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## Front and Center: An Anthropological Analysis of Drag Queens in American Culture

Seth Palmer  
*SUNY Geneseo*

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## Front and Center: An Anthropological Analysis of Drag Queens in American Culture Submitted by Seth Palmer



*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly **assumed to be natural and necessary** (*Gender Trouble*, 187).*

*The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. **There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas** (Douglass, 137).*

As the discipline has been institutionalized, anthropology within the academy has traditionally focused on the study of what “the West” considers to be the exotic, the strange, the weird, and the odd. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, anthropologists were interested mainly in claiming “a people” (often considered primitive) from which they could develop a professional career and academic prestige; for Malinowski it was the Trobriand Islanders, for Boas it was the Kwakiutl, and for Lewis Henry Morgan it was the Iroquois. Such attitudes today are highly criticized within

the discipline for being paternalistic, if not blatantly racist. The process of creating the “other,” however, continues today both inside and outside of the university, creating a need for scholars to deconstruct the very categories that are meant to define and constrain individuals within specific cultural groups.

In my research on drag queens in contemporary American culture, I have been interested in finding a language with which to deconstruct the institutionalized gendered and sexualized categories imposed on individuals in American society. I have been largely unsuccessful in this endeavor. Rupp and Taylor had the same struggle in their research on drag queens in Key West: “Although we argue that drag queens and drag performances break down the boundaries between woman and man, gay and straight, we continue to use these categories, however flawed they might be to identify people. In part, the language gives us no choice” (*Drag Queens*, 5). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, speaks to the fact that as individuals whose cognitive categories are influenced by a specific language, anthropologists themselves have difficulty in discussing concepts that exist beyond the bounds of their own culture. How can I, as a native English speaker, examine concepts of gender that go beyond “male” and

“female?” Despite the difficulty of the task, new linguistic terminologies will have to be created to discuss diverse gendered and sexualized identities given the genderqueer and androgynous identity movement within the queer community today. Because of such movements, it becomes increasingly apparent that standard conceptions of gender and sexuality no longer have complete control over the contemporary American populace.

My study of drag queens in American culture has been made increasingly relevant over the past few months as queer voices have continued to contest the oppressive sexist and homophobic structures of American society. The following are just a few of the issues that have challenged the normative gendered and sexualized structures in the United States. Most obviously, the November 2008 elections led to many important political decisions for the LGBTIQ community across the country. Proposition 8 in California passed this November, prohibiting gay marriage in the state. Similar measures were passed in Florida and Arizona. Act 1, which passed in Arkansas, prevents gay and lesbian parents (or even unmarried heterosexual couples) from adopting children. Similar measures are already in place in Utah and Mississippi, for example. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, the celebrated (and reviled) political candidates Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton both fought for the seats of the Vice President and President, respectively. The film *Milk*, describing the politician and community organizer Harvey Milk’s rise to power and assassination won two Academy

Awards. Katy Perry’s hit single “I Kissed a Girl” topped the Billboard Top 100 chart last summer, and was nominated for Favorite Song at the 2009 Kid’s Choice Awards. Ironically, Perry’s mother, an Evangelical Christian Preacher told the press that: “I hate the song. It clearly promotes homosexuality and its message is shameful and disgusting...I can’t even listen to that song...when it comes on the radio I bow my head and pray” (Lyons, 1). The LGBTIQ community was further angered by the selection of Reverend Rick Warren to give the benediction at President Obama’s inauguration: “In a recent interview with the Web site Beliefnet, Mr. Warren said that allowing same-sex couples to marry was no different from allowing a brother and sister to marry” (Zeleny, 1). More locally, on September 30<sup>th</sup> an anti-gay demonstration on the College Green at the State University of Geneseo, approved by Campus Scheduling, made people again question the limits of the First Amendment. The approval of a gender-neutral housing option on-campus at the State University of New York at Geneseo represents the gendered revolution that is taking place on college campuses nationwide. An article in the *Lamron*, Geneseo’s college newspaper, recognizes that: “The current housing form, which requires all incoming freshmen, even those who may not match a socially-defined gender or biological distinction, to identify themselves as ‘male’ or ‘female.’ The new housing project will attempt to resolve that issue” (Cioffi, 1). Even the debate over the curriculum at the State University of New York at Geneseo is in part concerned with the representation of women and sexual minorities. In his letter

to the Curriculum Review Task Force, concerning the debate over the Western Humanities course, Professor Walter Soffer argues that: “the humanities is the study of the great books left behind by the greatest minds” (1). Similarly, Professor Larry Blackman writes: “The required works in Western Humanities I and II are not considered great because they were written by white males. They are great books that happen to have been written mostly by white males” (2). In other words, it is just coincidence that all of the best works of literature, philosophy and history were written by male-bodied persons. These learned individuals fail to recognize the social structure in which these “great minds” were writing; they do not ask how it came to be that such males acquired the resources needed to be able to freely philosophize day and night. Who washed their dishes? Who scrubbed their floors? Who cooked their meals? Even in the setting of the university, often considered to be one of the most liberal institutions in the United States, a male-dominated, heteronormative discourse can run uncontested. Underneath all of these issues, of course, lies the problematic status of biological women and sexual minorities in the American political sphere. Is a woman capable of being the President or Vice President of the United States? Should it be legal for two men to be married and thus be privy to the same rights afforded to married heterosexual couples? Are two mothers, two fathers, or even an unmarried heterosexual couple capable of raising foster children? What these questions do not address, of course, are the arbitrary gendered and sexualized categories that

the American populace uses from which to base their opinions. Such conceptions of “male” and “female,” then become important signifiers in political decisions in the United States. The performances of drag queens speak directly to these socially-constructed categories, and have important literal and symbolic relevance in the larger arena of American politics.

Throughout this paper, the term “queer” will be used to encompass the whole LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) community. The word “queer” in academia and popular culture is used to reclaim a term that was once used against the community. The term is not accepted by all members within or outside of the community, and its use continues to be controversial. I use the term as a way to find unity amongst a highly diverse group of individuals that have many important shared experiences; the term is not being used in a derogatory sense.

In studying drag performance in American culture, I have been careful to contextualize the experiences of people who perform in drag as an extremely diverse group of individuals who are beyond the limits of any single anthropological interpretation. As my informant Champagne stated: “People try to put you in a box, and I don’t like to be in a box – I’m claustrophobic.” Additionally, my analysis not only acknowledges, but heavily emphasizes, the power structure that attempts to control the lives of those individuals who defy culturally-acceptable gender practices. Indeed, given the history of queer peoples living in the United States, drag should be seen partly as an act of resistance to social norms,

although this by itself would be a very simplified explanation.

In this paper, data collected from literature, fieldwork experiences, interviews, film, and social networking and video sharing websites will be utilized to examine the meaning of drag and the lives of those who perform in it. Literature read and analyzed for this study included the cultural history of drag performance, contemporary gender theory, and the anthropological literature on drag and queer communities in the United States. Fieldwork was conducted by watching drag performances at a small gay bar in Rochester, NY; interviews were conducted with a few select drag queens, and a focus group discussion on drag was held with a group of young queer college students. Additionally, I studied representations of drag queens in popular American culture to gain an understanding of how the perception of drag queens has, and has not, changed over time. Finally, I reviewed the personal pages of drag queens on video sharing websites (such as [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) and social networking websites (such as [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) and [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)). This paper is a multi-disciplinary piece that attempts to contextualize the experiences of drag performers in the United States, and most importantly, celebrates them as a people worthy of study.

Recently, representations of drag performances have entered into mainstream American culture through the cinema, including such films as Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, Torch Song Trilogy, Tootsie, Victor/Victoria, Birdcage, Mrs. Doubtfire, The Crying Game, Connie and Carla, and To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar.

Such representations of drag performance in popular culture have changed dramatically over time, with one of the most iconic, yet highly problematic, representations of drag appearing in the 1959 film Some Like it Hot. Many older films that portray characters in drag, such as Some Like it Hot, feature heterosexuals who cross-dress in order to hide their identity and/or enter spaces that they would otherwise be barred from. In newer films, characters identified as “drag queens” are at times used as an exotic feature to draw in the audience’s interest; in other cases, however, they are painted as multi-dimensional characters, as seen in Torch Song Trilogy. Overall, representation of drag performances in film often appear as one of two extremes, either in the form of light-hearted comedies or violent thrillers, typically involving the police force.

This winter, LOGO (an American cable channel with programming that targets the LGBTIQ community) began airing RuPaul’s Drag Race, a reality TV show in which drag queens compete to be reigned in as the ultimate diva. With LOGO being available in an estimated 35 million American homes, the concept of the drag queen is no longer relegated to liberal, urban, industrialized environments on the American landscape. Increasingly, Americans outside of the LGBTIQ community are being confronted with drag performances through print media, television, film, and cyberspace. Additionally, as members of the queer community continue to feel more comfortable challenging gender norms in the public sphere, American society will be forced to address those individuals who, while previously confined to the margins, are now

fighting for inclusion in the center.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The new anthropology of genders and sexualities is a dynamic sub-discipline that integrates theory from the interdisciplinary fields of queer and performance studies, and in part focuses on what anthropologist Rosalind Morris defines as “institutions of ambiguity.” Such institutions highlight the importance of understanding gendered and sexualized categorizations as cultural constructions embedded in a specific historical, spatial and cultural context. The primary theoretical perspective used in this study was Judith Butler’s concept of *gender performativity*. By linking performance studies to the existing literature on the anthropology of genders and sexualities, one can critique the gender binary as a social construction that is performed, and more importantly, one can understand “normative genders and sexualities” as performances in and of themselves. Morris recognizes the fecundity of a performative analysis of genders and sexualities in the house of anthropology:

The anthropology of gender is emerging under the influence of performance theory resists such connotations, however. Instead, it is concerned with the relationships and dissonance between the exclusive categories of normative sex/gender systems and the actuality of ambiguity, multiplicity, abjection, and resistance within these same systems. Oscillating between a desire to unseat the hegemony of sexual dichotomies in the modern West through exemplary counter-example and a

yearning to locate resistant practices in non-Western systems, much of the new anthropology of gender seeks... examples of “institutional transvestism” such as the *berdache* of North America, the *hijra* of India, or the *kathoey* of Thailand (570).

By studying the gendered performances of drag queens, therefore, one can understand the gendered performances that all people in all cultures enact on a daily basis. Gender, then becomes something very fluid: “Butler argues that gender is not a fact or an essence, but a set of acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance... Butler goes further than this when she argues that, although gender is a set of acts, it works and derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence and, in the process, come to believe that they are mandatory” (Morris, 572-573).

My analysis of drag performance in American culture has led me to recognize that all gendered performance is inherently a drag performance in and of itself. This theoretical conclusion is by no means original. Other gender theorists have been drawn to this conclusion as well. Morris comments on this perspective:

When theorists of gender performativity say that all gender is a form of drag, they mean that, like drag, the Western system of compulsory heterosexuality is a set of limitations. What is being imitated is the ideal of binary difference, a difference that only prescribes social roles but also is supposed to determine sexual desires... In this context, cases of third genders and/or institutionalized

travestism can be treated as framed examples of the performativity that underlies the entire logic of binary sexuality (580).

In fact, in the documentary *Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind*, Butler notes that the strict male and female gender norms of Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s prompted her to write *Gender Trouble* in order to make sense of these exaggerations (Zadjermann). Through recognition of the fact all gendered performance is drag, one can create a dialogue that does not relegate such examinations to a queer, or often “othered” population. Veritably, the power of an analysis of drag performance comes not only from the fact that it is part of a queer sub-culture, but that such performances critique all gendered spectacles as institutionalized acts with little biological import.

It is also important to note that within queer performances one is always in a state of *performing*; that is to say, one is always being critiqued, analyzed, and judged for the gendered and sexualized performances that they are producing on the stage and in the street. In an interview for a documentary on Judith Butler, Butler herself notes that while Simone de Beauvoir argued that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman, she believes that one is always *becoming* a woman (Zadjermann). Thus, she emphasizes the continued performative nature of gender as something that continues throughout one’s lifetime and does not end when the curtains fall. The anthropologist, however, must try to interpret such performances from both the perspective of the audience member and of the performer, both of which are highly diverse groups within themselves. Analyzing both the audience

and the performer allows the anthropologist to understand how space, behaviors, and ideologies are negotiated on and around the stage. Audience members come to drag performances primarily for entertainment, while drag queens perform primarily for economic reasons. However, the interactions and relations between performer and audience member are far more diverse and dynamic than this generalization.

### ***Historical Roots of Drag Queens***

Historical particularists, who set the foundation for American anthropology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed that cultural anthropologists should study each culture as its own entity, with its own particular history and developmental trajectory. Following in this tradition, I believe that it is important to study the history of drag from its beginning in Great Britain to its current form in the United States in order to understand contemporary drag queen performance in American culture. It is clear that contemporary drag performance has borrowed from cultures other than those that existed in Great Britain (or continental Europe); however, the history of drag performance is mainly rooted in gendered performance on the European stage. Contemporary drag culture in the United States has only more recently been influenced by the diverse ethnic groups that make-up the American social landscape.

From a European perspective, cross-dressing was essential in British theater because of a restriction against biological women from acting on the stage. Because of this social fact, certain actors would consistently play the role of women onstage and would work to perfect their own gender performance. Baker notes that these actors were usually young boys who “would be expected to lead a strange and somewhat

dubious life. He would be trained to dress up daily as a fascinating young woman and parade before the rowdy populace in the dangerous and insalubrious atmosphere of the public playhouse” (66-67). After Charles II introduced women onto the stage in England, it became less popular for men to play the role of women:

For this is what ultimately happened to the last of the female impersonators. They ceased to impersonate on the refined, serious level that derived from the Elizabethan period and began to burlesque their female roles. As they became less in demand, so their parts got shorter and they tended to make them comic. One, a man called Lacy, became famous for his burlesque of female characters and here we may discern the beginnings of the pantomime dame tradition as we see it today (Baker, 103).

While the sexual orientation of these early female impersonators is not entirely clear, Baker notes that “two of the most famous were widely known to be homosexual. They were Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park and both are dealt with quite fully in a collection of essays called The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, a survey of homosexuality in London published in 1881” (123).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States, male-bodied drag performances were enacted by men who were perceived to be heterosexual. Their performances were purely comedic, and not meant to address political concerns or alternative genders or sexualities. Later it entered into the theatrical arenas of burlesque and vaudeville at the turn of the twentieth century. Such performances were sexually-suggestive, and

had an important comic element to them as well: “as the nineteenth century began, men in women’s clothes on the professional stage were, with rare exceptions, dame comedians” (Chauncey, 295).

It is not until the rise of American industrial urban environments that a visible gay culture emerges. George Chauncey, a scholar of gay and lesbian histories in the United States, notes how the presence of a visible queer culture on the American landscape only became possible after a period of urbanization:

In his hometown he had needed to conform at all times to the social conventions of the community, for he had been subjected to the constant...surveillance of his family and neighbors. But in the city it was possible for him to move between social worlds and lead a double life: by day to hold a respectable job that any queer would have been denied, and by night to lead the life of a fairy on Bowery...The complexity of the city’s social and spatial organization made it possible for gay men to construct the multiple public identities necessary for them to participate in the gay world without losing the privileges of the straight: assuming one identity at work, another in leisure; one identity before biological kin, another with gay friends (133).

Writing in 1972, the anthropologist Esther Newton similarly noted that: “Homosexual communities are entirely urban and suburban phenomena. They depend on the anonymity and segmentation of metropolitan life” (21). Chauncey also highlights the experiences of biological men who perform as women in certain social environments



during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such environments included, but were not limited to, public parks, streets, bars, and prisons. Such men were labeled fairies, and “were the most famous symbols of gay life, and the impression of that life they conveyed was reinforced by the countless other effeminate men who were visible in the streets of the city’s working-class and amusement districts in the early decades of the century” (Chauncey, 47). Such men could be identified by “a limp wrist or an exaggerated, swivel-hipped, mincing walk – known as ‘swishing’ in the gay world [something that] was regularly caricatured on the vaudeville stage and occasionally seen on the street as a sign of the ‘true’ fairy” (Chauncey, 55). Like contemporary drag queens, “The fairies reaffirmed the conventions of gender even as they violated them: they behaved as not man should, but as any man might wish a woman would” (Chauncey, 57). The Bowery, a small neighborhood in Manhattan, was an important geographic space for the developing gay culture in New York City. According to Chauncey,

The ‘female impersonators’ on display at the Bowery resorts were the most famous symbols of gay life, and the impression of that life they conveyed was reinforced by the countless other effeminate men who were visible in the streets of the city’s working-class and amusement district in the early decades of the century (47).

While the fairies may have been marginally accepted in very specific urban spaces such as the Bowery, they were first and foremost defined by their pathology. Up until 1973, homosexuality was considered a psychologi-

cal disorder in the United States. Sexologists, beginning around the second-half of the nineteenth century, created an understanding of homosexuals as “inverts,” meaning that male homosexuals had a feminine spirit, thus explaining why they could be attracted to men. Likewise, female homosexuals had a masculine spirit, thus explaining why they were attracted to other women. In other words, the medical community reinforced compulsory heterosexuality because biological men could only be attracted to other biological men because one of them was internally a woman (in male-male sexual encounters at this time, men taking the active role were not perceived of as homosexuals, but as “perverts” who were conventionally masculine men with a “perverted” sex drive). During this time period, the male homosexual was a marked individual. According to Foucault, he “became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (43). Gay men, then, would often perform in a “feminine” manner to identify themselves as homosexual to others. As Chauncey notes: “gay men pursued a variety of strategies as they negotiated their presence in the city’s restaurants, cafeterias and speakeasies. Some of them boldly claimed their right to gather in public, speaking loudly about gay matters, dancing with their friends, even putting on a ‘show’ for the other customers of them” (176). This gendered performance would be an important step in the development of a drag queen identity.

After the turn of the twentieth century, however, male-bodied drag performances became increasingly common in

urban areas dominated by gay culture. Particularly during the Prohibition Era in the 1920s, drag balls and performances by female impersonators became increasingly visible within the gay world of New York City. The Pansy Craze, which hit New York City just prior to the Prohibition era, embodied this cultural movement. Upper-class heterosexual residents of New York went “slumming” during this time period in American history to listen to African-American jazz performances; they would also go to watch male homosexual performances on stage. Chauncey notes the connection between these two voyeuristic pursuits:

“The efforts of nightclub impresarios to cultivate and respond to the growing fascination of white middle-class club goers with African-American jazz and performance is the best-known aspect of this phenomenon, and in many ways the ‘Negro Vogue’ of the mid-twenties set the stage for the pansy craze that soon followed it...If whites were intrigued by the ‘primitivism’ of black culture, heterosexuals were equally intrigued by the ‘perversity’ of gay culture” (309).

Pansy acts were performances given by highly effeminate homosexual men who performed their sexual orientation on stage, again often to heterosexual audiences. Sometimes, however, such performers identified as heterosexual. Chauncey these performances to blackface, characterizing them as “straight actors putting on drag or stereotypical mannerisms to mimic and ridicule gay men, to the hoots and jeers of an anti-gay audience. This buffoonery became a standard feature in the burlesque and high-

class cabaret venues alike, which reinforced the dominant public image of homosexuals” (310). They were incredibly popular, and embodied the daring sense of rebelliousness that accompanied the illegal consumption of alcohol. Performers such as Gene Malin became famous for their pansy acts in New York City.

After the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression Era loomed over American society, drag performances, and gay and lesbians and cultures in general, fell under increasingly heightened scrutiny: “The revulsion against gay life in the early 1930s was part of a larger reaction to the perceived ‘excesses’ of the Prohibition years and the blurring of the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable public solidarity” (Chauncey, 353). Gay and lesbian bars were routinely raided by the police; if an individual should be arrested not only would they serve a sentence, but their names would be placed in the newspaper, often leading to loss of employment or familial ties. In fact, by 1931 “several of the city’s newspapers began a campaign against clubs featuring female impersonators...on the night of January 28, 1931, they [the police] raided the Pansy Club on West Forty-Eighth Street and the Club Calais at 125 West Fifty-First Street.” The next day, Police Commissioner Edward Mulrooney announced: “There will be a shake-up in the night clubs, especially of those which feature female impersonators” (Chauncey, 331). Laws were passed across the country that required individuals to wear at least five articles of clothing that matched their biological sex. According to Senelick, even in New York and San Francisco in the 1960s, drag remained illegal (384). Such actions were a way of reinforcing the very hegemonic structure that prevented drag performances

from entering mainstream culture: “Prohibition culture had allowed gay visibility to move into the center of New York’s most prestigious entertainment district, but in the early thirties, the authorities were determined to return it to the city’s periphery” (Chauncey, 333). Ironically, however, police attempts to restrict gay and lesbian cultures forced them to perform as homosexuals themselves: “Since the cops often went over on the ferries posing as homosexuals, the ferry owners always knew when raids were coming, said Ken Stein; the cops absurdly wore perfume and dressed inappropriately” (Cherry Grove, 193). In 1939, the Jewel Box Revue opened in Miami. This would soon become the most famous drag venue in the United States. However, “although it originated in a gay bar and was managed and staffed entirely by homosexuals, the Jewel Box Revue was geared for straight audiences, aiming to win acceptance through comedy (Senelick, 380). As the first interracial drag club, the Jewel Box Revue broke ground for future performances to challenge restrictive legislative policies, and to create a more open (although still closeted) dialogue about pluralism in American culture.

Following the larger trends of drag queen performance in the United States, performances prior to the disco era were usually meant to impersonate famous female figures, or they were completely comic in nature. Teri Warren, a drag queen who performed on Fire Island, told Esther Newton that: “when I first arrived out here, drag was not drag per se. Drag was a hairy chest, hairy arms, moustache... which is commonly known now as ‘gender fucking’... and I was-

n’t into that form of drag, so I stood in the background” (Cherry Grove, 174). With the disco era came the concept of glamour drag that differed from previous drag queen performances: “In most glamour drag the performer simply mouthed, or ‘lip-synced’ to the words of a recorded female vocalist. When they did comic drag, working-class men tended toward broad and vulgar sight gags and very explicit sexual suggestions which offended conservative Grovers” (Cherry Grove, 174). Newton asserts that drag played an important role in allowing residents, particularly gay men, to claim a territory as their own: “After 1950, witty repartee, parody, double-entendre, and gender reversal were used ever more openly and boldly to create a ‘gay reality’ – not only an escape from heterosexual domination on the mainland, but an evolving subculture in which camp was the norm” (Cherry Grove, 75). Due to constant police raids and the physical dangers of performing in drag in a public space, gay men would often restrict such performances to private spaces. House parties, and particularly tea parties, were a popular venue for such performances: “Besides theatrical productions... theme parties were the most important venues of camp representations” (Cherry Grove, 77). Thus, drag performances were (and are) enacted in private spaces to create social solidarity amongst members of the queer community.

The cultural mosaic that makes up the United States is not restricted to a European past, despite what much scholarship may suggest. While it is not completely clear what impact Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and

Asian Americans have had on the historical evolution of the “drag queen” in the United States, it is obvious the concept of the “drag queen” has been appropriated and altered within communities of color. Another section of this paper will be devoted to how drag queen performances are “racialized” on the stage.

### ***Drag Queens as “Other”***

As individuals with an unconventional gender performance, drag queens face stigma both outside of and within their own sub-culture. Representations of drag in film often reflect this stigmatization. In The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, for example, one queen, Tick, faces a difficult struggle of revealing his real identity to his son. Another drag queen, Bernadette, faces heckling from the other queens because she identifies as transgender. The three drag queens face violent, homophobic attacks in the Australian outback, and struggle to survive in a hate-filled social environment (The Adventures). In To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, three drag queens must go on the run in order to escape the grasp of an angry, homophobic local law enforcement official (To Wong Foo). Even today, some drag queens continue to have an uneasy relationship with the police force. Champagne, a drag queen from Schenectady, New York, noted that she was pulled over by a police officer while she was riding in her friend’s car in drag. Her friend driving the car, David, was also dressed in drag. Champagne stated that when David stuck his head out to talk to the cop she thought: “we’re all going to jail.” After being pulled over, the officer made

them wait in their car for an extended period of time while other police cars drove past and flashed their spotlights in the car. Finally, the policeman came back to the vehicle and said “okay, you can go now” while laughing at David, Champagne, and their friends. In response to these kinds of interactions with the police, Champagne said “you let it roll off your back and move on.” Narratives on drag queens in American culture often focus on their marginalization, and the inability of society to accept them for who they are.

Oppressed groups often feel quite free to oppress others, and the same is true within the queer community in the United States. David Valentine, an anthropologist who specializes in transgender studies, notes how many queer rights organizations have mainstreamed their goals “at the expense of representing non-‘respectable’ gay men and lesbians – drag queens, butch women, effeminate men, and the leather community – implicitly marking ‘gay’ as white, middle class, and gender normative” (227). Rupp and Taylor concur, stating: “From the assimilationist ‘We’re just like you’ tendency of gay and lesbian activism, from the homophile movement of the 1950’s to the present, drag queens have been an embarrassment” (Drag Queens, 185). Like drag queens today, certain gay American men in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century felt angry towards fairies for embodying the stereotypes that society placed on male homosexuals. Chauncey notes that:

The resentment many gay men felt toward the fairies, though, may have resulted as much from the affinity they felt with them as from the

affinity they felt with them as from the difference in their styles. The fact that many men referred to 'flaming faggots' or 'swishes' as 'obvious types' or 'extreme homosexuals' suggests the extent to which they saw themselves as part of a continuum linking them to the public stereotype, a continuum on which they represented merely a 'less extreme' form of the fairy (104).

In her research on drag culture in the 1960s, Esther Newton also found that drag queens were stigmatized within the community: "For instance, female impersonators are considered by most homosexuals to be too overt. They are consistently placed on the low end of the continuum of stigmatization, and one of the first things that female impersonators must learn is not to recognize anyone on the street or in any other public place unless they are recognized first" (Mother Camp, 25). Newton goes on to note that:

The drag queen symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear the most in themselves, all that they say they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, the stigma. In this way, the term 'drag queen' is comparable to 'nigger.' And like that word, it may be all right in an in-group context but not in an out-group one. Those who do not want to think of themselves or be identified as drag queens under any circumstances attempt to disassociate themselves from 'drag' completely. These homosexuals deplore drag shows and profess total lack of interest in them.

Their attitude toward drag queens is one of condemnation combined with the expression of vast social distance between themselves and the drag queen. Other homosexuals enjoy being queens among themselves, but do not want to be stigmatized by the heterosexual culture. These homosexuals admire drag and drag queens in homosexual contexts, but deplore female impersonators and street fairies for 'giving us a bad name' or 'projecting the wrong image' to the heterosexual culture. The drag queen is definitely a marked man in the subculture (Mother Camp, 104).

During this same time period on Fire Island, Newton notes that the social stigma of being a drag queen made it difficult for them to support themselves economically: "The poorest and least accomplished as performers or those with drug habits turned to hustling, which compounded their stigmatization; many of the more ambitious and talented became hairdressers as the only legitimate employment that would allow them to supplement their incomes from female impersonation" (Cherry Grove, 133). One of Cherry Grove's star drag queens, Dick Addison, "understood that the gay movement was hostile toward drag because 'they don't want homosexuality laughed at'" (Cherry Grove, 241). Chauncey also suggests that the antagonism between masculine gay men and fairies was really a kind of class antagonism, as the majority of fairies were a part of the working class, and the majority masculine gay men were a part of the middle-class (106). Even today, antagonism between mainstream gay men and drag queens

persists. Champagne, whom I interviewed, stated how a former boyfriend asserted: “no boyfriend of mine is going to be a drag queen.” In his anthropological study of drag queens in Atlanta, Georgia McNeal noted that: “Likewise, there is an internal social hierarchy within the gay community in which drag queens literally embody the stigma of male homosexuality as effeminacy and therefore occupy a lower, more stigmatized position within the gay community as a whole” (355). Thus, when one begins to analyze the political import of drag performances, one must also recognize the double stigma that drag queens embody. Berkowitz similarly notes that:

Drag queens comprise a community that is not only labeled as deviant by mainstream society, but is also separated from the stigmatized groups of non-cross-dressing gay men and heterosexual transvestites. The drag queen is part of a subgroup that consists of the outcasts of two stigmatized groups, gay men and heterosexual cross dressers, and thus endures the effects of multiple negative identities. Furthermore, the relatively small number of drag queens increases the likelihood that this behavior is perceived as unusual and bizarre (13).

In their performances, then, drag queens must resist both heterosexual and conservative homosexual agendas that restrict their often sexually-explicit critiques of the gender dichotomy.

### ***Subversive Politics: Drag as a Political Act***

The subversive power of drag performances in queer communities in the United States has been well-documented; drag performances reveal the socially-constructed nature of gender and critique the binary. Anthropologist Rosalind Morris agrees, noting that “By making gender so fabulously artificial, these performances are said to show up the artifice of gender” (583). Drag performances are also linked to the *politics of the body* because: “In such protests, the body of the performer highlights the social basis of gender and sexuality and becomes a weapon to contest the dominant heterosexual gender codes” (“Chicks with Dicks”, 116). In other words, by confusing categories of “man” and “woman,” drag queens are disrupting one of the most important organizing principles in all human societies: gender. Pandora Boxx, who performs in Rochester, believes that drag shows can reveal the socially-constructed nature of gender: “It is we as human beings who dictated how each sex should look when it comes to hairstyle, makeup, [and] clothes. We are not born that way. It’s a learned behavior. If you look back at history some of what men wore as regular clothes would be considered drag now. Drag makes us question our stereotypes and our gender role assignments.” Not all anthropologists believe that such rituals of inversion subvert cultural norms; some have even argued that they are “intended to preserve and even...strengthen the established order.” From his analysis of African rituals of inversion, Max Gluckman argues that: “the lifting of the normal taboos and restraints obviously serves to emphasize them” and “by allowing people to behave

normally prohibited ways, gave expression, in a reverse form, to the normal rightness of a particular kind of social order” (115-116). It is, then “the acceptance of the established order as right and good, and even sacred, [which] seems to allow unbridled license, very rituals of rebellion, for the order itself keeps this rebellion within bounds” (Gluckman, 125). While this perspective has some validity, it does not recognize the dynamic quality of cultural systems. Through time and space, the very “established order” to which Gluckman refers will evolve, changing what is and what is not considered acceptable behavior.

The practice of drag performance in the United States has certainly evolved over time, yet it continues to challenge traditional notions of “masculinity” and “femininity” in American culture. Drag queens, who can appear to be particularly convincing women, speak in low baritone voices. They also make comments about their feminine bodies; Ambrosia Salad, a drag queen in Rochester informed that audience one night that: “I think I just lactated.” Butler goes even further, arguing that audience members assume the actor’s “true” biological gender before they interpret the performance: “It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency. The point is rather different. If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender” (Gender Trouble, xxiii). In sum, drag performances are not artistic performances for art’s sake. Taylor and Rupp agree: “We suggest that

drag as performed at the 801 [Cabaret] should be understood not only as commercial performance but as a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality” (Drag Queens, 2). Pandora Boxx, who performs in Rochester, definitely believes that her performances are political:

Anything that goes against the norm becomes political at some point. I think because drag queens are often more visible is does poise drag to become more political and outspoken. American politics are drag in a way too. Drag is all about putting on the appearance of someone else. How many politicians put on their own version of a drag face and go out and smile to the people while they are dealing with the devil behind the scenes?

Judith Butler emphasizes that the artistic, the performative, and the cultural have always been political for queer communities in the U.S. Indeed, the theatrical aspect of gay and lesbian activism in the United States, particularly during the outbreak of AIDS in the gay male community was crucial to furthering a gay and lesbian agenda:

“To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: the hyperbolic “performance” of death in the practice of “die-ins” and the theatrical “outness” by which queer activism has disrupted the closeting distinction between public and private space have proliferated sites of politicization and AIDS awareness

throughout the public realm.

Indeed, an important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake... Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles, the sliding between the march (New York City) and the parade (San Francisco); die-ins by ACT UP, kiss-ins by Queer Nation; drag performance benefits for AIDS... the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism; performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the de-sexualization of the lesbian; tactical interruptions of public forums by lesbian and gay activists in favor of drawing public attention and outrage to the failure of government funding of AIDS research and outreach" (Bodies That Matter, 233).

An example of performative resistance within the gay and lesbian community *out of drag* was documented by Newton on Fire Island. Heterosexual tourists would regularly spy on gays and lesbians in their homes during the 1970s. Amelia Migliaccio noted that one time "a group of women, with husbands standing behind [said] 'Oh, how cute, they're eating!' Whereupon Babe jumped up and said, 'Come on in, your daughter's here!'... And another time she took a can of Raid and went outside and just started to spray. That was terrible. But that was the attitude...'Oh, look, they're eating.' You know, I mean like just a zoo" (Cherry Grove, 247). Champagne, a drag performer

from Upstate New York, noted the important role that drag queens have played within the larger gay and lesbian movement, particularly during the Stonewall Riot: "it wasn't a bunch of gay men and lesbians, it was drag queens who were pulled out and arrested... if it wasn't for stonewall, a lot of gay rights wouldn't be where they are today." The importance of drag queens in the larger gay and lesbian movement was not lost on Taylor and Rupp, who noted: "their resistance has also been important to the organized gay and lesbian movement. From Jose Sarria, drag queen and political candidate, to the drag queen chorus line challenging the police the night of the raid at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, drag queens, however ambivalently viewed by the movement, have been there" (Drag Queens, 186). Drag queens have used their persona to enact particularly powerful performances of resistance. For example, Gene Malin, who performed as a pansy (not a drag queen) in New York City during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was not afraid to stand up for himself:

After winning a prize for being the 'best dressed woman' at a Greenwich Village drag ball, he had wandered into a cafeteria without having bothered to change his clothes... when a part of four rough looking birds tossed a pitcher of hot water at him as he danced by, he pitched into them. After beating three of them into insensibility, the fight went into the street, with two taxi drivers coming to the assistance of the surviving member of the original foursome (Chauncey, 316).



Champagne also discussed how drag queens reacted to the introduction of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s: “when AIDS and HIV first came out it was the drag queens who were going out and doing benefits, giving money when it first was the gay cancer...trying to get people aware of what this was.” This history is not lost on Champagne, who raises money for children and families affected by HIV/AIDS through the annual Snowball Benefit, which she spearheads. It is a personal issue for Champagne, who acknowledges that a lot of drag queens are no longer performing because they have “died of AIDS.” Champagne says that as a drag queen performing in her benefit “you want to update them [the audience], you want to make them aware of what’s going on, you want to be politically aware and you know responsible...a lot of people don’t fucking know because it’s kinda like really blasé now – it’s [referring to HIV/AIDS] still here people, it still exists, we still need money, they are still looking for a cure.”

An important ritual of drag performance in American culture is the Invasion of the Pines. It began when Teri Warren, an Italian-American drag queen went to the Pines (a primarily upper-class, conservative, gay community on Fire Island) in drag to get dinner, but was not served because he was “not properly attired.” After the incident, a group of gay men (and at least two lesbians) dressed in drag and marched to the Pines in protest. Between eight and fourteen people, wearing “the most ridiculous drag” participated, and as they marched they sang “God Bless America.” Amelia, a participant, remembers:

So...people ...started to look and say, ‘what the hell is that?’ ... Well, we got out of the boat and Nick is carrying this big sign. It says, “Pines people are plastic’ or, ‘Pines people don’t know how to live.’ And I’m saying, ‘We’re gonna die, I know we’re gonna die here. They’re gonna kill us.’...But what happened was everybody started to laugh, I mean they thought it was really funny. And we just walked around and we went into the Blue Whale [the restaurant that Teri Warren was kicked out of] and they were so ecstatic that we were there they bought us a drink (Cherry Grove, 269-270).

This protest became a tradition, and “by the late 1980s it took the largest double-decker ferry to carry all the invaders to the Pines, and the crowd awaiting them there could be numbered in the thousands” (Cherry Grove, 270). Newton argues that the ritual “insists on kinship and commonality...bridges invidious class and generational distinctions and reasserts gay nationalism” (Cherry Grove, 271).

A particularly poignant moment in my fieldwork was when I witnessed a drag queen perform as Sarah Palin. The emcee of the show, Ambrosia Salad, asked the audience: “How many are following politics? A loud set of applause then erupted out of the audience. “We have a special treat for you...she was just debating against Biden... she can see Irondequoit [location near Rochester, NY] from her house.” Miss Darienne Lake then came out onto the stage wearing glasses, a wig and a wardrobe similar to that worn by Sarah Palin. In the performance

. she sang Meredith Brooks' song "Bitch," which emphasizes the multi-faceted roles and personalities that women sport. Her performance was highly sexualized; she used a lot of tongue action and revealed a large bosom. After the performance, Ambrosia Salad said "she's very folksy tonight" in reference to political commentators' opinions that Sarah Palin's ability to speak to the common American was her greatest asset. This ethnographic moment was heavily steeped in meaning; it can be read as political commentary, gender critique, and the history of American conservatism and the queer community. As a social conservative, Sarah Palin sparked fear in the queer community, and represented the socially-conservative segment of the Republican Party that former President George Bush supported during his two terms in office. Miss Darienne Lake's representation of Sarah Palin, however, was highly sexualized; in a way this counters her socially-conservative façade and plays with the notion of Sarah Palin as a sexual being. In fact, after her performance the emcee, Ambrosia Salad said: "She's a cock-sucking mom who loses her lipstick." While this representation is clearly problematic from a feminist perspective, it does point out the hypocrisy of a politician who supports abstinence-only education. All human beings, even socially-conservative politicians, such as Sarah Palin, are sexual, and this is a theme that drag queens try to bring to their audiences.

Often, overtly political statements are made as side-bar commentary in drag performances. In Key West, Rupp and Taylor observed drag queens "talk about the gay

and lesbian movement, AIDS, gay marriage, and discrimination" (*Drag Queens*, 143). I observed such statements during my fieldwork as well; when introducing a visiting performer from Florida, Ambrosia Salad cried out: "You know the state with the hanging chads...maybe this is too long ago for some of you... You know, back when Gore was supposed to win."

Young queers as a whole seem do not seem to be as embarrassed by drag performances as some older members of the community are. In fact, it is the radical and rebellious nature of the performance that makes it so intriguing to young, queer Americans. In a focus group discussion among queer college students and allies at the State University of New York at Geneseo, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were brought up in the conversation. The international organization consists of drag performers who wear the traditional attire of Catholic nuns. Their highly visible performances are clearly political in nature, and are of course a parody on the strict social conservatism present in the Roman Catholic Faith. As Senelick notes: "By 1981 the order contained fifteen sisters and two novices, including Sister Missionary Position, Sister Homo Fellatio, Sister Hysterectoria, and Sister Searching for Men. The following year, Sister Boom Boom...ran for a post on the Board of Supervisors, San Francisco's governing body" (466). Their political activism included:

reciting litanies and antiphonies at public events, for example, 'From the prejudice of Ronald Regan/Let us protect ourselves.' They

protested the Pope's visit to the city by canonizing the late Harvey Milk; exorcised Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly; gave public readings of The Satanic Verses, and conferred sainthood on such fellow-travelers as Harvey Feinstein, Lily Tomlin, and Shirley MacLaine. They made frequent television appearances to debate political issues and gay rights. By the time they celebrated their Decade of Decadence in 1989 with a formal ADIS benefit there were thirty sisters, several of them female and/or heterosexual (468).

One student noted that: "they [Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence] are everywhere in the world, they are all over the place." Immediately, another student interrupted saying: "they're doing missionary work." After a period of collective laughter, a third student asserted: "they're recruiters," playing off the assertion in mainstream heterosexual culture that gay men and lesbians have to "prey" on youth to try to convert them to a homosexual lifestyle.

While drag queens emphasize the differences between audience members in their performances (in terms of gender and sexual orientation specifically), they also seem to emphasize the unity that all human beings share. As Champagne emphasized, "we're all people...we breath the same...we think the same...we go through the same shit." In my fieldwork in Rochester, I have found that drag performances are always lead by an emcee who welcomes the audience as a whole, and throughout the performance tries to create a sense of unity

amongst everyone in the bar. In their study of drag queens in Key West, Rupp and Taylor have also noted how drag queens try to emphasize the humanity of all peoples through their performances on the stage.

Not all drag queens see their performances as inherently political. Champagne asserted that aside from a few political jokes, her performances are not necessarily political. Part of the difficulty in determining whether queens view their performances political or not is the very term "political" itself, and it is often only read in its most formal sense (in reference to party politics, judicial systems, etc). Additionally, one must acknowledge that drag queens, as individuals often living outside of the academic community, are often unexposed to the language and concepts explored in gender and queer theory. Thus, one cannot expect them to understand their performances within the framework of gender theory, which is often relegated to the ivory tower of the academy. Rupp and Taylor agree: "the drag queens and their audiences, as we have seen, are unlikely to talk 'cultural repertoires' or 'counter-hegemonic gender and sexual meanings' or even 'collective identity,' but that does not make their performances of protest any less confrontational, intentional, solidarity-building, or indeed, any less compelling" (*Drag Queens*, 22). Whose interpretation, then wins out, the anthropologist's or the performer's? Numerous anthropologists, particularly those examining ritual studies, have noted the etic/emic paradox that exists in the discipline. Victor Turner posits this same question: "How, then, can a social anthropologist justify his claim to be able to interpret a society's

ritual symbols more deeply and comprehensively than the actors themselves?" (*Forest of Symbols*, 26). Turner thinks that the anthropologist can and should interpret the symbolic meaning of a performance: "he [Turner assumes that all anthropologists are male] can place this ritual in its significant field setting and describe the structures and properties of that field" (*Forest of Symbols*, 26-27). At the same time, he acknowledges that the anthropologist is embedded within her/his own "structural perspective." By this he means that the anthropologist's "own vision is circumscribed by his particular position, or even a set of situationally conflicting positions, both in the persisting structure of his society, and also in the role structure of the given ritual" (*Forest of Symbols*, 27). As a self-identified gay man, I think that my position makes me well-suited for interpreting the meaning behind drag performance. In the end, I think it is important to find a balance between these two perspectives. Of course, the lives of LGBTIQ individuals are inherently political; their very existence is made political in a society where they are treated and represented as second-class citizens. However, the way that the anthropologist and the performer define a "political performance" may be vastly different. Overall, drag queens are not afraid to address the discrimination faced by queer Americans with their sassy, dynamic, and feisty personalities. When discussing legacy of George Bush's presidency, Champagne chimed in with: "it's like you're trying to tell us who we can and cannot love and who we can and cannot marry...who the fuck are they...you are supposed to represent your

entire country."

### ***Problematic Performances: Racism and Misogyny in Drag***

Within some feminist circles, drag queens are seen as perpetuating negative images of American women; in fact some compare the performances of drag queens to racist blackface performances. With their hyper-femininity, drag queens represent a certain type of woman on the stage. This woman is often represented as white, blonde, very attractive, highly sexualized, with large breasts. Perhaps one of the greatest theoretical hurdles that one must confront when studying drag queen performances in the United States is the often sexist representations that they support. Morris describes the central theoretical issue that has made studies of drag problematic for scholars:

Indeed, the theory of performativity has turned to drag for its metaphors, its exemplary instances, and its structural models. The literature on this topic is divided between works that treat transvestite and transgendered performances as subversive of the dominant sex/gender system and those that see them as an element buttressing and reconfirming binary opposition through an instructive but ultimately resolved blurring (582-583).

One need only look at the critiques surrounding Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* to understand how divisive this issue is amongst gender theorists (*Paris is Burning*). bell hooks in particular has been critical of drag performances for perpetuating misogynistic, racist themes (hooks, 214).

Other critics have noted incidents of misogyny in drag performances. Morris recounts an incident that Esther Newton describes in her ethnography of Fire Island in which men performing in drag prevented lesbians from participating in the experience:

“Newton has done just that with her description of a conflict that arose in Cherry Grove, New York, when lesbians attempted to enter a drag show and gay men rejected their right to masquerade in the feminine. Somewhat soberingly, accounts like these indicate that, even when self-consciously addressed to the matter of gender, drag can reinscribe dominant ideology – not because it provides an exemplary resolution but because the subject of conscious manipulation can never fully enter into the realm of the unconscious” (584).

The debate centering on drag performances as anti-feminist is rooted in issues of identity, identity politics, and internalized homophobia. McNeal, perhaps the only gay male anthropologist to have studied drag queen performances in the United States, notes painfully that

We should remain ever cognizant of how individuals and groups may exacerbate and even intensify certain oppressions at the same time that they attempt to reclaim and rectify others... Drag highlights the performative aspects of gender, and it is subversive and parodic by turns. But it is important that as observing analysts we do not foreclose upon any final interpretation of drag because

in many ways it re-instantiates the hegemonic system of binary gender and buttresses the status quo as much as it subverts it. It is much too simplistic to pose drag performance as either subversive or reaffirming of dominant cultural models of gender and sexuality... It is sobering and disheartening to observe attempts at assertiveness, empowerment, and transcendence through the marginal play of drag that resorts to re-stigmatization and sexism (360).

From my fieldwork experiences, I have seen several examples of drag queen performances that can be read as misogynistic. I observed one performance in Rochester, NY that was particularly troubling. In the performance, Miss Darienne Lake performed as Rihanna, a popular female musical artist who had just recently been in the news for having suffered from domestic abuse. Miss Darienne Lake came out on stage wearing make-up to simulate a bruised body (with a particularly dark black eye), and was punched, kicked and scratched on stage by another performer. Later, Miss Aggy Dune performed as M.I.A., the pregnant Sri Lankan female rapper. The drag queen wore an outfit similar to the one M.I.A. wore at the Grammys – it was made of black fabric, and had a black-and-white polka dot pattern fabric on the breasts and stomach (a fake pregnant stomach was hidden under the clothes. At the end of the show, the drag queen used a coat hanger (handed to her from backstage) on stage to simulate an abortion. Then, Miss Darienne Lake, who was still dressed as Rhianna, came out on stage and proceeded to punch

Miss Aggy Dune repeatedly in her stomach. Certainly such a performance can be read as being misogynistic. During another fieldwork visit, a special drag contest was being held for amateurs. One of the categories was lawn attire, meaning that they had to dress in a lawn ornament theme. One performer wore a black burqa, and carried on stage plastic flowers and a flamingo whirligig and lay on the floor to imitate a lawn. The same performer came out in the same black burqa in the “recession gown” (cheap attire) category and revealed a short skirt underneath made from newspaper. The emcee, Pandora Box, exclaimed: “code orange, code orange!” and the performer ran off stage. The audience found both performances extremely comedic, if not the most comedic of all the performances. Such representations of women, however, “play” with the oppression of women. Butler, who finds a way to mediate from both sides of the debate, asserts that: “The feminist analysis [of drag] thus makes male homosexuality about women and one might argue that at its extreme, this kind of analysis is in fact a colonization in reverse, a way for feminist women to make themselves into the center of male/male homosexual activity (and thus to reinscribe the heterosexual matrix, paradoxically, at the heart of the radical feminist position) (Bodies That Matter, 127). Coming from a lesbian perspective, Newton is able to look at male-bodied drag performances through both a heterosexual and misogynistic lens. She notes how feminist critiques of drag queen performances can be very limiting. Using the perspective of psychological anthropology, McNeal (who self-identifies as a gay male)

tries to understand how sexist representations of women emerge in drag queen performances. In part, gay men embrace performing as women because “For these few moments, the ‘femininity’ attributed to gay men is not stigmatized and ashamed, but in control and assertive, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world” (346-347). Thus, through representing women on the stage, performing as drag queens is an act of resistance: “the symbolic inversion of the drag show provides catharsis for those gay men present who enjoy and laugh as the personification of their own stigma takes undisputed control over the court” (348). Gay men are able to control, and indeed, reappropriate the femininity that has been placed upon them by mainstream society through these performances. Therefore, “Gay men have responded to this situation not only by poking fun at the world, but also by poking fun at themselves and women who occupy a similar, though not equivalent, psycho-cultural position in relation to men concerning matters of desire” (347). This is supported by drag queens who assert that they are celebrating, not demeaning women in their performances. Indeed, Champagne sees drag performance as “an homage” to women. Pandora Boxx does not believe that drag queens’ performances are inherently sexist:

I certainly understand where that comes from but I think it’s ridiculous. You can’t portray something so amazingly if you view it in a negative light. If drag queens truly hated women or anything like that they would not be able to go out on stage and celebrate the image of a

woman. If anything drag pokes fun at the image of what we have deemed women should look like and be like. I don't know if you would ever find a drag queen who says, I dress up like a woman because I hate women. Dressing up like a woman comes from a place of love. Love of the image of a woman, love of the powerful woman, love of our own mothers, love of femininity. It's all about love.

Similarly, Milla, a drag queen in Key West exclaimed: "Yes, ladies and gentlemen, women are power. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them...And that's why we spend all of our time being effeminate and looking up to women and thinking that they are all that they are" (*Drag Queens*, 144). In the documentary *Wigstock*, two African-American drag queens discussed their opinions on the issue. One argued that: "I think of myself as a butch drag queen – I'm paying homage to strong black women." The other agreed, stating; "Women are a lot stronger than men generally anyway because since they've been oppressed so long...they are more emotionally strong, they're more in touch with their spirituality" (Silvers). Finally, McNeal acknowledges that many drag queen performances are indeed sexist, despite any psychological explanation. However, one way to make sense of these sexist representations is that such "misogyny...is deeply tied to gay men's internalized homophobia and culturally learned shame" (348). Thus, until gay men are able to fight their own internalized homophobia, drag queen performances are likely to continue to have many misogynistic themes.

Additionally, the argument has been made within the queer community that contemporary drag queens are not impersonating women; instead they are performing as drag queens, a unique category of individuals unto itself. As Champagne notes, "it's really not about portraying a woman." Instead, they perform as drag queens, which tend to represent an extreme femininity. Because drag queens have formed their own unique subculture within the United States, drag performances tend to have particular similarities in different regions of the country. Such performances have their own established norms and rules, which amateurs must accept. As Goffman notes, "When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both" (27). In other words, drag queens cannot be said to perform as women; instead, in order to perform in professional venues, they must perform as drag queens.

Performances of drag queens have also always been "raced" as much as they have been "gendered." Some contemporary drag queen performers actually do don blackface. One student in a PRIDE meeting focus group at the State University of New York at Geneseo noted how she had heard about: "a blackface drag queen...the character is a three hundred pound welfare queen who has nineteen kids and drives a Cadillac." The student was troubled by this character, which clearly played off painful stereotypes of black femininity in American

culture. This character was not a myth, however. Chuck Knipp, a white gay male, performs in blackface under the persona Shirley Q. Liquor, an obese African-American woman on welfare who has nineteen children. He is well-known within drag queen circles, and has videos featured on YouTube (McCullom, 1). Champagne stated that she has seen drag queens perform in blackface, and asserted that “I didn’t even recognize him until he walked up to me – I was like you look fabulous as a black woman!”

On an episode of RuPaul’s Drag Race, a reality show competition for drag queens that aired in the spring of 2009, had an episode in which contestants were asked to make a drag persona inspired by Oprah Winfrey. At least one of the contestants, Jade, took this instruction literally, and tried to darken his complexion for the role (“Queens of All Media”). Champagne noted that she has seen some performers in blackface and said that sometimes it can be very realistic looking. As troubling as the history of blackface is, drag performances in America have always required performers to experiment with new identities. The ritualistic role reversal in drag performances makes it an appropriate cultural space for actors to “play” with the concept of racial and/or ethnic identity.

### ***Sexualizing Drag Performance***

An important function of drag is to highlight the sexualized experiences of Americans; indeed, drag performances can be read as a critique of the puritanical nature of American culture. Sexuality is in itself, of course, a metaphor for power, and thus it is rational for drag queens to use sexual per-

formances, jokes, metaphors, acts, and innuendos in their shows to combat an oppressive power structure. Rupp and Taylor explain the power of bringing sexuality to the forefront of drag queen performances:

“the sex talk and the public nudity and the groping serve as an extension of the way the girls challenge conventional understandings of male and female, straight and gay. In their public talk about sex and the slang words for body parts and sex acts that they bring into regular use, the drag queens practice what might be called a politics of vulgarity... In the same way that they blur the boundaries of gender and sexual categories and violate traditional distinctions between public and private, they cross the line between the respectable and the vulgar. Their bawdy talk about sex acts shocks the audience, creating an opening for the introduction of ideas about gender and sexuality that are shocking in a different sense” (Drag Queens, 140).

Indeed, an important part of the drag performance is its “shock factor.” In “On top of all this is the fact that drag queens make sex, which is usually far more private, a very public affair... The language the drag queens use about sex and their constant talk about sex acts contribute to an environment in which anything goes and nothing is shocking” (Drag Queens, 138). During their fieldwork, Taylor and Rupp observed Sushi, a drag queen, remind the audience that: “we are drag queens! We do have dicks and two balls!” (“Chicks with Dicks”, 114). In the field I also noticed many different



performative acts that were meant to shock the audience. Such acts would range from drag queens suddenly speaking in a very low, masculine voice, to placing the hands of audience members on their genitalia. In an interview with Champagne she noted that the point of the show is not to sexually arouse the audience, however, “if you do get aroused...meet me after the show.” Champagne’s statement exemplifies drag performances; it combines comedy with an openly sexual discourse. Even student members of the Pride Alliance at the State University of New York at Geneseo recognized the importance of sexuality in drag performances; one student noted how “drag is very sexualized in so many ways.” Drag queens perfect their gender performance by learning how to move their bodies in a sexual manner. When asked how she moves when she performs, Pandora Boxx stated: “Well, I try to dance. I’m no professional dancer by any means. I watch other entertainers like Madonna, Britney Spears, Pink and such to try and take little moves here and there and make them my own. There is usually a lot of sexuality to my moves on stage.” On the eve before Valentine’s Day, a drag performance in Rochester, NY was highly sexualized; this was especially fitting given the date of the show. The emcee of the drag show, called the Salad Bar Review, stated: “we’ll do a little demonstration right here, no that’s all extra ladies and gentlemen, that’s the after hours show – once the bar closes down we lock the door and that’s when the real Salad Bar Review starts.”

Some audience members are not always comfortable with the highly sexualized

nature of drag queen performances. Champagne “in case you haven’t guessed, you are at a drag show if someone comes over to you and sits on your lap...its all in fun...we are here to entertain you...if you can’t handle that then here is the door and I can refund your ticket money.” Some people have even pushed her away when she approached audience members during the show; when asked about who pushed her away, she said: “I’ve had lesbians do that, I’ve had straight men do that.” The anxiety that drag performances can elicit is not restricted to any one “category” of people. However, it does seem that straight audiences, who may be less comfortable with drag queens, show higher levels of anxiety. In her ethnographic research, Esther Newton observed the different ways that gay and straight audiences interacted with drag queens:

In Chicago, one very popular performer came down off the stage as part of his act and held out his hands to the gay audience sitting along the bar. The people in the audience virtually climbed all over each other to touch him. In Kansas City, I saw the same performer come down into the straight audience, and the people at the tables as he walked among them visibly shrank back. At one point he accidentally touched a woman, and she actually screamed ‘Get it away from me.’ At this point another woman jumped up yelling, ‘I’ll touch it,’ and pulled his wig. Since the wigs are usually glued on fairly firmly, it did not come off. The second woman then screamed louder than the first, ‘It’s its own hair!’ and

jumped back (66).

Milla, a drag performer in Key West similarly asserted: "If you don't like the show, there's an escalator right there. If it's not turned on, just tell me, I'll help you down the stairs" (*Drag Queens*, 113). By making such statements, drag queens claim their space on the stage, and assert their dominance over audience members who may not be comfortable challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality.

In addition, drag queens subvert traditional definitions of sexual identity by achieving the sexual arousal of heterosexual men in their performances. Champagne provided a specific example of when she was able to sexually arouse a heterosexual man at the request of his girlfriend: "I got down on my hands and knees...put the zipper in my mouth and got right up in his crotch and he was turning his head...he started to get hard...the girlfriend was taking pictures and laughing...it's fun because they [heterosexual men] get kinda embarrassed." Although not performing in drag at the time of this incident, Champagne also noted a time when she resisted male heteronormative culture when being bullied in high school: "the kid came out in the hallway and started saying shit to me...and I said what's wrong? You're girlfriend ain't blowing you the right way? You drop your fucking pants and I'll show you how to suck a cock...his mouth was gaped open and he couldn't say anything...I blew him kisses the rest of the day." During a show in Rochester, Samantha Vegas harassed a young heterosexual man celebrating a bachelor party by saying: "I bet you're

Irish...Oh, well does the top match the bottom [in reference to his red hair]?" Samantha then proceeded to call him "Ben-Gay" and asked him to "Ben-Dover." The other men in the bachelor party were very nervous to approach the drag queen. However, Samantha Vegas told Ben that if he took off his shirt she would show him her breasts. She then preceded to hand him one of her fake breasts and put it under his shirt. In doing so, she confused the gender identity of the male, heterosexual audience member. Joe, another heterosexual male member of the party was reluctant to approach the stage when called upon. Samantha Vegas then cried out: "I bet you take it like a man but scream like a woman." At one point in the performance, the bachelor's friends told him to "just back down." Samantha Vegas then questioned why his friends didn't want him to get married: "Do you have a crush on him? I bet you're so far in the closet that you can't even find the door." She then picked out one of the party members who was hiding in a corner and asked him to come and stage and dance to the music. Surprisingly, when on stage he took off his shirt, danced, and thrust his behind at Joe; he proceeded to take off his pants and lowered his boxers, and even received tips. Rupp and Taylor also observed that drag queens in Key West badger straight male audience members: "Although the drag queens appreciate their straight audiences, Kylie also says, 'straight people don't know how much gay people love to see us make fun of them.' The gay men in the audience enjoy, as one said the drag queens 'get some guy up there trying to take his shorts off and things like that. Especially because they always get

the straight boys up there to do that.’ Another gay man commented, ‘I mean, I love it when they hassle straight men’ (Drag Queens, 191). A specific ethnographic event highlighted for Rupp and Taylor the centrality of fighting male heteronormative structures in their performances: “Kylie pours right from the bottle into volunteers’ mouths, making comparisons to fellatio. When the straight man gags, Kylie gives him grief: ‘God. And I bet you beg her to suck it until you come. Maybe now you understand why she doesn’t want to swallow.’ In this way, they express anti-male sentiments and critique male domination of women. There’s a lot of hostility in the show directed at straight men” (Drag Queens, 134). Esther Newton argues that by celebrating their “gayness,” drag queens can invert the traditional social structure in which something that is “so gay” becomes something positive, not negative:

The drag queen symbolizes an open declaration, even celebration, of homosexuality. The drag queen says for his gay audience, who cannot say it, ‘I’m gay, I don’t care who knows it; the straight world be damned.’ ‘Live’ impersonators whom I saw working in gay bars almost invariably ‘put down’ any obvious heterosexuals who happened in, to the great satisfaction of the gay audience (Mother Camp, 64).

In fact, drag queens can use their skills as comediennes to oppose dominant heterosexual systems. In her fieldwork, Newton observed this first-hand:

The performer was attempting to talk

to a lady in the audience whom I could not see, and referred to her date as ‘that fat man you’re with.’ The man shot back, ‘We’d get along a lot better if you’d address me as sir.’ This obviously angered Tris [drag queen], who retorted, ‘You paid a dollar to come in here and watch me; you’d better believe I wouldn’t pay a dime to watch you roast in hell.’ The man wouldn’t give up, but repeated his demand, where upon Tris replied with elaborate sarcasm in his voice, ‘Sir...?’ I’m more sir than you’ll ever be, and twice the broad you’ll ever pick up.’ This drew a laugh from the audience and silenced the man (Mother Camp, 66).

Drag queens also harass heterosexual women in many of their performances. McNeal notes that one reason for this is that drag queens, who are most often gay men, are often perceived as vying for the sexual attention of masculine men, as are heterosexual women. He also asserts that: “If the drag queen – or male homosexual – manages to beat women at the glamour game, then s/he has at least momentarily outwitted one aspect of the cultural model of compulsory heterosexuality” (359). During fieldwork, there were several times when drag queens would bring heterosexual female audience members into their performances. During one drag performance in Rochester, I witnessed two separate heterosexual women both turning fifty years old on the same night. One of the women was asked by a drag queen to “de-boxer” a “straight” young man in the bathroom. She was followed

into the bathroom with this young man, where she proceeded to take off his pants. The other woman, highly intoxicated, was brought on stage where she danced provocatively with the drag queen. On another date two heterosexual female audience members were harassed by the drag queen emcee who asked if this was their first time attending a drag performance. Upon confirmation, the drag queen asked the woman why they were holding on to their jackets and purses, and if they were too afraid [of a queer space] to bring them to coat check.

In general, drag performances confuse the sexualized identities of audience members themselves because they often combine “sex acts that are outside their category of gender and sexual preference” (*Drag Queens*, 136). For example, in Rupp and Taylor’s study, both lesbians and heterosexual women were sexually attracted to the drag queens in their study: “obviously, people have different responses to the girls, but it is noticeable that women, both straight and lesbian, tended to talk about their attraction to those...who look most like women in drag” (*Drag Queens*, 193).

### ***Theatricality of Drag***

The performative aspect of drag shows begs for an anthropological analysis; indeed, it too is bounded by specific norms and rules that determine when and who can perform on stage. From my fieldwork experience, specific lighting and musical signs are used to cue the audience that a show is about to begin. Curtains and doors block off the “sacred” space in which the performers transform into queens and the “profane” space of the bar and dance floor. McNeal

describes the sacred space as a “circumscribed arena that provides a privileged window into the psychic realities of gay men, even though they are – for dynamically defensive reasons – unaware of the conflicts and ambivalences expressed in that forum” (366). One must note that the stage is only sacred during the drag performances; between or before and after acts the stage can be used as a space for resting, dancing, or occasionally, stripping. Thus the conception of a sacred or profane space is not simply limited to place, but time as well.

Drag queens inhabit a liminal space in their performances; they are, in the words of Victor Turner, “betwixt and between.” Turner argues: “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (*Ritual Process*, 95). Drag queens are not necessarily “male,” nor are they “female.” Similarly, they inhabit a space in which individuals are allowed to explore, and challenge the confines of their gender. This is both a powerful place and a dangerous place. It is within this space that they challenge the status quo.

In her ethnography *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton notes that: “In fact the distinguishing characteristic of drag... is its group character; all drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, as a theatrical structure

style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama (or theatricality)" (37). As an artistic endeavor, drag performances require queens to have a solid command of the stage, and by extension, of the audience. In their article, Rupp and Taylor note the affinity that many drag queens have to the theater: "Being a drag queen also means embracing a theatrical identity, and many of them have background in theater. Scabola has been involved in theater since elementary school and always loved it... Although for Milla being a drag queen is more profound, she also identifies as a performer. She, too, was in theater groups from a young age. What she loves is being able to use her feelings, to evoke the pain and anger and love that audience members have felt in their own lives... R.V. had been in professional summer stock theater as a boy... Inga has been in the theater since she was ten, and she, too, loves performing." ("Chicks with Dicks", 123). In my interview with Rob (who performs as Champagne in Schenectady, New York), he made it clear that his experience with the theater in high school made him more comfortable performing on stage in drag: "with acting in high school and everything we had to do classes in watching people and studying their mannerisms." Champagne also stated that "I was involved in drama in high school and I looked at it as an acting role... Rob was always the shy person where if I was Champagne I could say anything I want to." Experience within the theater allows drag queens to get into and develop a persona, a topic that will be examined in the following section. Taylor and Rupp found

that the majority of the drag queens that they studied in Key West also had familiarity with the theater: "With their theatrical experience, the drag queens engage in street theater – both in the cabaret and literally on the streets - in a way that brings their work into alignment with their identity politics" ("Chicks with Dicks", 125). In their ethnography, Taylor and Rupp also note that many drag queens became familiar with using makeup through their theater experience (Drag Queens, 13). One student in the PRIDE focus group noted that the collectivity found among a group of drag queens is to be expected, as it mirrors the experience of many who are a part of a theatrical cast: "any performance, any group that you're seeing everyday you're going to have that sisterhood." Drag queens tend to be very critical of their work. After all, for most of them performing is an economic activity, and better performances mean better tips. Champagne noted that: "I'll like have a videotape and come back home that night and I'll watch the show... I've very critical of my own performances" and stated that she treated drag "like a career."

By attending amateur drag performances in Rochester, I learned to appreciate the artistic and performative talent of professional drag queens. Often amateurs are not self-confident enough to act as professionals, and will occasionally forget to or mess-up their lip-synching. Berkowitz notes that "amateur drag queens have limited status and are the ones subject to the most overt discrimination by their gay peers. Although it was at this amateur bar that we witnessed the most interactions between the drag queens and mainstream gay men, much of

this contact was characterized by disrespect and vulgarity, rather than appreciation” (29).

There are specific theatrical performances that are common throughout different drag queen performances in the United States. From my fieldwork, I have noticed that a common line for drag queens to use to start a show is “the more you drink the prettier we look.” Ambrosia Salad, an emcee drag queen at a gay bar in Rochester called this the “rule number one.” Champagne said that she used the same saying: “I made the announcement: ‘the more you drink the prettier we look’ so of course everyone is running up to that bar.”

### *Forging A New Persona*

Drag queens create persona(s) from which to express themselves as female-bodied. Professional performers cling to a specific persona as a way of making themselves identifiable to returning audience members. Indeed, Pandora Boxx argues that “If you don’t have some sort of personae, then you are not an entertainer.” The line between the drag queen’s everyday self and their drag persona, however, often becomes blurred. Roger claims that his persona, Champagne, was very different from him. Champagne was confident, whereas he was shy; Champagne was bold, whereas he was calm. However, with time he has found that both sides of his life (Roger and Champagne) have learned from one another, and have in many ways merged into one being: “Rob and Champagne have slowly morphed or learned from one another.” Taylor and Rupp recorded similar experiences in Key West: “This theatrical identity involves, just as in traditional theater, taking on a new per-

sona. ‘Sushi is different than Gary,’ says Sushi. Even Margo, who became a drag queen late in life, describes David as ‘an entirely different person’ from Margo, although ‘now they are coming together more and more’ (“Chicks with Dicks”, 124). Drag personas are highly dramatized, and are representative of an extremely sexually-charged female body. In his analysis of gay male culture in New York City just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Chauncey notes that the self-identified “fairies” would speak, move, and gesture like prostitutes, whether they were selling themselves or not. Similarly, Taylor and Rupp note that the drag queens they observed in Key West like to “hassle the straight men.” “If some of this behavior sounds masculine, they view it more as ‘acting like hookers,’ deploying the kind of sexual aggressiveness of female prostitutes” (“Chicks with Dicks”, 124).

The creation of a persona can have a very real psychological effect upon a performer. Champagne noted a shy male friend who went out in drag on Halloween (which is, of course, a holiday during which all Americans play with new roles and personas), and “as soon as he had the body suit on...he was like a totally different person... you would never know that it was him inside that costume.” Indeed, many drag queens note how their performances can be, in Champagne’s words: “kind of liberating... there’s a sense of freedom...you’re still the same person but you have a sense of freedom.” Pandora Boxx has also found drag performance to be a positive experience: “Drag can give you a sense of empowerment. All eyes are on you for the brief moment on stage and to see that you’ve

affected people, even in a small way, can really be truly powerful.” Champagne also asserted that her persona has taught her: “not to take any crap from anybody...if you can’t love yourself, how are you gonna love somebody else?”

Drag queen personas, it then seems, have the ability to increase self-confidence and self-respect in ways perhaps unattainable for gay men living in a homophobic world. Analyzing the human mind however, is not what anthropological analysis is best-suited for, and I would leave this interpretation up to the psychologists, even given their problematic relationship with the queer community in America.

#### ***Globalizing Identities and Drag Culture***

Ted Lewellen, among many other contemporary cultural anthropologists, stresses the importance of understanding processes related to globalization in order to contextualize ethnographic studies. He states: “The subjects of anthropological globalization studies are less likely to be communities or cultures than translocalities, border zones, migrations, diasporas, commodity chains, transnational corporations, foreign aid agencies, tourists, refugees, cyberspace, the influences of television and other communications media, the international processes of science or commercialized art” (57). One of the most important conclusions that can be drawn from globalization studies is that individual actors are not simply helpless victims of Westernization, but interact with technological processes to achieve personal agency. Drag performers are no different, and with the growing importance of video-sharing websites such as [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

and social networking websites such as [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) and [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com), it is clear that they are creating identities that exist as mutable beings in cyberspace.

As professional drag queens, these performers use the internet to advertise their personas and exhibit their work. On the video sharing website YouTube, this can be easily done by creating a username profile that holds videos of a single performer to be linked to one another. Drag performances from a specific contest, such as Miss Syracuse or Miss Rochester are also posted online and threaded to one another on the related videos link. This allows viewers to go from one drag video to another, shifting between performers or looking at the varied performances of a single performer. Most of the drag queens that I observed in Rochester had pages on Myspace, although I was unable to find their pages on Facebook. Champagne asserts that Myspace is “better in some aspects.” The drag queens on Myspace featured images of them with audience members and fellow queens. Their pages were also quite political, with at least one drag queen posting an image used in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign that featured a rainbow with the words “Obama Pride.” Miss Darienne Lake featured her picture dressed as Sarah Palin as her profile picture. Myspace pages can also be used to legitimize the person who performs in drag as a “normal,” educated American. For example, Samantha Vegas notes that she holds a Master’s degree in biomedical engineering from the University of Massachusetts – Boston, and both Ambrosia Salad and Pandora Boxx define themselves as a “college graduate.”

Facebook has several groups devoted to drag queens, including “Drag Queens Rock My Socks Off,” through which I met my informant, Champagne. The group, as of May 12, 2009 has 953 members, with 12 different discussion topics, 145 wall posts, 497 posted pictures, and six posted videos.

As cyberspace continues to become an increasingly important aspect of American culture in particular, drag queens will probably continue to use the internet to sell their personas and showcase their work. Any dynamic, contemporary study of drag queens, or any other identity group that transcends political boundaries, is incomplete then without an analysis of this performance space as well.

### **Conclusion**

The very nature of drag performance is one of illusion. Indeed, on some level all male-bodied drag queens do attempt to make the audience believe that they are biologically female. As Goffman asserts: “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (28). Drag queens do just that. In addition, drag queens tend to portray American women in a highly exaggerated manner, in part as a way of critiquing the clearly defined gender roles in American culture. It is important to note, however, that the performances of drag queens are very ambiguous within themselves; without soliciting information from the performer, one can never be sure if the individual is truly male-bodied or female-bodied. In fact, the power of the performance rests upon the fact that the audience may not be able to definitively identify the

biological facts of the performers. Certainly in this new technological age where body modification, including gender reassignment surgery, is not unknown, it becomes difficult to define what exactly is “male-bodied” and what is “female-bodied” in the first place. These elements of illusion, parody, satire and ambiguity, make it very difficult to draw any concrete conclusions from my study of drag queens in contemporary American culture. Yes, drag queens challenge gender norms and act as agents of resistance by putting forth a new kind of *public transcript*; at the same time, however, a paradox remains in that they often reproduce the same stereotypical performances of women that American society has formed. Gluckman would argue that by showing an extreme femininity on stage, drag queens reinforce, not subvert, the gender dichotomy. Such arguments do not acknowledge the fact that drag queens are themselves, a particular category, and community, of individuals who create their own social norms, and therefore impose boundaries on their own members’ performances.

What does the future hold for drag queens in American culture? Without prompt, Champagne stated: “I don’t think that drag queens’ or drag kings’ history are quite yet done because their still gonna play an important part in the future – what future? I don’t know yet but I think that it’s going to be part of our society.” Rupp and Taylor share an optimistic perspective by suggesting that “drag can serve as a catalyst for changes in values, ideas, and identities in twenty-first century American society” (*Drag Queens*, 6). With new identities evolving in the LGBTIQ community such



as “genderqueer” and “androgynous,” as well as practices such as “genderfucking,” drag performances highlight the importance of gender-bending in queer communities in American culture. Overall, however, drag queens reveal the hidden truth that all Americans, especially those who identify as heterosexual and “gender normative,” are putting on a gendered performance at all times and in all spaces. Indeed, we are all performing in drag.

### **Reflections**

As a queer student of anthropology, my study of drag queens in American culture has given me the opportunity to act as a native anthropologist and study those within my own community. Unlike queer anthropologists who study in “mainstream” cultures or focus on non-queer topics, such as many of those described in the groundbreaking text *Out in the Field* (edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap), I easily maneuvered between the queer, or native community and academic anthropological community, both of which have their own culture, and thus their own norms, values, and beliefs.

From this unique vantage point, I have attempted to interpret drag queen performances from the objective, analytical perspective of an anthropologist **and** from the subjective, emotional perspective of a queer American. The harmony of these two perspectives has deepened this experience, and if nothing else, calls out for more native anthropology to be conducted. Unfortunately, many within the discipline see native anthropologists as “trapped” within their own community, making them unable to impartially

analyze it. I ask, with both membership in a community and “objective” training in anthropological theory and methodology, who is better suited to represent a culture than a native anthropologist? Given the postmodern concern that all anthropologists are simply bias-filled outside observers, caught in their own, often Western, worldview, native anthropologists can mediate between these two positions and provide new insights into the paradox of the emic and the etic views within the discipline.

More broadly, native anthropologists call into question many of the central dilemmas of the discipline: Who has the right, or the privilege, to speak for a given community or describe a given culture? Who should speak for whom? Whose interpretation is correct, or at least considered more authoritative, the anthropologist’s or the native’s? Or more critically, given the fluid nature of identities, what makes one a “native” and one an “anthropologist” in the first place? My study of drag queens on the American landscape reveals, if nothing else, that native anthropologists occupy a critical and unique space in anthropological inquiry.

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