expression “matches” the gender identity, the reality is this scene depicts how female bodies, specifically white feminine-expressing bodies, are sometimes treated by both cisgender males and masculine-performing queer women as less than. Her back is turned while the audience laughs. Although this is probably an intentional choice, performative choices are always ideological in nature, and this one communicates that the feminine performer is there to be objectified. As Julia Serano, a transsexual feminine woman, articulates, “Today, while it is generally considered to be offensive or prejudiced to openly discriminate against someone for being female, discriminating against someone’s femininity is still considered fair game” (5).

Although the masculine performer is given the space to express sexual desire and aggression, the feminine performer’s agency is more limited in this moment. The assumption that there is inherent privilege in expressing femininity is called into question when we see, even in this performance, that femininities are targets of harassment and ridicule from within the queer community.

Although this performance of desire appears to be done in jest, humor is always ideological and exemplifies truth—women who perform femininity are sexual objects subjected to misogyny and male sexual aggression despite where the performance is taking place. This is illustrated by the fact that throughout most of this performance the femme-woman’s back is turned unknowingly while the king makes sexual gestures toward her. She does not perform sexual agency but is instead made the brunt of the joke by the drag king.

“Oh, but I need some time off from that emotion” (Michael).

The king looks at the audience smiling.

“Time to pick my heart up off the floor” (Michael).

The king reaches down to the floor and picks up what appears to be a heart and slams it onto his breastbone, drawing attention to what appears to be a muscularly chiseled chest.

“And when that love comes down without devotion” (Michael).

The king turns away from the audience as the woman begins to face the king.

“Well it takes a strong man baby” (Michael).

At this point, the king turns around with a simulated bulging erection in his pants.

The feminine performer sees the erection and covers her mouth. She appears surprised by this outward expression of desire toward her, which borderlines upon harassment.

The audience howls in laughter and excitement, amused by the actions occurring between the masculine king and the feminine teacher. The audience deems both the erection and the femme's bodily reaction hilarious. Because of the king's masculine aesthetic and demeanor, he is seen as a prepubescent boy who cannot control his sexual responses to a woman—his teacher. Yet, this erection also signifies this tension of reification and the challenging of gender and sexual norms. The cisgender male body is not present to signify a totality of male privilege, but masculine privilege, as well as white privilege, is present in this performance.

This white king constructs his masculinity in contradictory ways; he is both characterized as youthful and innocent and yet extremely sexual and sexualizing of his teacher. His whiteness and his masculinity allow him to act entitled to express his desire for the teacher. I wrestle with knowing that the performers are making intentional choices but that those choices are communicating ideologies to the audience—ideologies that express a devaluing of feminine expression, boundaries, and sexual agency while glorifying white masculinity as innocuous and normative.

The king attempts to cover his genital region; turning back around, he removes the sock where the erection once was and throws it off the stage and turns back around.

“But I’m showing you the door” (Michael).

The king grabs the woman and begins to dance with her. The woman is reluctant at first but is unable to break free. The king pulls her close, lifting her leg up so he can hold the thigh with his hand, grinding her in his lap. With their genital regions rubbing, the perceived absence of the king is anything but absent in this moment.

The audience begins to whoop and holler as the feminine performer has finally been seduced by the power of the young stud. She can no longer control her sexual desire for him nor maintain the strength of her boundaries against him; despite her role as an authority figure, she gives into him. Catcalls and laughter ensue.

A masculine-presenting queer person, presumably a butch lesbian from the crowd, yells, **“Yeah boy! Get her good!”**

There is a distinct pulsation through the room as the acknowledgement of what has been said registers with more and more audience members. It is a blister that has ruptured in the space; people don't know how to react. The performance continues. Although the drag king has not marked the space with the vulgar discursive remarks, his whiteness, middle classness, and masculinity allude that he could “get her” and is entitled to perform sexual acts with her. The king holds more control over the feminine-expressing

performer's bodily movements. He takes up more performance space and has many more active moments than she. The time she is most active is when the king grabs and moves her body. Much of the performance seems intentionally non-consensual for the feminine performer.

*“Cause I gotta have faith...faith...faith... I gotta have faith...
faith...faith...yeah” (Michael).*

After realizing how caught up in the moment she is, the feminine performer catches her breath, straightens her hair and outfit, and picks up the “ruler of discipline” and resumes writing on the chalkboard. Her back is turned to the audience.

The song ends and the performers bow. The couple receives plenty of compensation for their performance; their performance is admired by the audience—the irony and humor of a performance that re-enacts heteronormativity, misogyny, and femmephobia. At the same time, it is not heteronormative because they are two drag performers, playing with and queering gender and sexual norms, and this is a show—it is entertainment. The king is defying expectations for normative feminine gender and is even problematizing the role of stable heterosexuality in religious institutions like the Catholic Church. Also, though he may be read male, the audience knows he is in drag, and as such his character may be a masculine-expressing woman expressing desire for another woman. The erection might not lend itself to this reading, but it is possible. It does switch the power dynamic so that the student has control in the performance, but because the drag king is white and performing masculinity, this is also a performance of entitlement to women's bodies that is not subversive. Mainly this piece has performed white, heterosexist, misogyny cloaked as humor and gender transgression.

There has been little room for the white femme's sexual agency, as her bodily position has been mostly controlled through the king's movements; however, she is not entirely docile to the performance around her. The feminine performer has agreed to perform in this piece and she has made a decision that performance is worth her time, her costume, and choreography. She may be shedding light on these existent ideologies and stereotypes for normative white masculinity and femininity, choosing this role to evoke its ridiculousness. She may be part of a BDSM relationship that the audience is unaware of, or she may enjoy being a more passive partner—sexually and otherwise. This harkens back to historical accounts of the way that butch-femme identities were performed in the everyday (Hollibaugh; Nestle). In these accounts, femmes were often characterized as solely passive and lacking agency; femme theorists assert that their agency cannot be viewed and compared in the same way as their butch counterparts. Feminine expression was viewed as a control through passivity, allowing one to be taken to a certain place on her terms (Hollibaugh; Nestle). The “ruler of discipline” suggests that the femme performer should be more powerful than her choreography

has allowed, and there is no reason that her sexually provocative clothing should have suggested a will or desire for sex with the king's character. She is not agency-less, but she is lacking agency in this particular performance, and I employ a healthy amount of skepticism in a supposedly queer space that garners so much attention for such an uncouth performance. This may also just be bad drag, or worse, thoughtless, unreflexive drag.

"But I gotta have faith, faith, faith. I gotta have faith, faith, faith, yeah" (Michael).

This performative moment is long gone but not forgotten. I leave the performance space alone, coat clutched tightly around my thin, white feminine frame. There is no inherent safety in this queer space, not for my feminine body or the multitude of bodies that could have been represented and respected on that stage but were not.

The implications of such an event for queer theory are first about revealing the lack of visibility regarding the contested identities, performances, and lives of queer people. Although much scholarship has been dedicated to drag queens and other aspects of queer men's lives, the same has not been provided for queer women. Any queer project that attempts to sustain the critique of a cohesive subject cannot dismiss the materiality of the bodies that perform within the ideological constraints of social systems that continually prioritize and value masculinity at the expense of femininity, whiteness at the expense of people of color, and middle-upper class over the working class and poor people. Any queer project that attempts to be a project of freedom and liberation must consider the ways that power plays out intersectionally in all aspects of life, recognizing where we all experience simultaneous oppression and privilege in our everyday lives.

Toward an Intersectional Queer Analysis for Drag Performances

This essay focuses on one performance of white, middle-class, queer masculine and feminine aesthetics, which perpetuates many of the dominant norms for drag scholarship. As there are many types of drag performances and as many types of performers, this glimpse gives just a hint at what some drag does while not giving space to what all drag performances have done and will do. This is, however, not the only time I have experienced misogyny by masculine performers toward more feminine ones, especially in queer female drag performances in queer spaces. Drag performance is just one site where we see the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality play out in both oppressive and resistant ways.

Queer theory from an intersectional perspective requires us to look at how dominant and privileged identities work in sites like a drag performance. In order to understand how drag king and feminine-drag performances are communicative of resisting and also reinscribing norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class, an intersectional queer intervention is necessary. For the

performers, the relationship of their race and class cannot be separated from their gender and sexual performances, even for members of dominant groups. We learn much about race and class from drag, whether intentional or not, invisible or not. Although drag king performances may critique traditional hegemonic masculinity, some performances also reify the normativity of white and middle-class identities, choosing to embody them without question, while other performers make sure to queer them just as they would a gender or sexual performance.

Drag performances, like all performances, are formed in the social and cultural systems of power in which they are made, and not all expressions are valued to the same degree. Instead, white drag king performances walk a tense line between resistance and reification of norms, where the performance may challenge some aspects of identities while solidifying others. In order to have more liberatory gender performances as performers and audience members, we must be willing to employ an intersectional queer lens of analysis through which we sense the fine lines we walk: making and breaking art; resisting and implementing norms; and being willing to reflexively recognize the moments where our liberation is at the expense of someone belonging to another identity group.

Although this site of intersectional queer analysis focuses specifically on drag, the point is that as part of any community committed to social justice, we should be accountable to one another in our moves toward liberation. This piece, which can be circulated at bars where drag shows are taking place, should encourage performers to reflect on their performative choices; noting how their actions communicate ideologies and hold one another accountable for ethical performance choices. As for those audiencing drag shows, I would encourage them to be critical of what they witness on stage, noting where and how some performances serve as a critique of ideologies while others reify them, and, in most cases, how performances do both. Lastly, as audience members we must hold our performing communities accountable for their actions, knowing that drag and performance serve critical pedagogical functions for those in heterogeneous queer communities. Drag provides a much-needed outlet for those experiencing oppression on multiple levels and can provide performers with catharsis, which in turn may contribute to more active, accountable community members.

As queer community members, activists, and scholars invested in justice we should be sensitive to the oppression of others, especially the members of our own communities, so as to not further marginalize and alienate them. This essay asks that drag performers be intentional in their performative choices, realizing the ideological nature that these performances both imitate and create. We must all be intentional and self-reflexive in our identity performances. We must be willing to do the work of critique that asks us to be intersectional and to challenge dominant notions of queer so that we can build sustainable communities committed to reflexivity, intersectionality, and justice.

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