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Author
Horowitz, Katie Rebecca

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The Trouble with “Queerness”:
Drag and the Making of Two Cultures

By
Katie Rebecca Horowitz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Linda Williams, Chair
Professor Catherine Cole
Professor Judith Butler

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Abstract

The Trouble with “Queerness”: Drag and the Making of Two Cultures

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This dissertation responds to the frequent charge within academic and activist circles that queer theory is simply gay male theory cloaked in more inclusive language. Taking as its starting point an ethnographic case study of drag king and queen performance cultures, it challenges the efficaciousness of an everything and the kitchen sink approach to queer theorizing and organizing. This work constitutes the first academic monograph centered on queer life in Cleveland, Ohio and is also the first to focus simultaneously on kinging and queening, a lacuna at once explained by and demanding interrogation of the fact that these practices have almost nothing in common with each other. Despite the shared heading of drag, these iconically queer institutions overlap little with respect to audience, movement vocabulary, stage persona, and treatment of gender, class, race, and sexuality. The radical (in)difference between these genres serves as a microcosmic representation of the perennial rift between lesbians and gay men and highlights the heteronormativity of the assumption that all of the identity categories subsumed under (and often eclipsed by) the queer umbrella ought a priori to have anything in common culturally, politically, or otherwise. I argue instead for the legitimacy of studies that focus exclusively on e.g., gay men or lesbians or transsexuals, free from the intersectional compulsion to extrapolate one’s claims to the rest of the queer spectrum.

The first two chapters detail the generic constitutions of queening and kinging, arguing that the ideal of femininity operating in the former is far more fixed and hegemonic than the ideal of masculinity produced in the latter. Chapter 3 uses archival images to locate these contemporary performances within a gestural lineage dating as far back as the late nineteenth century. Such genealogical evidence contextualizes the development of kinging and queening as distinct performance practices and foregrounds their respective roles in producing the discrete and relatively coherent cultural iterations we conventionally label “lesbian” and “gay male.” Synthesizing these ethnographic and archival findings, Chapter 4 suggests that contemporary U.S. drag queens rely on the invisibility of real world social structures (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, class) to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity. I attribute this tendency to the imbrication of gay male kinship rituals with colonialist discourse, a rhetorical paradigm popularized over the last half-century by the gay service
organization the International Court System (ICS). Drawing on recent critiques of gay urbanism, homonormativity, and homonationalism, I problematize the ICS’s mobilization of imperialism as a rhetoric of community-building. Such rhetoric exemplifies the exclusionary uses of “queer” described above, and in the final chapter I propose a theory of omniperformance, a relational metaphysics of identity performance, as a solution to the paradox that queer discourse simultaneously seeks to erase differences (by insisting on the inclusion of an ever-expanding array of non-normative genders and sexualities) and to maintain differences (by framing some bodies and lives as queerer than others). The most significant conclusion of this work is that there is no difference between performance and performativity, that the rhetorical distinction between the two has exhausted its utility, and that omniperformance, a paradigm based on an ontology of bodily intra-action, accounts for both the theoretical fluidity and the apparent fixity of individual identity. Consequently, my theory decentralizes language as the sole or primary arbiter of subjectionhood and affirms that bodies share in the work of identity formation. As such, it transports us across the critical impasse that performativity grants language limitless power to make, break, and subvert identities while glossing over the material conditions and consequences of having a (particularly gendered, sexed, raced, and classed) body.
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INTRODUCTION

“Radically Different Agendas”

Are you saying it took a lesbian to fight for gay rights?

Well, you know Stephen, most people don't understand that lesbians are part of the gay rights movement.

I didn't know that.
I did not know that.
I thought you had radically different agendas.

We have the same agenda, which is about freedom.

Political comedian Stephen Colbert interviewing gay rights activist Jim Fouratt on the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots (Hoskinson 2009)

A recent queer studies conference concluded with a cutting, if familiar, refrain. Responding to a paper on “queer” psychoanalysis whose examples were drawn almost exclusively from the lives of gay men, a prominent lesbian theorist demanded, “Where are the women? Where are the women?” (Castle 2009).

As anyone versed in queer thought will apprehend, the question is specific neither to the panelist’s talk nor to the respondent’s personal sensibilities. Nor is it merely rhetorical. In the twenty years since Teresa de Lauretis inaugurated the discipline, it has become a truism that “queer theory” is really gay male theory cloaked in more inclusive language.¹ The concern is not a trivial one. In light of queer theory and the queer movement’s tremendous success in dislodging the universalizing assumption of

¹ This sentiment, rooted in early radical women of color critiques of Western feminism such as those in This Bridge Called My Back (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), predates the academic cooptation of the word “queer” and persists into the present moment. In the early 1990s, the consolidation of queer studies as a discipline provoked vociferous objections from radical lesbian feminists concerned that the prioritization of sexuality would eclipse gender difference, implicitly authorizing gay male dominance (Stein 1992; Jeffreys 1994; Zita 1994; Castle 1995). Indeed, a spare three years after she coined the term, de Lauretis (1994) herself disavowed “queer theory” on the grounds that it had been appropriated for precisely the consumerist and institutional ends it was intended to resist. During the intervening years, the political and conceptual utility of “queer” has been challenged with respect to its racial, ethnic, economic, and gendered elisions (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005), and scholars within the discipline have begun to envision a “post-queer” academic and social movement (Green 2002; McRuer 2006).
heterosexuality, those of us who engage in queer discourses should be wary of any argument that uses the history, culture, psychology, or politics of one segment of the queer population to stand in for that of the entire queer spectrum. This is a pitfall inherent to any umbrella term and, as I shall suggest in various ways throughout this dissertation, one made all the more acute by the postmodern inducement to think everything intersectionally. In the scenario above, for instance, critical attention to the juncture of gender and ambiguously defined queer sexuality raises the question of what is assumed (in this case, a normatively gay male subject) and what is effaced (lesbian subjectivities) when we invoke such a nebulous term. But a further question goes unasked in this exchange and others like it, for implicit in the grammar of “Where are the women?” is the presumption that women merit de facto consideration in the context of the (ostensibly negligent) speaker’s analysis. Pushing this line of reasoning further, the question I propose we take seriously in queer scholarship is, in any given work of queer theory, why should there be women (or for that matter gay men, bisexuals, asexuals, transsexuals, transgender individuals, the intersexed, or self-identified heterosexuals who engage in marginalized sexual practices) at all? To say this is neither an exercise in contrarianism nor an endorsement of some valuative identitarian hierarchy—a who’s who of the sexually abject—nor, least of all, an encomium for gay male hegemony. What I am challenging, however, is the self-evidence of the notion that an everything-and-the-kitchen sink approach to queer theorizing and organizing (what Elizabeth Povinelli [2009] usefully terms “queer megalomania”) is socially, politically, or philosophically efficacious. More precisely, I wish to highlight the paradoxically heteronormative stance underwriting the presumption that lesbians and gay men (or bisexuals, asexuals, transsexuals, etc.) should have anything in common culturally, politically, or otherwise. To put it more strongly, I wish to pursue the counterargument that there are many distinct, frictional, and even oppositional cultural practices that constitute the various identity categories subsumed under (and often eclipsed by) the queer banner; that we can observe, name, and theorize these categories precisely and coherently without essentializing; and that, quite the contrary, it is the telescopic use of queer as both verb and generic that presents the greatest risk of essentialism. Such essentialism is teased out in more absurd—and more concise—terms in the epigraph to this chapter. Colbert, assuming the role of ill-informed neocon blowhard, feigns cognitive dissonance at the notion that women played a vital role in the birth of gay liberation. Fourratt, like a schoolteacher explaining that Hawaii, despite its geographic remoteness from the continent, is indeed a state, patiently corrects his student’s ostensible ignorance and rhetorically forces the hypothetical lesbians back into line. Now I concede that as an analogy to the conference scenario described above, the exchange between Fourratt and Colbert comes up lacking. Unlike the theorist who asks, “Where are the women?” Colbert’s desire to distinguish lesbians from gay men is presumably rooted in his character’s misogyny. Likewise, Fourratt’s comments seem motivated by a spirit of inclusion rather than occlusion of women’s contributions to queer history. Nevertheless, I include this conversation, contrived, satirical, and flawed though it may be, as an example of how widespread and automatic the questionable assumption of gay men and lesbians’ sociopolitical alignment has become. It is the purpose of this dissertation to challenge this
In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency...Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original...


But in all the articles and studies and media exposés on drag queen culture, very little time and energy has been expended on the drag queen’s counterpart, the drag king.

Judith Halberstam (1998, 231)

It is no coincidence that, as the title of this dissertation indicates, I have chosen to examine and rework these broad, intangible currents in queer, cultural, and performance studies through the much narrower lens of drag. This project, at its core a comparative ethnography of drag king and queen shows in Cleveland, Ohio, is situated with temporal and dialectical respect to two critical moments in the development of queer theory. It has been almost fifteen years since Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* introduced academia to the drag king, a figure that belies the binaristic formulation of masculinity as essential and femininity as performed. And, perhaps more famously, more than two decades have elapsed since Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* inaugurated a widespread cultural and scholarly fascination with the drag queen as gender performativity’s *exemple par excellence*—she who pulls back the curtain on gender, exposing it as a copy of an “original” that never existed. Although in the intervening years Butler has tried to correct the misreading of drag “as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency” (2006, xxiii) it is hard to dismiss the fact that an example constituting two-and-a-half pages of a two hundred-plus page monograph has been the most salient take-away point for so many readers over so many years. Indeed, a brief Google Scholar search returns 3460 books and articles citing *Gender Trouble*’s discussion of drag.

This intervention is the product of eighteen months of fieldwork at Bounce/Union Station, an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) bar in Cleveland, Ohio. My research there focused on the drag queen revue Girls A-Go-Go, which attracts primarily gay men, male-to-female (MTF) transwomen, and straight women, and the Cleveland Kings & Girls (CKG), a drag king and bio femme\(^2\) troupe whose audience is largely comprised of lesbians and female-to-male (FTM) transmen.\(^3\) My work with the

\(^2\) Bio femmes are “biological” females (that is, women who were born with a female anatomy rather than transitioning into one through surgery and/or hormonal therapy) who identify as women and who perform stereotypes of femininity onstage as a critical practice.

\(^3\) There is, of course, some degree of variation among both drag performers and spectators. Girls A-Go-Go always includes one or two drag kings, and the CKG features a new queen each week. There are lesbian devotees of Kari Nickels, the hostess of Girls A-Go-Go, and gay male regulars at CKG. But, in general, at
performers entailed extensive participant-observation, including twice-weekly attendance at performances, presence for backstage preparations and rehearsals, travel to engagements in and out of Cleveland, group and individual interviews, and informal meetings.4

The structure of my argument, particularly the choice to position drag as the connective tissue between the political and the performative, has developed quite organically from this research and is, I believe, an honest portrayal of how these performers articulate the activist work that their performances do. I use this word do deliberately, instead of, say, reflect or represent. One of the major points this dissertation seeks to prove is that what we typically think of as staged performances, like drag shows, produce effects just as real (and as really political) as apparently unstaged performances—political rallies, legal interventions, and organized protests, to name a few. Of course, not all political strategies are created equal, nor can or should they be used interchangeably. A drag queen’s rendition of Lily Allen’s anti-homophobia anthem “Fuck You” is not especially likely to secure marriage equality for people of all genders and sexual preferences on its own. But neither has the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell prompted all closeted service members to come out to their families, let alone to their fellow troops. Indeed, I’d wager that watching and doing drag are tactics far better suited to the project of negotiating, claiming, and articulating an individual or collective queer identity than, say, campaigning for queer-friendly candidates and legislation.

In engaging ethnographically with drag, then, I hope to contribute to the burgeoning literature on what drag can do to, with, and through gender and sexual identity. Curiously, only a single scholarly article has addressed kinging and queening comparatively (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010), a lacuna simultaneously explained by and demanding interrogation of the fact that these practices have almost nothing in common with each other. I concede a few very basic parallels. First, generally speaking queens are biological males who perform as women and kings are biological females who perform as men (although even this comparison is questionable at best, given the increasingly vocal and critical presence of genderqueer and transgender drag performers at various stages of transition). Second, kings and queens critique stereotypes of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, race, and class through a process José Esteban Muñoz (1999) terms “disidentification”—marginalized subjects’ political and aesthetic appropriation of exclusionary cultural productions for their own world-making ends. Third, both genres enact these disidentificatory critiques by lip synching to popular music. Finally, almost without exception, drag performers do or did at some point in their lives identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer.

Although for these reasons queens and kings are discursively lumped together under the heading of drag, in terms of audience demographics, aesthetics, stage persona, movement vocabulary, and treatment of race, class, gender, and sexuality, the two performance genres are so radically distinct as to be, in some cases, diametrically opposed.

4 The majority of the field research for this dissertation was conducted between December 2009 and June 2011, though a few of the performances and interviews cited herein took place subsequent to this period. Recordings and transcripts of interviews are on file with the author.
I thus propose that drag kings are in no way the “counterparts” of drag queens, as Judith Halberstam suggests in the epigraph to this section, and moreover that to conceive them as such is both to replicate the heteronormative assumption that gay and lesbian cultures are ontologically related and to obscure the complex and transformative ways in which practitioners of each idiom perform gender.

The generic non-correspondence between kinging and queening—and, I want to suggest, between lesbian and gay male cultures more generally—is embodied by the spatial organization of Bounce/Union Station, the bar where I conducted my research. Though housed in one building, under the same ownership, and separated only by a short hallway, Bounce and Union Station are functionally two separate establishments, a gay bar and a lesbian bar, respectively. Whereas Union Station’s aesthetic is upscale dive (smaller, more intimate, a place to play pool and chat with the bartender, a place where everyone seems to know each other), Bounce is a never-ending dance party, its abundant speakers constantly pumping pop and house beats, accompanied by a rainbow of flashing lights. The bars’ names are thus perfect rhetorical envelopes for the spaces they denote: While Union Station’s long, narrow layout recalls, precisely, a train car, Bounce reflects the constant flux of bodies, beats, and lights in motion, the sweatiness of a crowded dance hall, and the gay male fantasy of perpetual youth. Bounce offers a theater in the round experience; its stage, complete with catwalk, is the bar’s centerpiece, surrounded by tables at pit-level and a semi-circular balcony above. This is the home of the Saturday night drag queen show, Girls A-Go-Go. Union’s stage, by contrast, is a smaller, more traditional rectangular platform tucked against the bar’s back wall and hosts the Wednesday night performances of the Cleveland Kings and Girls.

In spite of their differences, thinking kinging and queening together does provide a useful preliminary means of untangling those ubiquitous postmodern bedfellows, gender and performance, whose union has become the guiding conceptual framework for much radical queer and feminist inquiry. A comparative approach to drag genres challenges contemporary critical definitions of gender and performance and reveals a more dynamic exchange between the two than conventional usage typically permits. My research therefore moves beyond questions like “Has drag lived up to its transgressive reputation?” or “Does drag simply reproduce normative gender constructions?” Rather it asks, What can drag really tell us about the lived experience of gender? What do gender, race, and class do to and through each other in these performances? And most importantly, what can the generic discrepancies between kinging and queening can tell us about the ideological tensions of a political marriage of convenience that compresses gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender subjects into uniformly “queer” ones?

In asking such questions, a brief clarification of terms may be necessary. To begin with, this dissertation addresses two usages of performance: the traditional sense of theatrical presentation, and the more recent notion of the doing of everyday life (Goffman 1959; Bourdieu 1977; Geertz 1980; Schechner 1985; Conquergood 1991). Although ultimately I want to question the veracity and productivity of this opposition, it is a useful distinction for discussing issues of identity as they relate to the performer on stage and off. I have tried to clarify which signification I am invoking at any given moment through terms like staged performance, theatrical performance, performance of everyday life, onstage and offstage
persona, and by using performers’ drag names to discuss their onstage personae and given names to discuss their offstage personae.

The issue of naming in the context of drag necessarily entails the ubiquitous pronoun problem. When referring to onstage performances, I use the pronoun that corresponds to the gender of the character being played; when referring to offstage performances, I follow the language of the individual in question, respecting his or her cis- or transgender identity. Thus, for example, Trenton Ford identifies as a transgender man and also performs with the CKG as a king, Timmy Knight; I therefore use masculine pronouns when referring to his onstage and offstage personae alike. Emily Szabo, by contrast, is a self-identified woman to whom I refer as “she,” but her onstage persona, Blake Bound, is a man to whom I refer as “he.” At times, however, these assignations become particularly fraught—moments, that is, when it is not clear which persona is acting or speaking. I have made every effort to highlight these slippages and the discursive dilemmas they pose, given the limits of binaristic language to deal with an issue as multivalent as gender.

With respect to differentiating sex and gender—a distinction as arbitrary and as artificial as any other dualism addressed herein (see e.g., Fausto-Sterling 2000 on the scientific difficulties of definitively classifying an individual as male or female) but provisionally useful to an exploration of the relationship between bodies and performance—I have employed a biological lexicon to refer to the former and a social lexicon to refer to the latter. I use male and female exclusively to indicate biological sex. All other such terms—man, woman, butch, femme, masculine/ity, feminine/ity—refer to socially constructed gender, which I understand to be fluid and polymorphous at the individual as well as the social level.

Finally, it seems important to emphasize that in the analysis that follows, all interpretations of performances are strictly my own. My perceptions do not necessarily reflect the performers’ intentions or other spectators’ impressions. Descriptions of costumes, gestures, banter, and all the other visual, sonic, and kinetic elements that comprise theater, as well as my reflections on them are taken directly from my fieldnotes unless otherwise noted. As a corollary, it seems important here to clarify that all of the performances discussed herein are lip syncs; any terms I use to describe vocal timbre or quality (e.g., scream, plead, serenade, urge) thus refer to the performer’s pantomimed interpretation of a recorded singer’s voice. Where I have drawn on secondary sources (websites, interviews, personal correspondence), I have cited the source. Matters of offstage identities (gender, sexuality, relationships, personal attributes), however, require a more nuanced, sensitive approach. Therefore, all statements of this nature reflect the performers’ own words and descriptions. Although I have taken the formidable liberty of interpreting the words of others, I have tried to be clear about the distinction between what they said and what I took it to mean. Above all, I have tried to write about these individuals, who so generously shared their time, art, and insights with me, in a way that respects their integrity as performers onstage and off and to say nothing that I would not say to them in person.
Whenever there is polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think the truth lies somewhere in between.

Gayle Rubin (1984, 303)

The narrative arc of this dissertation begins with an ethnographic examination of a concrete, local phenomenon, namely the weekly drag king and queen shows at Bounce/Union Station, from which I extrapolate a number of broader conclusions about the contestations and occlusions implicit in any use of the term queer. It concludes by offering a new performance-epistemological framework by which to account for, reckon with, and ideally move beyond queerness’s perennial discontents.

I begin by chronicling the on- and offstage gender performances of historical and contemporary drag performers. Chapters 1 and 2 detail the generic constitutions of queening and kinging, arguing that the ideal of femininity which operates in the former is far more fixed and hegemonic than the ideal of masculinity produced in the latter. I have chosen, perhaps counterintuitively, to begin with kinging, a genre absent from the mainstream media and often unfamiliar even to individuals who identify as queer. I have done so to destabilize queening as the perceptual norm of drag and to resist what I presume will be many readers’ impulse to measure the defining elements of kinging against the yardstick of queen performance. As I have suggested above, to attempt such a comparison is at best a futile exercise, given the radical dissimilarities between the genres, and at worst a dismissal of kinging’s unique characteristics.

In Chapter 3, I historicize the defining characteristics of each genre as I have observed them in my ethnographic research. Drawing on the gestural work of artists, philosophers, sociologists, and feminist theorists, and sourcing archival photographs, video recordings, reviews, and personal accounts of drag shows from across the U.S., I locate these contemporary performances within a vocal, gestural, bodily, affective, and discursive lineage dating from the late nineteenth century. Such genealogical evidence, I suggest, not only contextualizes the development of kinging and queening as distinct performance practices, but foregrounds their respective roles in producing the particular, discrete, and relatively coherent cultural iterations we conventionally label “lesbian” and “gay male.”

Synthesizing these ethnographic and archival findings, in Chapter 4, I argue that contemporary U.S. drag queens’ gestural and stylistic affinity with fame, royalty, and wealth underscores the fact that they depend on the invisibility of real world social structures (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, and class) to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity. I attribute this tendency to the deep imbrication of gay male kinship rituals with colonialist discourse, a rhetorical paradigm popularized over the last half-century by the gay service organization the International Court System (ICS). Founded by the legendary San Francisco drag queen José Sarria in 1965, the ICS has continually straddled the lines between camp irony, imperial fantasy, and conventional politics. While its activities have made the mainstream sociopolitical economy more habitable for queer people, they have also given rise to some troubling consequences for the history of American drag and for the polemic timbre of “queer” discourse more broadly. Drawing on Mary Gray’s and Scott Herring’s recent work on gay urbanism, Lisa Duggan’s critique of homonormativity, and Jasbir Puar’s articulation of the exclusionary politics of homonationalism, I problematize the ICS’s mobilization of
imperialism as a rhetoric of community-building.

Such rhetoric exemplifies the exclusionary uses of “queer” described above, and in the final chapter, I use the concrete examples of kinging and queening to interrogate the broader notion of queer border wars—a host of political and intellectual debates over the meaning and ownership of the queer mantel. In struggling to define queer, these debates paradoxically assume that queerness is a set of discrete, recognizable characteristics (what we might call essences), all the while insisting that sexuality and gender are mutable and culturally conditioned constructions. In order to overcome the problematic tension between essentialism and constructivism, not just between theorists but also within individual works of theory, I turn to performance studies, focusing on a parallel tension between performance (stage play) and performativity (the embodied experience of everyday life). Borrowing on the work of feminist scientist Karen Barad, I propose a relational metaphysical approach to identity performance, which I call omniperformance. Grounding my ethnographic and archival findings in such a relational ontology, I offer a number of generalizations about what makes lesbian culture “lesbian,” what makes gay male culture “gay,” and how we might go about making such claims in a manner consistent with queer’s deconstruction of “the normal.”

Admittedly, I have a personal stake in such a metaphysical reframing. It rather conveniently accounts for and affirms my seemingly contradictory identification as a queer heterosexual—an identification that, I am increasingly aware, is not altogether uncommon. In so identifying, I mean to say that while I am married to a man and have only had sexual relationships with straight-identified biological males, I engage in many activities and discourses and subscribe to a political ideology that read as queer, and I feel most comfortable in queer spaces and with queer people. I am keenly aware that positioning myself in this manner may be controversial and even objectionable to some, and for a variety of good and legitimate reasons, many of which I wrestled with myself in considering whether or not to disclose this information. I offer this not as an assertion of my straight privilege, nor as a disclaimer of my qualifications to speak about queer theory and culture, nor do I wish to co-opt the category of queerness by denuding it of its important relation to sexual practice. But in the end, I feel ethically and personally compelled to make the same order of self-revelations that I demand of others in conducting ethnographic research. Finally, in exploring the ongoing contestations over what it means to be queer, I offer my own sense of self as yet another example of how troubled and troubling a phenomenon queerness truly is.
**CHAPTER 1**

**Kinging**

*For the white drag king performing conventional heterosexual maleness, masculinity has first to be made visible and theatrical before it can be performed. Masculinities of color and gay masculinities, however, have already been rendered visible and theatrical in their various relations to dominant white masculinities, and the performance of these masculinities presents a somewhat easier theatrical task. Furthermore, although white masculinity seems to be readily available for parody by the drag kings, black masculinities or queer masculinities are often performed by drag kings in the spirit of homage or tribute rather than humor.*

Judith Halberstam (1998, 235)

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It’s 10:30pm on the last Wednesday of the month and it looks, for all appearances, as if a dyke convention has hijacked the Union Station premiere of Phantom of the Opera. The bar is strewn with glitter and heart-shaped sequins. Swaths of red and black tulle dangle between the rafters, and the well-worn wooden tabletops have been swallowed by decadent expanses of crushed velvet. On the back wall of the stage are mounted several oversized bejeweled and feathered masks. This elaborate set piece echoes the favor offered to each patron at the door: a green, red, or yellow mask signaling the wearer’s status as single, taken, or “it’s complicated.” Navigating both the newly defamiliarized space and the landscape of sexual availability, the regulars stake out the prime seating on the west wall while a throng of newcomers shuffle toward the back.

To the left of the stage, just past the booths of Wednesday night faithful and through the swinging black door that reads, emphatically, “ENTERTAINERS ONLY!!!!” the pre-show is well underway. Terrah tugs insistently on Pam’s binder, the garment lovechild of a sleeveless undershirt and control-top pantyhose, and with each effort Pam’s curves disappear into Ace Daniels’ streamlined torso. Two tables down, a similar transformation is in progress as Ebony refashions Ashley’s breasts into pectorals. Ashley holds her right breast to the side as layer-by-layer Ebony fixes it in place with strips of duct tape wrapped in a semi-circle from sternum to spine. The process is repeated on the left side and minutes later Landin Steele’s V-shaped upper body has emerged. In front of the mirror, Bryce Chambers adjusts his packer, a flaccid prosthetic penis, and asks Rory whether the resultant bulge is too large for his fitted jeans. Meanwhile, Trento runs an electric razor through a Tupperware containing the remnants of his last haircut, chopping his erstwhile mane into an ever-finer cloud of five o’clock shadow. Once he’s satisfied with the result, he outlines a square goatee with a few spritzes of Aquanet to his chin, dips a powder brush in the ground hair, and dusts it over the hairsprayed area. He traces the edge of his beard with a moistened makeup sponge to remove any strays, and completes his metamorphosis into Timmy Knight.
As the eleven o’clock hour approaches, emcee Donnie Waste and his microphone take to the barroom floor. A surreal walking hybrid, equal parts circus ringmaster, Liberace, and small-town politician, he strolls the aisles encouraging patrons to sneak in one last cigarette, purchase another round, and tip their bartenders generously. He kisses cheeks, offers ribald commentary on the man- and lady-parts of fellow Bounce employees, interrupts his own monologue to welcome a newly arrived friend from across the room. Meanwhile backstage, troupe managers Terrah (Miss Red) and Rory (Collin Lingus) rally the troops for a pep talk. All the hard work of the last month has paid off. Between the décor, the extensive publicity, and the promise of high production numbers, the Cleveland Kings and Girls (CKG) have managed to pack the house for this month’s theme show, “Love Is a Masquerade.” Terrah reminds the performers to take advantage of this windfall by mingling with the audience, chatting up first-timers, and personally inviting them to come back next week.

Then the traditional music begins (50 Cent’s “In Da Club”), signaling the main event. Co-hosts Donnie and Red take the stage, urging the audience to come in closer and fill the surrounding space. After a few announcements (all Skyy cocktails are $5; a prize will be awarded later in the evening to the audience member with the best costume; Donnie and Red’s production company, Wasted Productions, is sponsoring a show this Sunday to benefit the LGBT Center), Miss Red calls out the usual Wednesday night refrain—“Can I get a motherfuckin’ CKG?”—to which the initiated loudly respond, “WHAT!” And then the show begins, a line-up of solos and duets punctuated by the obligatory half-time show in which audience members who are celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, new jobs (or, failing that, break-ups, layoffs, or the not-insignificant accomplishment of securing a babysitter on a weeknight) are invited onstage to dance with (read: get humped by) the cast. All this culminates in a climactic group number to One Republic’s “All the Right Moves.”

In this piece, Miss Red does a turn as Miss Manners, the histrionic hostess of a late-Renaissance masquerade ball. She minces about the stage, overseeing the polite intermingling of her guests on the floor below. At the outset of the piece, the eight guests perform a highly stylized, meticulously choreographed baroque partner dance, bowing and curtsying, their physical contact limited to palms touching palms. But as Xavier Alexander Jade (or, as he prefers to be called, X) enters the scene, clad in black pants, vest, and ascot, his hair spiked and his eyes rimmed with thick black kohl, silently crooning into an anachronistic 1950s Elvis Presley microphone, the crowd’s gentility begins to deteriorate. Under X’s Svengali-like presence, their conduct grows increasingly indecorous, proportional to the intensifying passion and sensuality of his performance, until finally the civilized, mannerly dancing has degenerated into a bumping, grinding orgy of movement. Scandalized by the dirty dancing and frantically waving her peacock feather fan to maintain composure, Red ascends the narrow bar table that flanks the stage, the better to self-righteously scold her guests from. The piece reaches its climax as X joins Red on the tabletop and unmasks her, causing her to faint and fall into the arms of the unseemly dancers below. Her protestations having fallen on deaf ears, Red is finally consumed by the undulating waves of fleshly turpitude.
I begin with this performance because it both is and is not typical of CKG’s performance ethics and aesthetics, to the extent that there is such a thing as a typical drag king performance. On one hand, the heterogendered pairings; the historical invocation of white, upper-crust proprieties; the damsel in distress figure; and the associations of femininity with innocence and masculinity with baser instincts appear at first glance to reify hegemonic sexual, racial, class, and gender norms. On the other, it literally upsets the very stereotypes it invokes by physically toppling Miss Red’s character and with her the traditional values she represents. This upending might also be seen to symbolize the performer-spectator relationship at CKG shows: in contrast to the traditional, proscenium-like staging of this particular number, these shows generally presume the absence of the so-called “fourth wall”—the illusion of distance between audience and entertainer.

In brief, that which does typify CKG shows can be broken down into four categories. Firstly, the performers’ stage personae are mutable and impermanent. Although all the kings use a stage name, they do not aim for continuity in their onstage personae’s identities. The stage name is just a name—albeit one that connotes some form of masculinity: to put it somewhat reductively, “Collin Lingus” is an empty container that can be filled with any number of masculine types (rocker Collin, gangsta Collin, lounge lizard Collin), and this is important because almost all of the kings’ performances are one-offs. Unlike the drag queens at Bounce, CKG members rarely repeat a number, and when they do it usually involves some significant reworking. Consequently and secondly, kings enjoy the freedom to try on new masculinities and sexual orientations with each performance, including explicitly queer and gay ones, and importantly, this sexual fluidity is presented as an integral element of the natural range of masculinities, rather than as a threat to masculinity. Thirdly, kings and bio femmes routinely breach the performer/spectator divide by pulling audience members onstage or by leaving the stage space and entering the crowd during performances. As I will discuss below, kings’ willingness to abase themselves for tips is central to the fourth and final constitutive aspect of the CKG’s performance ethos: a non-hegemonic relationship to class and race.

Sociologist R.W. Connell (2005) provides a useful construct for understanding the nuanced and multivalent ways in which CKG members craft and interact with masculinity. Connell defines gender as a social practice organized around reproduction at all levels of society, from the individual to the discursive/symbolic to the institutional. As a social structure, it orders relations of power (via patriarchy), production (via the sexual division of labor), and desire (via heteronormativity). Connell asserts that masculinity must be interrogated through all of these lenses and in terms of its interactions with race, class, and nationality. That is, masculinities must be viewed in relation to one another in order to avoid reducing its complexities to uncritical “character typologies” (e.g. black or working-class masculinity) (76)—as if such types were uniform unto themselves. To combat this tendency, Connell identifies four relational patterns within masculinity: 1) hegemony, the culturally and temporally specific, dominant ideal that insures a masculine subject’s position at the top of the social hierarchy; 2) complicity in reaping the benefits of patriarchy, even if one does not meet all the standards of hegemonic masculinity; 3) subordination of masculinities that deviate too strongly from the hegemonic norm (e.g. gay masculinities, disabled masculinities); and 4) marginalization of masculinities that intersect with
subjugated races, classes, or ethnicities. The tenuousness and instability of these relations is evidenced by the violence with which hegemonic masculinity often asserts itself against femininity and subordinated masculinities. The gender order is thus prone to crisis: whenever the fixity of masculinity and/or femininity is called into question (by women’s liberation, queer organizing, etc.), hegemonic masculinity must either reassert or revise itself. As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, CKG performers have a particular fondness for representing the stability-threatening categories of subordinate and marginalized masculinities.

Connell claims that masculinities “are inherently historical; and their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change” (2005, 44). At the same time, however, her argument may ironically perpetuate a highly problematic conception of binary gender. “‘Masculinity,’” per Connell, “does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’. A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture” (68). Despite the author’s desire to complicate and pluralize masculinities, this statement is predicated on an antinomy of masculine/feminine. Indeed, it illustrates Gayle Rubin’s comment that “our usual understandings posit gender as in some ways binary; even the continuums of gender differences often seem structured by a primary binary opposition” (Rubin and Butler 1994, 70). The question remains then that if we want to argue that there is no such thing as “masculinity,” but rather many masculinities—as Connell clearly does—how can we maintain that the latter are defined relationally without viewing gender as a spectrum ranging from hegemonic masculinity to idealized femininity?

This problematic is further evidenced by the absence of female masculinities in Connell’s book. Although Connell genuflects in this direction, noting that “to define masculinity as what-men-empirically-are is to rule out the usage in which we call some women ‘masculine’ and some men ‘feminine’” (2005, 69), the substance of her work does little to distinguish gender from sex, masculinity from male bodies. None of her examples or ethnographic data involves women, except in the roles of victims of and resisters to (hegemonic) masculine dominance. This is an especially striking omission, given that female masculinity is perhaps the most consistently subordinated masculinity of all. Yet instead of engaging with this example, Connell invokes gay men as the archetype of subordinate masculinity. And in so doing, she seems to fall back on character typologies herself. “Gayness,” she states, “in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure” (78). In so saying, Connell appears to equate gayness with effeminacy and, by extension, sexuality with gender. But certainly there are plenty of gay men who inhabit hegemonic masculinity more comfortably and successfully than many straight men (by being physically strong, sexually aggressive, emotionally detached). Certainly there are gay men who participate in the subjugation of women; indeed, as the introduction to this dissertation details, a major critique of queer theory is that the white gay male voice is overrepresented and too often stands in for those of all sexual- and gender non-conforming individuals.
What the drag king performances discussed in this chapter show us is that masculinities, though indeed relational, need not be tied to a gender binary, nor even to sustaining male dominance over the gendered social order. Since the particular qualities ascribed to the masculine ideal in any given culture are arbitrary (that is, qualities such as strength, weakness, reason, emotion, assertiveness, and passiveness are inherently value neutral until we tether them to a system of patriarchy which deems some desirable and others undesirable), the Cleveland Kings and Girls detach masculinity from both male bodies and patriarchy by recasting it as a simple aesthetic. A style, a way of walking, a way of dressing—masculinity consists entirely of gestures, and inasmuch as any/body can execute these gestures, anyone can access masculinity with equal legitimacy. Nevertheless, Connell’s terminology provides a useful provisory schematic for exploring the qualities that drag kings give weight to through their performances of gender, particularly in contrast to the qualities prized by drag queens (a topic which will be examined in depth in Chapter 2). The following analysis of drag king performances will thus be structured around Connell’s taxonomy of non-hegemonic masculinities, the masculinities which most appeal to the sensibilities of the Cleveland Kings and Girls.

Performing subordinate masculinities

Kinging as a genre tends to eschew the notion of a consistent, legible alter ego. This allows performers the freedom to experiment with multiple masculinities in direct contradistinction to queening, which, as I will discuss at length in the next chapter, circumscribes a fairly narrow definition of femininity. By way of illustration, I turn to one of the CKG’s longest standing members Stevie Feldman, who performs as Logan Behold. Logan is a wiry, longhaired lightning rod of a performer whose body vibrates with an uncontainable energy. Typically drawn to the alternatingly cool and frenetic presentationality of hard and classic rock, Logan chose one night to perform a body, sound, and aesthetic that could not have been further from his usual milieu: “Pencil Full of Lead,” a ragtime throwback well suited to singer Paolo Nutini’s tinny, prematurely aged voice. In performing this song, Logan appeared in a three-piece suit and bowler hat, all of it several sizes too large for his sinewy frame, and doddered about the stage with tiny shuffling steps, a blank stare plastered on his face for the duration of the song, looking for all the world like a confused old man still wearing the garments of his halcyon days despite having shrunken to a hunched shell of his former physique. It’s worth noting that although R.W. Connell never explicitly mentions age, this elderly masculinity certainly seems to fit the conditions of subordination to the hegemonic ideal, for which able-bodiedness is a key criterion.

The week before, Logan had done a soulful rendition of a song by southern folk rock band Blues Traveler. A month prior he was a suave, tuxedoed crooner accompanied by Michael Buble’s cover of the bluesy standard, “Feelin’ Good.” Several weeks later, he embodied Michael Jackson, replicating the icon’s signature spin, crotch grab, and moonwalk. And during a dead celebrities theme show a few months later, he took on Janis Joplin’s “Bobby McGee,” appearing barefoot in a peasant skirt and blouse, round sunglasses, love beads, and pink boa. Onstage Logan parked himself on a barstool and
drank straight from a liquor bottle, his usual vibrating energy translating perfectly to Joplin’s involuntary sway. This last performance garnered Logan a standing ovation because, I want to suggest, it seemed a most incredible feat of drag. That Stevie, a butch lesbian woman, should perform masculinity of impeccable verisimilitude strikes a savvy queer audience as “natural”; that she should perform convincingly as a woman seems a far more difficult accomplishment.

Just as Logan’s performative excursions to the peripheries of masculinity nonetheless remain legible as masculine representations, performances of gayness or sexual submissiveness, which might be assumed to threaten the illusion of masculinity on which kinging depends, are in practice easily absorbed by CKG’s pluralistic conception of masculinity. One astonishing example is an elaborate production number staged by Donnie Waste and bio male performer Biohazard Kid at a benefit for the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland.¹ Narratively, it is the story of two businessmen who betray their presumably heterosexual lives for an ill-fated one-night stand. The piece opens in darkness. As if out of an old horror film, a deep, disembodied voice intones, “It was a night they’d never forget.” A single overhead spotlight illuminates a black-clothed table, at which are seated two figures clad in gothic three-piece suits. Biohazard Kid, painted in his usual goth face—white base, black lips, elaborate black and green eye makeup—is slumped over the table, an empty overturned wine glass in his hand. Across the table Donnie Waste lip syncs Lady Gaga’s country-inspired eulogy to love lost, “Speechless.” Without a hint of camp or irony, Donnie serenades his lover with all the sincerity and gravitas of unrequited feeling—as if there were nothing at all strange about a pop, female voice emanating from his masculine, post-punk body. In what we later learn is a flashback, Biohazard awakens and offers his conflicted sentiments through metal shock rocker Marilyn Manson’s voice. The piece culminates with Donnie dragging Biohazard around the stage using his necktie as a leash, finally turning to face him and pulling Biohazard’s body into his own. The men embrace passionately, Donnie groping Biohazard’s ass and seeming to beg him futilely for something more than this one night. They seethe, then scream Nine Inch Nails’ lyrics at each other:

I come along but I don’t know where you’re taking me
I shouldn’t go but you’re wrenching, dragging, shaking me
Turn off the sun, pull the stars from the sky
The more I give to you the more I die

And I want you
You are the perfect drug

As the song comes to an end, the pair returns to the table where they raise their glasses and link arms in a macabre appropriation of the wedding toast. They down their wine and

¹ A bio male is the masculine analogue to the bio femme. Bio males are, as the name suggests, biologically males-sexed and identify as men; like drag kings, they critically perform stereotypical masculinities. Biohazard Kid was a guest performer at this benefit and is not a member of the Cleveland Kings and Girls.
Biohazard Kid passes out, just as we found him at the beginning of the piece, the victim of Donnie’s more literal perfect drug.

Organizationally, this piece maps neatly onto Lee Edelman’s (1998) description of a queer temporality unregulated by the heteronormative hallmarks of marriage and reproduction and always circumscribed by death. Donnie and Biohazard’s story is told out of order, defying the linear conventions of narrative and of mainstream life. Biohazard’s death, chronologically the final event in this tale, comes first in the performance. This aestheticization of morbidity is further emphasized by musical and sartorial references to the goth subculture and its fetishization of death. But the piece also queers queer temporality by asking whether and how it accounts for men who have sex with men (MSM)—that is, men who publicly identify as straight and may well be married with children but who secretly seek out homosexual encounters. MSM is a loaded phenomenon for queer theory and activism precisely because the individuals that term describes adamantly reject queer umbrella labels (e.g., gay, homosexual, bisexual) but nevertheless engage in activities that clearly fall within its linguistic scope. The concept of MSM received a good deal of attention in the popular media several years ago, with television shows from Oprah to Law & Order: Special Victims Unit portraying men who have sex with men, especially African American ones, as morally bankrupt individuals engaged in a nefarious plot to spread HIV to their unsuspecting wives and girlfriends. Inasmuch as MSM are associated, in the popular imagination at least, with abjection, embracing the death drive, and threatening the heterosexual social order, one might regard them, however ironically, as quintessentially queer.

In the main then, Donnie Waste and Biohazard Kid are not afraid to take on and indeed concatenate what Ruth Goldman once described as “queer queer” identities—those that must position themselves in opposition to queer norms of whiteness, maleness, middle-classness, and monosexuality just to be heard, or in Goldman’s words, those who “are forced to essentialize [their] identities by drawing attention to the ways in which certain parts of [them]selves are consistently being left out of the discourse” (1996, 173). Donnie is himself most certainly a queer queer. He self-identifies as borderline genderqueer/transgender, which is to say that while he wants to look and sound more masculine, he does not wish to live fully as a man. Thus, for example, while he prefers masculine pronouns to feminine ones, he would rather avoid pronouns altogether. And while he enjoys passing as a man, he proudly flaunts his love of glitter and makeup. In creating this performance piece, Donnie told me his goal was “to kill any type of gender stereotype out there,” so perhaps we should read the onstage murder of Biohazard Kid as a symbolic destruction of gender and sexual norms both within and without the queer community. But the piece is also a productive gesture, according to Donnie: “It was a way for me to embrace my androgyny.” Part of this androgyny is Donnie’s speaking voice, which he feels is too feminine and which he plans to lower by taking testosterone. But in the meantime, his naturalistic performance of Lady Gaga is a way of overcoming the anxiety rooted in his own voice and of celebrating the contradictions in his identity. It is

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2 All quotations from Donnie Waste in this paragraph are taken from an instant message conversation with the author, March 15, 2010.
also, he says, a means of resisting the compulsion “to portray the typical male” (i.e., masculinity as it is constructed by the hegemonic ideal).

This sort of creative resistance is the centerpiece of the CKG’s 2010 Halloween show, an evening-length work entitled “CKG in Genderland,” a shorter version of which they presented at the 12th annual International Drag King Extravaganza in Baltimore. For this piece the stage is set with two bathroom doors, a men’s and a women’s. In between the doors a double-sided mirror stands perpendicular to the audience, its reflective surfaces made of foil rather than glass. Through the gender appropriate doors emerge Alice, played by JennaCyde, and Alan, played by Bryce Chambers. Alice wears knee socks, Mary Janes, a pale blue headband, and a carbon copy of the frilly dress worn by the title character in Disney’s animated Alice in Wonderland. Alan sports black dress pants and a matching vest over an oxford shirt, a tie and suspenders the same shade of blue as Alice’s dress. Standing on opposite sides of the mirror, the two characters examine their reflections as Miss Red’s voice narrates from offstage:

Alice and Alan lived in a place
Where gender dictated each move that they made.
They hated the rules and how they had to be
Because what they saw in the mirror they didn’t want to see.
They wished for a world with freedom of choice
Without having to conform or losing their voice.

As Red’s voice dissolves into the opening bars of Rihanna’s “Disturbia,” Alice and Alan peer around the edge of the mirror, see each other, and jump back in shock before spinning it around to face audience. At this point all of the Genderland characters emerge from the wings, led by the White Rabbit (Travis McNasty). They surround Alice and Alan in a human rabbit hole, funneling them into Genderland, where everyone dances in unison to Rihanna’s lyrics, repurposed in this context to describe the struggle of gender dysphoria:

Nothing heard, nothing said, can’t even speak about it.
On my life, on my head, don’t wanna think about it.
Feels like I’m going insane.
It’s a thief in the night to come and grab you.
It can creep up inside you and consume you.
A disease of the mind, it can control you.
It’s too close for comfort.
Put on your pretty lights, you’re in the city of wonder.
Ain’t gonna play nice, watch out, you might just go under.
Better think twice, your train of thought will be altered,
So if you must falter be wise.
Having thusly warned the newcomers of their impending journey to gender-related self-discovery, the crowd disperses, and the music cuts to Marilyn Manson’s menacing cover of the Eurythmics “Sweet Dreams.” Red resumes her narrative verse:

Through the rabbit hole they fell and entered a maze
Where everyone they encountered had something to say.
They didn’t know who to trust or where they could turn,
But along this journey there was a lesson to learn.

Bewildered by their surroundings, the abductees, Alice and Alan, don’t notice Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum (Timmy Knight and RJ Thomas) creeping up behind them until the mischievous twins have removed their headband and tie. These gendered accessories are handed off to the Cheshire Cat, played by an ebullient Ace Daniels, as Miss Red asks, “Can gender be neutral, much less defined? The people they meet have some words to the wise.” To illustrate this, the Cheshire Cat redistributes the pilfered accessories, wrapping the tie around Alice’s neck and nestling the headband into Alan’s hair while lip syncing a snippet of Kevin Rudolf’s “Let It Rock”: “So you pray to God to justify the way you live a lie, live a lie, live a lie.” Meanwhile, the Mad Hatter (Donnie Waste) has appeared, accompanied by a classic rock standard from The Doors. In this dreamscape of gender confusion, singer Jim Morrison’s observation, “When you’re strange, no one remembers your name,” becomes a reference to the difficulty trans people face in getting family and friends to call them by the name they’ve chosen to reflect their transgendered identity.

The next stop on Alice and Alan’s gender adventure is a castle where they meet the King of Hearts, played by Collin Lingus. He whisks away the troublesome headband and tie once and for all, urging the pair via INXS’s late front man Michael Hutchence, “Don’t change for you. Don’t change a thing for me.” But the encouragement to embrace one’s true gender identity is short lived. The narrator explains, “The queen was notified of strangers in her land. She didn’t approve and summoned her men.” The entire cast hits the deck as Luna Tique, in the role of Queen of Hearts, makes her entrance. The Tweedles do her bidding and escort Alice and Alan back through their respective bathroom doors. But something has changed in Genderland. The characters are suddenly aware that, “The queen had them under her spell for far too long, and it wasn’t until now that they realized she was wrong.” Empowered by this revelation, the King and the Hatter steal the Queen’s crown and wrestle her to the floor. In the meantime, the White Rabbit has removed the foil from the mirror to reveal a unisex sign on what is now a third swinging bathroom door. Through this door bursts Alex, a hybrid of Alice and Alan played, appropriately, by Emily Szabo, a performer who appears as both bio femme Violet Destruction and drag king Blake Bound. The androgynous Alex has facial hair and is clad in silver short shorts, suspenders, and a breast-flattening bandeau version of Alice’s corset ingeniously fashioned from duct tape. As the Tweedles lift Alex onto their shoulders in celebration, the White Rabbit produces a rope which he, the King, and the Mad Hatter use to tie up the ousted Queen. Freedom of gender expression having finally triumphed over the parochial notion of binary gender, Alex dons the Queen’s crown, places a conquering
foot on her, and, along with the newly enlightened inhabitants of Genderland, thrusts a fist victoriously into the air.

In this performance, the idealization of genderqueerness reaches quasi-messianic proportions, aided in part by the appropriation of the aphoristic nursery rhyme format to frame gender fluidity as a crucial life lesson no less important than being kind to one’s siblings, obeying one’s parents, or resisting the temptation to steal. Hegemonic masculinity has no place in Genderland’s genderless utopia. The unidentifiably gendered Alex is the uncontested hero of the story. Ironically, the character that most nearly embodies the hegemonic masculine norm of strength, power, and authority is the Queen of Hearts, and she is rendered (figuratively) impotent by story’s end.

This disavowal of the hegemonic norm is equally apparent in a twice-performed piece by Bryce Chambers, a king whose usual milieu might be described as Sinatraesque. In the original performance, a dominatrix strips Bryce to his underwear, whips him, pours hot wax on his stomach, tags him with spray paint, and finally strangles him with a riding crop. The second version is identical to the first, except that Bryce becomes the dominator and Xavier Alexander Jade plays his houseboy-cum-sex-slave. Bryce and Xavier’s apparently inconsistent relationships to masculinity highlight the remarkable absence of a logic of non-contradiction in kinging. Kings’ hybridized identity performances gesture toward a metaphysical standpoint about which I shall have much more to say in Chapter 5, one in which the performative distinction between what one is and what one does begins to collapse in on itself.

Judith Halberstam has noted that because of the presumed naturalness of masculinity, particularly white, heterosexual masculinity, drag king’s parodies thereof often demand “a reluctant and withholding kind of performance,” “an almost antitheatrical performance” (1998, 239). While this is often true, it is also the case that drag kings sometimes execute hypertheatrical performances of hegemonic masculinity and “earnest” (Halberstam 1998, 239), restrained performances of subordinate masculinities. In an example of the latter, Donnie and Bryce call attention to their real life status as transgender men. Travis McNasty plays the role of a psychologist vexed by his client Donnie’s gender nonconformity. While Bryce lip syncs to The Who’s “Behind Blue Eyes” (“No one knows what it’s like to be the bad man, to be the sad man…No one knows what it’s like to be hated, to be fated to telling only lies”), Travis ignores his patient’s protestations and persists in redirecting Donnie down the path to feminine normalcy by pushing makeup and stuffed animals across the table to him. Suddenly the music cuts to a more aggressive techno-rock track, and as the lead singer of Orgy growls, “I still find it so hard to say what I need to say, but I’m quite sure that you’ll tell me just how I should feel today,” Donnie and Bryce quite literally turn the tables on Travis and force him into a dress. Donnie pins Travis to a chair and taunts him with a teddy bear while Bryce uses the lipstick to paint a bright pink question mark on Travis’s face.

The piece is clearly meant to exorcise Bryce’s and Donnie’s frustrations with being encouraged or compelled to conform to gender roles that are anathema to their senses of self, and the fear and physical and emotional discomfort suffered by Travis as the psychologist not only function as a revenge fantasy but drive home the point that for a transman, being forced to live as a woman feels as unnatural as it would to a cisman. In
this sense, the performance challenges the clear-cut distinction between art and life—a distinction I hope to dispel throughout this dissertation, and particularly in Chapter 5—as well as the naturalness of white, heterosexual masculinity. The fragility of the latter is highlighted in its relation to transmasculinity: if reversing one’s transgendered identification is as easy as putting on lipstick and holding a doll, the piece suggests, then surely cisgendered identities must be equally tenuous and changeable given a little exposure to cross-gendered toys and accessories.

But this particular performance piece is complicated by the power and gender dynamics of its inception. After the show, Travis’s offstage alter ego Krucky told me that she was very upset about being dressed as a girl in this number and had been tricked into doing it. Correctly presuming that Krucky would not have agreed to be in the piece had she known all the details, Bryce and Donnie withheld the bit about the women’s apparel and makeup she’d be forced to wear at the end. Thus the staged assault on the psychologist character’s gender was also a real ambush on their unsuspecting cast mate. I find this remarkable for a number of reasons. In the first place, Krucky’s umbrage at being emasculated onstage is striking not just because she identifies as a woman in her day-to-day life but also because it implies that she was offended on Travis’s behalf that his gender identity was so publicly disrespected. In this performative moment, on- and offstage personae bled into one another. The performance made Krucky uncomfortable because being seen in a dress, even onstage, threatened to call her (real life) (female) masculinity into question in a way that it wouldn’t for a post-transition FTM like troupe manager Rory (Collin Lingus), whose male body stabilizes his masculine gender identity, or even for a pre-transitional FTM like Bryce or Donnie, whose daily enactments of manhood render their masculinity comparably unimpeachable within the LGBTQ space of Union Station. But the fact that Krucky was also concerned about the integrity of Travis’s gender identity challenges the very notion that stage personae are fictions easily distinguishable from the performers who create them. And this performative identity crisis parallels the challenges faced by genderqueer individuals who invent new personae to better reflect the transgendered lives they wish to live. Indeed, in their daily (offstage) lives, Bryce Chambers and Donnie Waste go by Bryce Goldstein and Donnie Talbott, respectively. If ever there were an example of earnestness this is it: they invite the audience to see their on- and offstage personae as overlapping in some vital way.

In contrast to this earnest portrayal of a subordinate masculinity (i.e., transmasculinity), Collin Lingus and Ricky Vega perform hegemonic masculinity with exaggerated theatricality in an appropriation of the Saturday Night Live digital short, “Dick in a Box.” In the original video, comedian Andy Samberg and pop singer Justin Timberlake parody early-'90s R&B ballads. Dressed in the double-breasted suits, dark glasses, gold chains, and angular facial hair characteristic of the genre and time period, Samberg and Timberlake croon about the special, heartfelt Christmas present they plan to give their girlfriends—something more sincere than “a diamond ring” or “a fancy car” or “a house in the hills.” No, they assert, a handmade gift is more appropriate and actually quite simple to construct. Timberlake explains the three easy steps: “1) Cut a hole in a box. 2) Put your junk in that box. 3) Make her open the box.” Samberg and Timberlake illustrate these instructions, arriving at their lovers’ houses with large, gift-wrapped boxes projecting
from their pelvises. So impressed are their lady friends that the duo conclude that a penis is the perfect gift for any occasion, from Kwanzaa to “midday at the grocery store.”

Collin and Ricky’s drag version is almost identical to the original: the same ‘90s aesthetic, the same self-serving presentational blend of sensitivity and machismo. But there is one significant difference: the audience’s knowledge—owing to emcee Donnie Waste’s reference to “tranny dicks” as he introduced the act—that the performers are post-transition FTMs, and that the dicks ostensibly contained within the oversized boxes strapped to their midsections were once clitorises enlarged by their weekly injections of testosterone. The performance rather ingeniously straddles the line between glorifying the power of the symbolic phallus and destabilizing the definition of the biological penis. The upshot, I would submit, is that through performances like this the CKG queers white, male heterosexuality or, more precisely, renders hegemonic masculinity temporarily subordinate.

CKG’s bio femmes offer an equal and opposite dislocation with respect to femininity. Whereas masculinity has traditionally been viewed as the absence of affect or gender—the proverbial “unmarked” category—femininity has often appeared as excessively affected or artificial. In one particularly clear transgression of this construct, JennaCyde, a stereotypically beautiful high femme clad in fishnets, lace panties, a black bustier, and sky-high platform heels, took to the mic to inform her audience that she “really ha[d] to pee.” Moments later Donnie introduced her as “our barely potty-trained friend JennaCyde!” Madonna’s controversial homage to sadomasochism, “Human Nature” then erupted from the speakers and, without missing a beat, Jenna launched into a sexy striptease. This incident was quintessentially JennaCyde: the bad stripper who takes you out of the fantasy by loudly calling attention to what most would perceive as distinctly unsexy bodily functions. In so presenting herself, Jenna disrupts the discourse of femininity as pretension, propriety, and artifice by foregrounding her basic biological needs in the manner of a typical “dude” who makes no effort to conceal a loud belch in public.

The point is that, unlike drag queens who, as I will argue in the next chapter, almost exclusively perform what Connell might call hegemonic femininity, kings take the far riskier path of performing masculinities that contemporary Western society does not view as quintessentially masculine. This drag is not about verisimilitude or illusion; the trick isn’t in making oneself as unmistakably masculine as possible or in passing as male. Nor is it about pretending to be masculine. Rather, it is about promoting diversity in masculinities; about claiming ownership of masculinity for women and transmen; about validating outlying masculinities and proving them to be as genuinely, legitimately masculine as the dominant ideal; about showing that all masculinities are composed of reality and pretense in equal measure. And as I will show in the next section, kings use the presumption of gender inauthenticity inherent to drag shows as a platform to highlight the equally inorganic production of class and race.

Performing marginalized masculinities

While drag queen performances aspire to perfection and theatrical professionalism, drag kings prize a distinctly low culture aesthetic. Although I agree with Butler that “the notion of gender parody” that drag queens produce “does not assume that there is an
original which such parodic identities imitate” (2006, 188)—in other words, that drag queens do not attempt to produce a facsimile of femininity or womanness—drag queens do tend to put a premium on polished appearances and well-rehearsed performances. They want the work of drag to be evidenced through their impeccable self-styling and spectacular stage shows. Drag kings, while no less devoted to their craft, generally occupy a performative milieu that might be described as amateurish. In using this adjective, I am unequivocally not implying that kinging is crude or artless or that the performers are unskilled. Rather, I wish to signal that drag kings subvert traditional expectations of “serious” or “high” art. “Indeed,” as Judith Halberstam incisively notes in The Queer Art of Failure, “terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy” (2011, 6, emphasis author’s). Thus, what spectators accustomed to the more refined ethos of queening might read as sloppiness or failure in kinging, Halberstam reinterprets as “a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (2011, 11-12).

This critique of capitalism, of the equation of success with affluence, of the collateral social division between winners and losers is a central animating force of CKG performances. As we saw in the previous section, troupe members’ acts often operate outside of conventional assumptions about masculinity and its conflation with heterosexuality. The same is true with respect to the performers’ approach to class and racial hierarchies.

As a general rule, the CKG cultivates a democratic atmosphere within the performance space. The separation of performer and spectator so typical of Western theater (including drag queen shows) is frequently transgressed during CKG shows. Audience members are routinely invited to join the cast onstage for pre-show games, open mic nights, and post-show dance parties. For a special theme show, the troupe circulated ballots on which audience members could vote for the song they wanted each king and bio femme to perform. The effect of such intermingling makes clear even to a first-time patron that by entering the bar on a Wednesday night, one implicitly consents to participate in the performance.

That said, the relationship between kings and their fans is neither unilateral nor really coercive. As much as kings expect a certain level of participatory willingness from an audience, they also unabashedly court their spectators’ generosity. CKG members routinely come down to the audience’s level, crouching on the edge of the stage to make eye contact with each fan that outstretches a dollar. Thus, when Ace Daniels spots a girl waving a tip in his direction, he locks eyes with her, saunters purposefully toward her, and places a hand or a kiss on her cheek before accepting the money, as if his time and performance were dedicated to her alone. A more explicit form of this self-abasement is the commonplace of simulating sex with tippers: performers remove dollars from fans’ lips, cleavage, and waistbands with their mouths and gyrate their hips up and down the length of his or her body. The kings’ willingness to submit to the audience’s demands—though circumscribed by racial difference, as I will discuss below—is consistent with the non-
hegemonic forms of masculinity evoked by their names. These range from the punny (Logan Behold, Nic Tendo) to the dirty (Collin Lingus, Travis McNasty) to the abject (Donnie Waste, Blake Bound). But it is also consistent with a broader identification with the working classes, one summarized most eloquently by Miss Red/Christopher Dane, a bio femme and king who emcees the Wednesday night shows. Following a performance of John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero” (a phrase which, not for nothing, is tattooed on the arm of the performer, Donnie Waste), Red commented to the audience, “Especially in northeast Ohio when we’re struggling for jobs, a working class hero is definitely something to be.”

Such reflexive acknowledgments of the social intersections that marginalize certain masculinities are routine in the CKG’s performances. Many of the white kings, most notably Xavier Alexander Jade, adopt the hyperbolic gestures of black hip-hop masculinity in order to transgress the limiting construct of masculinity as an absence of affect that once led Halberstam (1998) to describe kinging as a study in underperformance. X’s racial performances are, crucially, rarely uncritical insofar as they typically draw attention to the act of appropriation. So, in one instance, he imported the gangsta swagger characteristic of rap videos to a country music number; in another, he complicated his own cooption of Usher’s ladies’ man persona by pulling up his shirt to reveal his binder, the undergarment that many kings and transmen wear to conceal their breasts.

In an even more layered instance of racial appropriation, Landin Steele, an African American king, infused a medley of Justin Timberlake ballads with his own hip hop and R&B sensibilities. Timberlake’s public persona has a complex and complicated relationship with matters of race and racial authenticity. Like so many current white pop stars, he grew up on the set of The Mickey Mouse Club and in the late ‘90s rose to fame as a member of the boy band *N Sync before launching an even more successful solo career. Timberlake counts among his musical influences R&B legends Stevie Wonder, Donnie Hathaway, Al Green, and Marvin Gaye, and most of his studio recordings as a solo artist have been produced by hip hop moguls like Timbaland and Pharrell. Despite Timberlake’s continued popularity with audiences both white and black, as well as his frequent collaborations with black musicians, he has been accused variously in the popular media and blogosphere of acting black (“CMU Daily-On the Inside” 2005), objectifying black women (Ro 2009), and capitalizing on black culture (Viera 2011).

Dressed in Timberlake’s signature slim-cut-suit-and-sneakers look, a flat-billed Yankees cap (which rapper Jay-Z claimed in his song “Empire State of Mind” to have made “more famous than a Yankee can”), and an oversized red plastic watch reminiscent of early hip hop star Flava Flav’s iconic clock necklace, Landin staged a sartorial and gestural mash up of the pop singer’s white-bread teeny bopper roots and black R&B-influenced solo career. He interspersed the stink-faced, pop and lock moves endemic to hip hop music and dance with the cheesy, choreographed-to-the-pinky style of boy band videos. The earnest literalism of ‘90s pop—a pantomime of answering the telephone or shedding a tear prompted by lyrical references to phone conversations or crying—would quickly morph into the hard-hitting chest isolations of an urban street dancer before Landin once again accepted a dollar from a spectator, looked at it forlornly, and let it fall to the ground, too overcome by pathos to hold on to it. The cumulative effect is a mise en abîme of gender
and racial appropriations. Ashley, a butch black woman, performs Landin Steele, a black man, performing Justin Timberlake, a white man who, depending on who you ask, has either borrowed liberally from or feasted on the bones of black cultural inheritance.

A similar mashup of racially inflected iconography is staged by Hershey Chocolate in a dual turn as Marilyn Monroe and Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes of the ‘90s R&B girl group TLC. As her stage name not so subtly suggests, Hershey is an African American bio femme. But this nominal nod to Blaxploitation again belies a far more complicated performative relationship with race. In the Marilyn/Left Eye number, for example, Hershey appears onstage in a wavy blonde wig and flowy white halter dress reminiscent of Monroe’s costume in the infamous subway grate scene from The Seven Year Itch. She lip syncs to Monroe’s cooing classic, “I Wanna Be Loved By You,” swishing around the stage and flirting with the audience. Suddenly, without warning, the music cuts to TLC’s “No Scrubs.” Hershey pulls a swatch of black electrical tape out of her cleavage and presses it onto her cheekbone just below the eye, mimicking Lopes’ signature look. The Marilyn dress now evokes Left Eye’s feathery white crop top and low-rise pants get-up from the “No Scrubs” video, the fringy adornments of which, like Monroe’s skirt, catch a gust of air from below and blow upward. Hershey’s body language morphs instantaneously from the languid sensuality of Monroe to the sharp, robotic dance moves of Left Eye. Then, just as abruptly, Marilyn’s sultry voice comes back, the electrical tape returns to the cleavage, and Hershey resumes a honey-like legato sway. This transformation repeats several times over. As Marilyn, Hershey assures the audience of her monogamous desire to “be loved by you, just you and nobody else but you”; as Left Eye, she scoffs, “I don’t find it surprising if you don’t have the Gs to please me”—“G” being slang for a grand. As the white Monroe, she is slavishly devoted to a man; as the African American Lopes, she sets the standards in her potential relationships. As a white woman, she begs; as a black woman, she demands to be catered to.

This flipping of racial scripts is a frequent trope of Hershey’s work. Her performances often invoke the visual lexicon of white cartoon characters and white teenyboppers but insert hip hop dance moves and gestures to reinscribe it with a concatenated black middle-class disidentification. For example, one Wednesday night she took the stage in a turquoise ball gown, tiara, and long white gloves, an apple in her hand, and announced herself as “Snow Black” before launching into a rendition of Beyonce’s “Poison.” On another occasion, she channeled Miley Cyrus, former Disney Channel star and daughter of country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, for the G-rated pop tune, “Party in the U.S.A.” In a third, she was in full bobby soxer regalia for Etta James’ “All I Could Do Was Cry,” a doo-wop ballad mourning an ex-boyfriend’s marriage to another girl. Poodle skirts having fallen out of fashion by the time James released the single in 1960, Hershey’s anachronistic revival of a costume popularized by Shirley Temple recasts her own black body in the role of America’s (wholesome white) sweetheart, only to complicate that image by collecting tips from her adoring lesbian fans.

Indeed, among CKG’s six bio femmes, Hershey’s stage persona would be the most likely candidate for all-American girl. Unlike Miss Red, Hope Arcade, and Luna Tique who usually perform in bustiers, corsets, and the like, Hershey typically eschews the high femme aesthetic; unless she is performing a specific character (e.g., Snow Black), she
generally dresses like a fashionable young woman going out to the clubs. And unlike JennaCyde and Violet Destruction who frequently strip as part of their acts, Hershey rarely presents herself as a sexual object. In one of the first performances I saw her give, her fellow troupe member Collin Lingus laid down on the stage and a butch audience member mounted him missionary style, each with a dollar bill in their mouth. As discussed above, this was a clear cue for Hershey to earn her tips by simulating sex with her benefactors. (And indeed, this is precisely what Violet Destruction did later in the show when a similar opportunity presented itself.) But Hershey did not take the bait. She sauntered over to them in her own good time and, with no more than a glance in their direction, swiped the tips up in her fingers, cocked her head and raised her eyebrow at the audience as if to say, “Who do they think they are?” Part of Hershey’s unclassifiability within the landscape of bio femme’s generic conventions seems to be a factor of the racial drag that is so integral to her act. Her no-nonsense demeanor indexes the trope of the hard-as-nails, inviolable black woman—one who has suffered in the past and emerged stronger than ever (e.g., Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill pre-brainwashing, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker)—a counter-image to the jezebel whose “excessive sexual appetites” simultaneously justify assaults on black women and criticisms of their supposedly out of control fertility (Collins 2000, 81–83).

Hershey’s portrayal of marginalized femininities and her concomitant marginalization of normative white, heterosexual femininities provides a distinct counterpoint to the kind of femininity performed by Bounce’s drag queens. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, queen performances almost uniformly articulate a femininity that resonates with the dominant Western ideal—a hegemonic femininity that brooks no incursion of race, class, or even sexuality and the nuances of social disparity that they entail.

**Conclusion**

Connell’s categorical breakdown helpfully articulates the interactional properties of masculinities, as well as the variegated power dynamics between them. But it is not a perfect model of gender relations, and its flaws are revealed and potentially remedied by king performances like those described above. For one thing, Connell’s theory is troublesome inasmuch as patriarchy becomes the sole referent for determining one’s relationship to gender. An individual more or less closely approximates hegemonic masculinity depending entirely on the degree to which he (or perhaps she) benefits from patriarchy. This foundational equation of masculine persons with oppressors is an uncomfortable, and possibly inaccurate, basis from which to define masculinity, particularly for people who want to embody the qualities our society conventionally deems masculine without being complicit in the subjugation of those who do not embody those qualities. Connell’s formulation therefore fails as an analytic of drag masculinity because drag kings do not assume patriarchy as the referent of masculinity. The success or failure of a gender performance (i.e., the degree to which a drag king reads as masculine in any given performance) is not predicated on the extent to which a king demonstrates strength, stoicism, competence, aggressiveness, heterosexual desire, or any other characteristic that
normatively accrues patriarchal dividend. Instead, drag kings construct masculinities semiotically through aesthetics, in the manner outlined by cultural theorist Dick Hebdige in his classic work, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*:

[T]he challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (and ‘magically resolved’) at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs...The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification... ‘Humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination. Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature,’ interrupting the process of ‘normalization.’ As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority,’ which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. (1979, 18)

Framed accordingly, in the subculture of drag kings and their audiences, an oppositional ideology of masculinity is encoded in (communicated through) a matrix of symbols, gestures, and fashions that mean in ways undecipherable to mainstream outsiders. (The specific gestures and signs that constitute drag kings’ discourse of masculinity and drag queens’ discourse of femininity are the subject of Chapter 3.)

Secondly, even as they produce communal understandings of masculinity, drag kings challenge Connell’s assumption that gender is an entirely social formation. Connell worries that, “Recognizing multiple masculinities, especially in an individualist culture such as the United States, risks taking them for alternative lifestyles, a matter of consumer choice. A relational approach makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed” (76). No doubt, the experiences of being gendered and doing gender are conditioned by thousands of years of social, cultural, and biological history; constrained by localized expectations and options; and entangled with individual and group psychology. But Connell’s emphasis on the systemic, social nature of gender formation dismisses the fact that individuals do make intentional choices about the version of masculinity they project as they move through the world. Through their embodiments of multiple masculinities, drag kings carve out more autonomy and agency in masculinity than Connell’s model seems to allow.³

Finally, even if we accept that gender is shaped primarily by social forces and that masculinity must be defined in relation to patriarchy, Connell’s categorical approach to gender may oversimplify the varied experiences of masculinity within any given category.

³ One might object that the gender performative choices drag kings make on stage are not a legitimate comparison to the gender performative choices available to people in the real world. But this objection is predicated on a distinction between stage performance and the performance of everyday life, a distinction I will challenge in Chapter 5.
There are degrees of subordination within subordinate masculinity which result, for example, in certain privileges being bestowed on straight-seeming gay men while being denied to effeminate gay men or butch women (relative immunity from bullying and violence, say). And those same effeminate gay men enjoy greater freedom relative to transgender men when it comes to safely entering a public restroom. This blind spot in Connell’s argument has broader implications within the context of queer theory and activism. The difficulties faced by LGBTQIA individuals in the United States do not cohere into a uniform struggle either internally or in relation to heterosexism. Although femme lesbians may be more palatable to the straight (and especially straight male) masses, they are often construed as incomplete, unenlightened, or less authentically queer than their butch counterparts. Similar suspicions attach to bisexuals (who are often seen as lacking the courage to commit to homosexuality) and asexuals (about whom it is assumed that a pleasurable sexual experience will turn them straight or gay).

What the CKG shows us is that individuals who Connell would categorize as subordinately or marginally masculine can also be hegemonically masculine relative to other subordinately or marginally masculine persons and relative to a gender order that does not recognize the ideals of patriarchy as a standard. This is the defining characteristic of kinging as a genre. Such a critical ethos is virtually outlaw within the generic conventions of queening; indeed, as I will argue in the next chapter, drag queens who adopt an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, or otherwise explicitly non-hegemonic performance M.O. become unintelligible to drag queen audiences and are often instead accepted into the fold of the CKG. Illegibility and plurality, while hallmarks of drag king performance, have no place in queening because queening, like hegemonic femininity itself, is a narrowly circumscribed performance.
CHAPTER 2
QUEENING

I don’t think of them as really any of it. I feel like they’re their own thing. I feel like a drag queen is something completely different...It’s way more than being a woman and it’s definitely not being a man.

A spectator at a drag queen show, asked whether he thought of the performers as men or women (Rupp and Taylor 2003, 193–194)

The preceding chapter suggested that while drag kings are drawn to what R.W. Connell labels “subordinate” and “marginalized” masculinities, drag queens primarily exhibit what might be called hegemonic femininity within Connell’s classificatory system of gender relations. It is all the more important at this juncture to define the concept of hegemonic femininity because Connell firmly maintains that it does not exist. There can be no such thing as hegemonic femininity, she reasons, because “[a]ll forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men” (1987, 187). Instead Connell offers the relational category of “emphasized femininity,” which “is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (1987, 184).

Connell’s negation of the possibility of hegemony within femininity misses the mark, according to sociologist Mimi Schippers, because it ignores the reality that some ways of embodying femininity actively participate in (and indeed benefit from) upholding and perpetuating the male-dominant gender order. Schippers proposes that there is such a thing as hegemonic femininity and that it “consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2007, 94, emphasis author’s). Hegemonic femininity stands in contradistinction not to “subordinate” femininities, but rather to what Schippers terms “pariah femininities,” those which society “deem[s], not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity” (2007, 95).

Unfortunately, for the purposes of this chapter, neither Connell’s emphasized femininity nor Schippers’ hegemonic femininity accurately captures what gender hegemony signifies in the context of drag queen performance culture. Whereas hegemonic masculinity in Connell’s model and hegemonic femininity in Schippers’ safeguard men’s privileged social position, drag queen femininity operates irrespective of a hierarchical gender order. On the contrary, drag queens articulate a version of hegemonic femininity that does not serve the interests of patriarchy. It is due precisely to, as the epigraph to this chapter articulates, queening’s simulacral quality that these gender artists can perform outside of the gender binary. “Drag queeness,” as Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor call this
phenomenon in their ethnography Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret (2003, 218), signifies a state of not so much in-betweenness or hybridity vis-à-vis gender and sexuality (i.e., androgyny, transgender, genderqueerness) as an otherness, an embodied performance of gender and sexuality that defies the dualistic limits of the English language. But unlike kinging, which renders patriarchy irrelevant to the embodiment of masculinity, queening renders irrelevant masculinity itself. And masculinity is not alone in its exile from drag queen shows. In this chapter I will argue that drag queens highlight the markedness of femininity by banishing to the margins race, class, and sexuality—the intersections where, not incidentally, king performance thrives. To be clear, in referencing Beauvoir’s theory of the “marked” (which suggests that woman is the only gender, since man is the generic subject position), I am not suggesting that drag queen’s personae default to the “unmarked” aspects of these intersections; that is, we should not read these characters as white, upper-class, or heterosexual. Rather, queening as a genre does not recognize differences of race, class, and sexuality. Thus, in the subsequent argument, hegemonic femininity refers to femininity that cannot be subordinated because it does not acknowledge the existence of variations that make hierarchy possible.

A class apart: drag queens, celebrity, and the abstraction of wealth

In her path-breaking ethnography of female impersonators in mid-sixties Chicago and Kansas City, Esther Newton and the performers she interviewed repeatedly describe drag queens as the most outcast of outcasts, the most marginal of marginals in the United States, considered only slightly less abject than prostitutes, even among gay men. Newton is especially concerned with the plight of those she designates “street” impersonators, who lip sync to recorded music and whose work is thus considered unskilled relative to that of “stage” performers, who speak, sing, and engage improvisationally with the audience (1972, 7). In her preface to the revised edition, Newton refers to drag queens as “gay male culture ‘heroes’” (1972, xi), presumably because of the courage it took to be an effeminate gay man at a time when it was extremely dangerous to do so.

Today, however, those performers that Newton calls “street” queens have become the norm in barroom drag culture and are revered on a par with “stage” queens. Contemporary drag queens are looked on as celebrities rather than heroes and are lionized within the gay community not because of the obstacles they are presumed to have overcome as the public face of flamboyant homosexuality, but in the way that movie stars

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8 Rupp and Taylor’s definition of drag queenness differs from my own in one critical respect. While they assert that it “expands and problematizes identity by taking bodies and practices that are culturally encoded as feminine or masculine or as heterosexual or homosexual and combining them in ways that create new gender and sexual meanings” (2003, 218, emphasis added), I contend that it operates outside of sexual (and class and racial) meaning.

9 All discussion of drag queens in this dissertation refers to traditional barroom drag (i.e., that people typically think of when they think of drag, embodied most iconically by singer, model, and reality show host RuPaul). In recent decades, alternative forms of queening practice that challenge social and political hierarchies have emerged, mainly in San Francisco. These include skag drag, in which the performer cross-dresses but doesn’t attempt to disguise his masculine features, and grotesque drag, which celebrates queer abjection by using actual or simulated bodily fluids (feces, urine, semen, blood) as the act’s organizing trope.
are idolized simply by dint of their profession. Nearly fifty years after Newton conducted her field research, the exponential increase in gay visibility and acceptance has caused drag to become more closely associated with glamour, perfection, and untouchability than with suffering endured and surmounted.

This aspirational quality saturates drag queen culture at Bounce. Most performers’ stage names interpellate upper-class subjectivity by referencing expensive tastes (KiArra Cartier Fontaine, Jamie Lynn Versace, Miko Chanel, Mandy Merlot); pedigree (The Lady Akashia); or celebrity (Shari Turner, Stevie Reese Desmond). The class structure implied by their stage names is made body by the queens’ management of audience rapport. Performers at Bounce rely on tips to supplement their fixed percentage of the bar’s revenue on the night. Thus, the relation between performer and spectator might ordinarily be read as one of dependence. Queens refigure this economy, however, by casting themselves as uniquely skilled service providers. So, for example, Miko Chanel, whose persona is part whirling dervish, part acrobat, part high-stepper, and all thigh-high stilettos, quite literally demands compensation for her distinctive talents. If the audience is not sufficiently forthcoming with its money, Miko stares down individual spectators until they fork over the cash; pulls a wallet out of an unsuspecting audience member’s back pocket; or otherwise “hints” that they are obligated to pay her—that they owe her and that she deserves their money. Similarly, should a newcomer attempt to garner the attentions of Kari Nickels, grande dame of Girls A-Go-Go, by laying down on the stage with a dollar bill in his belt buckle—a gesture that would compel a drag king to earn his money by seducing the tipper—she glares disdainfully and shakes her head ever so slightly, indicating that not only will she not demean herself for tips, but that the spectator’s actions merit no more than the tersest dismissal.

It is important to note here that even in projecting an image of wealth and celebrity, the drag queens at Bounce never imply or engage its opposite. The overt references to the working classes, which permeate drag king fashions, musical choices, and audience interactions are nowhere to be found in these performances, thus bolstering the illusion that there is only one class—the leisure class. The only possible engagement with socioeconomics in this performative structure is through conspicuous consumption. Queens thus wear extravagant gowns and impossibly high heels, shoulder-dusting gold earrings and eye-popping jeweled rings; their hair is always perfectly coiffed, their nails perfectly manicured, their makeup airbrushed as if they’d spent all day at the salon.

Bolstering the image of the diva is the fact that the drag queens at Bounce are essentially independent contractors. While the Cleveland Kings and Girls comprise a unified performance troupe, the very notion of a collective flies in the face of queen ideology, in which everyone is a prima donna and each performer constructs herself as the star of the show.10 The primacy of celebrity is reflected in the relatively limited pantheon

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10 The phenomenon of drag “houses,” self-made families of (usually black and Latino) queer men and women who adopt the surname of the house “mother” and who compete as a unit at drag balls, has been well documented and publicized through Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary, *Paris Is Burning*. Drag balls constitute an entirely different performance genre from the type of barroom drag discussed in this dissertation. Drag ball participants practice “voguing” and “walking” (as a fashion model on a runway) and are evaluated on their “realness”—the ability to pass as the opposite gender. Significantly, the house system formed out of a collective sense of alienation and helps shelter members from racism, classism, homophobia,
of chanteuses that drag queens tend to emulate. There are of course the standards: Cher, Madonna, Judy Garland, Liza Minelli, Tina Turner, Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson. And then there are the more recent denizens of Top 40 music: Beyoncé, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Lady Gaga, Amy Winehouse, MIA, Pink, Fergie, Rihanna, and Nikki Minaj, most of whom, it is worth noting, either tacitly or avowedly model their public personae on drag queens’ emblematically absurdist high femme style. Selecting songs that are either classic or of the moment is an unspoken imperative within queen culture. To experiment, as kings do, with non-popular genres like punk, metal, alt rock, and emo would be to a) risk the audience not recognizing the music and b) embody the street, gutter, and working class aesthetics of these genres, both of which would penetrate the all-important mask of glamour and celebrity.

Of course, the audience knows that what they see onstage are not really designer clothes or genuine diamond rings, that the elaborate updos are wigs and that the fingernails are press-ons. The overwroughtness of a drag queen’s hair and makeup may even reek of desperation or trashiness to some spectators. So once again the drag queen comes to occupy not a state of liminality (that is, of vacillating between wealth and poverty or of splitting the difference and presenting as middle class), but rather of something else entirely: a simulacrum of fame. Class, I would suggest, thus becomes another element in the matrix of ambiguous qualities that constitute what Rupp and Taylor call drag queenness. The practice of queening therefore abstracts class inasmuch as it disimbricates it from traditional socioeconomic divisions and attaches it instead to a vague, intangible conception of celebrity. And in turn, as the next section demonstrates, the hegemony of this pseudo-celebrity within queening effaces other categories of difference like race and sexuality.

*Iconic sexuality and the impossibility of race*

A brief theoretical detour at this juncture will contextualize and clarify this non-binary or “third” space from which drag queens construct identity. Logician Charles

and transphobia. In this respect, drag houses have more in common with the drag kings discussed in the previous chapter than with the drag queens studied herein. However, while houses assemble for the express purpose of competition with other houses, the Cleveland Kings and Girls and other drag king troupes across the country (e.g., Columbus’ Royal Renegades, Oakland’s East Bay Kings Club, Baltimore’s Charm City Boys) come together in order to drum up audiences, do community service work, and organize non-competitive showcases like the International Drag King Extravaganza.

11 Beyoncé provides a particularly complicated example of the enmeshment of drag queen imagery with the production of female pop singers. Working within R&B and hip hop, genres historically dominated by men and steeped in (hetero)sexism, a fascinating dialectic has nevertheless emerged between Beyoncé and her gay fans. The latter have adopted her as a Liza-for-the-new-generation because of her over-the-top, “tranny” style which walks (sometimes crosses) the line between high glamour and high kitsch, and her associations with musical theater via *Dream Girls* and her Fosse-inspired music video “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It).” Beyoncé expresses her reciprocal admiration through gestures subtle (the shout out in “Get Me Bodied,” “Snaps to the kids [slang for gay men]”) and not so subtle (dressing as her husband, Jay Z, in her “Upgrade U” video). Her gay followers have appropriated these acknowledgments in turn, flooding YouTube, for example, with drag renditions of “Single Ladies,” to which Beyoncé responded with a self-satirizing vignette on *Saturday Night Live*, in which she remade the video with male backup dancers clad in the same spandex leotards she and her female dancers sported in the original.
Sanders Pierce’s semiotic theory identifies three ways in which a sign can denote the thing it represents: through physical resemblance (iconicity), sensory correlation (indexicality), or mental association (symbolism). At the most basic level, the words drag queen symbolize a specific embodied performer, but the term also stands for a constellation of related words like gay, man, cross-dresser, transvestite, and flamboyant. Taken individually, various elements of a drag queen’s performance might index other objects, concepts, or acts: her bustier and micro-miniskirt might index promiscuity, her artificially plumped lips poutiness or kissability, her seductive hip circling penetrative sex. But although drag queens and their performances may symbolize or index a host of discrete characteristics that conventionally denote femininity, heterosexuality, or homosexuality, I would argue that these symbols and indices are nullified by the fact that, taken as a whole, queening is iconic only unto itself.

To wit, though she may index femininity or symbolize gayness, in terms of physical appearance and comportment, a drag queen really only resembles a drag queen. This is not to deny that drag queens do, in a number of obvious ways, look like women, much as one brown-haired, brown-eyed, white woman looks like another. But even though I myself am a brown-haired, brown-eyed white woman, a photograph of, say, actress Katie Holmes fails as an icon for me because (clearly) it looks more like Katie Holmes than it does me. So too does the drag queen fail as an icon for woman (and woman as an icon for drag queen) because a drag queen looks more like a drag queen than she does a woman.

Within the framework of iconicity, we can begin to understand drag queens’ performance of sexuality as neither heterosexual nor homosexual, nor even bisexual, but rather as a form of sexuality all its own. And this sexuality is characterized by its glaring lack of what Freud called aim (the consummate sexual act toward which the sexual impulse is primarily directed) and object (the person toward whom a desiring subject is attracted) (2000, 1–2). This is to say that while queens draw on a visual lexicon of sexual desire through their skimpy costumes, explicit banter, and suggestive dance moves, the type of sex act or person toward which this desire is directed remains undifferentiated. In light of queens’ proclivity for dominant forms of femininity, one might read into their personae a default heterosexuality. Although this may be accurate with respect to certain performance pieces, because drag queen sexuality is, generally speaking, iconic, it refers only to itself, rather than to any external sex act or object of attraction. The self-containment or iconicity of queen sexuality shores up the perception of queens as extraordinary, surreal, or spectacular, which in turn perpetuates the performance of undifferentiated sexuality.

No queen at Bounce demonstrates aimless, objectless sexuality more clearly than Miko Chanel, a performer who is also (again in the Peircean sense) Bounce’s most iconic. Arguably more genderfuck artist than queen, onstage Miko presents as more feminine than masculine and yet confounds gendered divisions. Her typical look includes a long, high ponytail, which she uses to impressive effect as she whips her head around in a series of her signature chaîné turns; an obviously homemade dress fashioned from some unusual material (anything from crushed velvet spandex to a red biohazard bag used for medical waste), typically either with belled sleeves and a fringed skirt or in a trench coat style; and thigh-high patent leather stiletto boots. But what sets Miko apart from the other queens who grace the Bounce stage are the constants in her self-styling, namely her well-groomed moustache and goatee; her refusal to stuff her bra or tuck her genitals; and her...
gold-flecked electric blue contacts, which appear extra-terrestrially unnatural against her dark brown skin, and which are mirrored in the paint that engulfs her eyes and extends to her hairline like a blue and gold spotted mask of Zorro.

A trained technical dancer, Miko’s performances are a highly choreographed fusion of jazz, West African, waacking, voguing, and step, punctuated by gymnastic handsprings and backflips. Notably absent from her repertoire are many of the more common drag queen gestures—the flirty hair flips, body rolls, swinging hips, and sashays, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter. The emphasis of her performances is thus virtuosity rather than charm, coordinated movement rather than sexy gyration, internal rather than external focus. When Miko does engage with her audience, she projects intimidation rather than flirtation; she comes to a full stop, locks eyes with a single spectator, and holds their gaze for an uncomfortably long moment. Her ethos is perhaps best encapsulated by a Christina Aguilera song to which Miko frequently performs:

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Who’s the flyest bitch of them all?  
Never mind, I am  
That bitch is so fucking pretty  
Yeah I am  
If I were her I would kiss me

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Hit up Prince Charming  
Tell him give me a call  
Never mind, screw him  
Cause I found somebody better  
Never mind, screw him  
I’ll make myself so much wetter

V is for vanity, every time I look at me  
I turn myself on, yeah  
I turn myself on, yeah  
V is for vanity, thank you mom and daddy cause  
I turn myself on, yeah  
I turn myself on

This anthem is a refusal of object choice save perhaps oneself—a refusal of “Prince Charming” and “the flyest bitch” alike. It is also a refusal to specify a desired sex act, save the impossibility of kissing oneself. Miko’s sexuality is entirely contained to her own body, a fact made body by the tattoo emblazoned on her collarbone, which reads simply, “Miko Chanel.”

Miko may represent the apex of drag queens’ sexual otherness, but even the more conventional performers at Bounce go out of their way not only to avoid being labeled as straight, gay, or bi, but to avoid presenting themselves as objects of homo- or heterosexual
desire. Kari Nickels’ rendition of a Shania Twain song resists the presumption that when the singer confesses her urge to “get in the action, feel the attraction,” said “action” will presumably come from a man. Her transgender body complicates a figurative reading of the lyric “go totally crazy, forget I’m a lady” as casting off the Victorian sexual expectation of feminine frigidity; a more literal interpretation is evinced by Kari’s gestural enactment of the song’s refrain, “Man! I feel like a woman,” in which she grabs her crotch on “Man!” and her breasts on “woman.” To be sure, Kari’s performance does not imply that transgender people should be regarded as asexual or undesirable. She does, however, make deliberate performative choices that frustrate the audience’s perception of her as a subject or object of purely hetero- or homosexual desire.

Likewise, Rosario Garcia’s performance of Britney Spears’ “Womanizer” and Shari Turner’s performance of No Doubt’s “Sunday Morning” invest the predictable pop topos of sexual infidelity with alternate meaning. When Shari, looking like an innocent schoolgirl in a demure cardigan set and poodle skirt, coos, “I know who I am, but who are you? You’re not looking like you used to. You’re on the other side of the mirror, so nothing’s looking quite as clear,” it truly is not clear whether she is a woman speaking to the man who betrayed her or a drag queen speaking to her male alter ego. When Rosario lip syncs, “Boy, don’t try to front, I know just what you are,” is she a woman scorned or a performer turning the question of sexual identity in on itself, transforming desire into a circuit that runs only between Rosario (the onstage persona) and Jose (the offstage subject)?

In point of fact, it matters little either way. The ambiguity itself is the crucial thing. The more illusory a queen’s sexuality, the cloudier the backdrop it provides, the more sharply those concrete aspects of her persona—opulence, fabulousness, pseudo-celebrity—stand out by contrast. So while the drag kings of Union Station bring specificity to sexuality, emphasizing the trans, gay, and otherwise queer constitutive outside of hegemonic masculinity, the drag queens across the hall in Bounce cultivate a nondescript sexuality subordinate not in respect of an ideal feminine sexuality but to the all-important paradigm of glamour and fame.

Within the generic conventions of queening, race is analogously pressed into the service of maintaining illusions. Since race, like sexuality, is subordinated to an ideal of celebrity and status, racial crossings often appear to go unremarked. Whereas kings deliberately highlight acts of racial appropriation, when queens select songs by differently-raced artists, the focus is always directed at some other technical aspect of the performance—Maya Tack’s reproduction of MIA’s outrageous fashion or Rosario Garcia’s acrobatic upgrade of Britney Spears’ choreography. Nothing in these performances calls attention to the racial subtext of a white performer’s appropriation of a Sri Lankan rapper’s image or a Latina queen’s technical improvements on a white, Southern pop star’s moves.

On the rare occasion that racial subtext threatens to become the main text, a queen is quick to create a distraction that will shift the audience’s focus to something less politically charged. One night during Suicide, the final act of the show in which each performer improvises to a snippet of a song chosen at random by the DJ, KiArra Cartier Fontaine’s turn arrived as Alanis Morissette’s angst-ridden alt rock anthem “You Oughta Know” blasted forth from the speakers. Channeled through KiArra’s black, hyperfeminized body, the white Canadian grrrl rocker’s voice might have evinced the
stereotype of the angry black woman, but KiArra dodged this landmine by spontaneously throwing her hairpiece at me. With the crowd’s attention temporarily diverted to the buttoned-up ethnographer in the front row with her glasses askew, holding an exaggerated Afro wig, KiArra, now looking more like Norma Desmond in her dressing gown and scalp-protecting turban, took a deep bow and glided offstage with the music still playing. Thus, what initially promised to be a confrontation of the racial dynamics of feminine anger—KiArra tearing the wig from her head and flinging it into the audience—instead became a tactic of circumvention, the racial politics of the moment sublimated through humor.

Indeed, in my eighteen months of fieldwork at Bounce/Union Station, only two performances disrupted the pattern of racial elision. The first was actually a brief ad lib between performances at a Cleveland Kings and Girls show. Rosario, an American-born Puerto Rican performer, was making a guest appearance that night. She asked emcee Donnie Waste if she could make an announcement and grabbed the microphone from his hands without waiting for a response. In perfect, unaccented American English, Rosario began to promote Torso Tuesdays, the weekly male revue she hosted. Shortly, Donnie wrested the mic back from her and asked, “Do you speak any English at all?” to which Rosario simply replied, in an exaggerated Spanish accent, “No, señor,” and minced briskly offstage, her shoulders slumped, looking at the floor. This moment of racial play hypostatizes the difference between kings’ and queens’ approaches to racial performance. Firstly, Donnie, not Rosario, was the one to engage the topic of race initially and, of course, ironically by arbitrarily drawing attention to Rosario’s Latina heritage in a moment when race—not to mention class, gender, and sexuality—could easily have gone unremarked. Secondly, Rosario chose to respond by shutting down verbally and physically, thus foreclosing further discussion of her ethnicity. The mere mention of race quite literally silenced the drag queen.

In the second instance of racial address, the Lady Akashia, an African American queen, donned a blonde wig, vinyl cat suit and corset, ballet slippers with eight-inch spike heels, and full whiteface makeup, and performed to Christina Aguilera’s aptly titled, “Not Myself Tonight.” Arriving bewigged and bepainted at Bounce, Akashia brushed off the doorman’s suggestion that she use the back entrance so as to avoid the obstacle course of the crowded bar. “I’m a white lady now,” she quipped. “I can do whatever I want.” But onstage this witticism was belied by her skintight costume and extreme footwear, which restricted her movement to writhing on the floor. Unlike the kings’ appropriations of racialized tropes, which expand the definition of race to mean more than a fixed set of characteristics inhering in certain bodies, Akashia’s performance of the (figurative and physical) limits of racial transgression reifies queening’s deracinated feminine norm.

The bricolage of racial, sexual, gender, and class identities that constitute kinging as a genre would therefore be impermissible within the generic conventions of queening, whose performers depend on the invisibility of “real world” social structures to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity. So critical is the protection of this illusion to the ethos of queening that performers who fail to maintain it avoid performing on the Bounce stage. Evona James, for instance, performs a style of drag more resonant with the “low brow” drag scene epitomized by San Francisco’s Trannyshack and now-defunct Charlie Horse. Like many of the performers at these west coast venues, Evona embodies a sort of monstrous
femininity, one so flagrantly unnatural and parodic that looking like a real woman is completely beside the point. Evona covers her entire face in white pancake makeup and pencils in thin geometric eyebrows a half inch above her natural ones. She wears ill-fitting pumps that cause her to teeter precariously and tube dresses out of the top of which peek her breast forms, the realistic silicone prostheses drag queens stuff into their bras. She doesn’t secure her wig, so it slides out of place as she dances. In short, she is the anti-ingenue, the foil to the starlet archetype prized by the other queens. Consequently, Evona limits her appearances at Bounce/Union Station to CKG shows, a platform better suited to the aesthetic rejection of normative feminine beauty.

Similarly, a frequent performer on the Bounce stage, Madison Phillips, embodies hegemonic femininity during queen shows, performing to Madonna or Lady Gaga or Katy Perry tracks while dressed in corsets, miniskirts, colorful wigs, and platform heels, but experiments with more avant-garde routines when she is invited to participate in CKG productions. At their 2010 Halloween show, for instance—the same show at which the Cleveland Kings and Girls mounted the “CKG in Genderland” work detailed in Chapter 2—Madison debuted a daring version of Orgy’s “Blue Monday,” a dark, industrial, male-voiced track, which, interestingly enough, Bryce Chambers and Donnie Waste used in the piece about transgender psychiatrization also described in the previous chapter. Madison took the stage in a black vinyl trench coat and gothic fetish boots, her bleach-blonde hair partly spiked, partly matted to her head as she often wears it in her offstage life. Her signature vapid pop star habitus seemingly banished from her body, she transformed into a caged animal, alternately prowling the catwalk and withdrawing deep into herself. About halfway through the song, she opened the coat to reveal a wide-mesh fishnet leotard that left nothing to the imagination. Beneath the bodysuit she wore no bra, fake breasts, or underwear—just a nude gaff thong (a garment that secures the testicles inside the body cavity and the penis between the legs, creating the illusion of a flat, female pubic area) and two swatches of black electrical tape concealing each nipple with an X as the female strippers at Bounce/Union Station are required to do. Madison thus forces the audience to question not only her gender but her biological sex, even as she invites us to read her body as female by reshaping her pubic and treating her nipples as breasts.

Madison’s grittiness, vulnerability, and graphically androgynous appearance in this performance undermine nearly every principle in the proverbial drag queen handbook, from her explicit BDSM sexuality to her mystifying gender presentation to her refusal of the trappings of fame. Moreover, by literally exposing herself in this way, Madison breaches the protective membrane that separates on- and offstage self. Her nakedness makes it impossible for us to see the onstage persona as wholly separate from the “real” person—a discrete alter ego. The degree to which a performer allows the audience to perceive his or her stage persona as overlapping with his or her quotidian self is another hallmark that distinguishes kinging from queening, a distinction I propose we frame as earnestness versus camp.

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12 Bounce/Union Station is not licensed as a strip club, so all performers must minimally wear a G-string, and female performers (including transwomen) may not expose their nipples.
Poetics of earnestness, poetics of camp: drag and genre

In a lecture entitled, “Toward a Poetics of Gay Male Culture,” queer theorist David Halperin attempts to locate a defining feature of gay male culture. In order to avoid the obvious problem that any generalization one makes about a culture will inevitably prove false when applied to the individuals who constitute it, Halperin takes the novel approach of framing culture as genre. Genre in this context refers not to “different kinds of literature or different modes of representation” but rather to “different horizons of expectation for speech acts” or “[t]he generic conventions that govern interaction in a specific social context” (2008, 88). By way of example, he shares an anecdote about taking a pair of Parisian visitors to a restaurant in Ann Arbor, Michigan, wherein his guests wrongly assume from the waitress’s familiar tone that she and Halperin are close friends. So while it is false to generalize that Americans are friendly while the French are cold and reserved, it is true that American culture permits a less formal mode of address between server and patron than is acceptable by French cultural standards.

Halperin goes on to identify camp as gay male culture’s unifying discursive register or genre. Broadly defined, camp is “the axiom that there is nothing in life so serious or so tragic as to be off-limits to humor” (2008, 90). In Halperin’s formulation, camp is a close relative of melodrama, which is in turn the product of “queer[ing] tragedy” (2008, 93). Whereas tragedy turns on the authenticity of feeling, melodrama (specifically, for Halperin, the variety that is self-conscious in and of its excess) hinges on the excessive performedness of sentiment. This emotional inauthenticity is the lynchpin of camp culture: it protects against the indignities of being queer in a heteronormative world. By rhetorically positioning gay male culture as always already outside the high seriousness of straight culture, camp limits the damage to one’s self-image.

Halperin’s conception of the poetics of camp provides critical insight into the fundamental distinction between queens and kings. The “selflacerating irony,” excess of affect, and self-conscious hyper-constructedness of a drag queen persona is camp par excellence (2008, 90). Bound by the generic conventions of camp, we can read the drag queen practice of creating a fully developed, coherent alter ego—one who is above the fray of racial, economic, and sexual injustice—as a necessary function of camp’s emotional distanciation. By contrast, drag king performance as a genre is defined by what I would call a poetics of earnestness, a term Judith Halberstam uses to signify “the opposite of camp” (1998, 239). A poetics of earnestness is a discursive practice that, like tragedy in Halperin’s conception, depends on emotional authenticity. But while tragedy, for Halperin, is an essentially heterosexual discourse grounded in normative conventions and proprieties, earnestness values emotionally authentic performances across, in, and between a variety of non-normative genders and sexualities, and sometimes several at the same time. As a byproduct of this (potentially feigned) emotional authenticity, drag kings open themselves to the perception that they are the character(s) they perform onstage.

The relative authenticity or inauthenticity of emotion in kinging and queening, respectively, is paralleled by the apparently essential nature of king style in contrast to the apparently constructed nature of queen style. Because drag queens perform a femininity that far exceeds the mainstream aesthetic, one consistent with the ethos of excess and consumption, achieving this hyper-feminization generally entails a drastic transformation
of the performer’s everyday appearance. Akashia, for example, is all woman: long, layered hair, prominent cheekbones, carefully painted lips and eyes, convincing breasts, wide hips, stiletto heels, and sequined dresses. Her everyday alter ego, Eric, however, is quite conventionally masculine in his physical appearance. He is slim but toned with a V-shaped torso, closely cropped hair, and the occasional five o’clock shadow. When he’s not performing, Eric wears jeans or cargo shorts, button-downs or brand name t-shirts and leather jackets, a perennial knit beanie during the brutal Cleveland winters. A regular patron of Bounce might easily pass him on the street and never recognize Akashia’s hyperbolic features in his unmade-up, unshaven face. And this is precisely the goal of queening: to create the illusion of a fully realized onstage persona with her own coherent identity, readily distinguishable from the man who plays her.13

Indeed, illusion (along with art, craft, and impersonation) is a term drag queens frequently employ to describe their performance work—“Next up, in the illusion of Lady Gaga, Maya Tack!” Such terminology emphasizes the constructedness of drag: the use of makeup to accentuate cheekbones, soften jaw lines, conceal the bulge of an Adam’s apple, and create cleavage where none exists; the deconstruction and refashioning of women’s clothes to deemphasize broad shoulders and create an hourglass shape; the addition of sequins, sparkles, rhinestones, lace, and ribbon to send an outfit over the top. Queening thus paradoxically creates the illusion of a discrete person (the feminine stage persona) by calling attention to its own craftedness.

For kings, by contrast, the transformation is far less extreme. Many of the CKG’s kings present as butch or male in their offstage lives. For these performers, the difference between stage appearance and day-to-day appearance generally consists in applying facial hair (and sometimes not even that). And unlike queens, who usually affect a high-pitched feminine voice when they address the audience, kings generally use their natural speaking voices. Thus, the line between the king and the person inside, so to speak, may often appear to be rather a thin one. This can make for an uneasy spectatorship at times when the aesthetic of kinging seems to bleed uncomfortably into the territory of passing, and it also accounts for the perception I’ve often encountered, particularly among gay male connoisseurs of queening, that kinging is artless—that there is no performance there. As I argued in the preceding chapter, there is, in fact, a great deal of work, thought, and self-awareness that goes into making drag king performance look like non-performance or under-performance. And while individual kings may share certain details about their private lives or invite the audience to read in their performances a certain degree of realism, the appearance that the relation between stage persona and everyday life is more tenuous for drag queens than it is for drag kings is just that—an appearance. Ultimately, as

13 The goal is, of course, a bit different for transgender queens who not only perform as women but also live as women. Kari Nickels, an icon of the Cleveland gay community, is commonly identified with her arresting large breasts, quite literally the size of melons, and she clearly cannot (nor would she want to) remove her implants after each performance. But even in her case, there is a notable chasm between Kari the drag queen and Kari the hairdresser and regular person. Ordinarily, Kari dresses like a typical stylish woman and is described by her friends as kind, generous, and a good listener. Onstage, her brash, bawdy, loud personality is matched by her bouffant wigs, deep-V dresses with bust lines slit down to her bellybutton, and even the occasional thong. In this way she makes clear to anyone who spends even a little time with her offstage that drag queen Kari is a gimmick.
I will show in Chapter 5, both genres are simultaneously as natural and as performed as the act of living itself.

Inasmuch as we might extend camp and earnestness to represent not only queening and kinging, but the genres of gay male and lesbian culture, respectively, we might understand them as opposite, but potentially compatible, modes of critique. Kinging critiques arbitrary but widely accepted expectations about what it means to be male, female, straight, gay, middle class, working class, black, or white by demonstrating the ease and naturalness with which seemingly entrenched attributes can be appropriated and with which supposedly conflicting categories can melt and morph into one another. Queening, I suggest, is as much or more a critique of consumerism as it is of gender. By idealizing an unattainable concept of celebrity untouched by the tensions of social existence, it highlights the absurdity of subordinating all social ills to the issue of wealth production—an absurdity that, since the economic crash of 2008, has increasingly become a political reality. The belief that any problem can be solved through privatization and more efficient business modeling serves to conceal structural inequalities inhering in race, gender, and sexuality. Queening, via camp, critiques the enshrinement of the free market within American culture by making us reconsider the seriousness of the things we take seriously and the significance of the things we don’t. Kinging, via earnestness, gives the lie to binary gender by showing that authenticity is not synonymous with naturalness.

Conclusion

There is a good reason why people who study drag queens almost never study drag kings and vice versa: kinging and queening are totally different genres with different expectations about the kind of subject matter one can address and the way in which one can address it. Kinging deals in sincerity, embracing subordinated and marginalized identities. Queening deals in irony, purposefully refusing to acknowledge that there are subordinated and marginalized identities. Each has its own disciplinary conventions, to borrow Foucault’s terminology (1982, 222), asks its own set of questions, and demands that its practitioners comport themselves a certain way. But to approach them as distinct but parallel cultural practices is to understand both the potency and problematics of the concept queer. While there are fundamental similarities (e.g., same-sex attraction) and shared political aims (e.g., marriage equality, employment and housing discrimination, opposition to anti-gay bullying and crime), that unite (portions of) the lesbian and gay communities, there are as many or more points of contention between, and even within, the two. It is easy to see why the narrative of a united queer umbrella persists in the face of longstanding criticisms and continues to hold a certain appeal despite its obvious erasures: In the decades since gay liberation, a coalitional politics has enabled non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming Americans to achieve relative social acceptance and freedom to lead uncloseted lives. But coalition can only go so far. As Judith Butler asks in regard to the feminist movement, “Is the premature insistence on the goal of unity precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks?...Without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a
number of ‘women’ for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot” (1990, 15). Taking up Butler’s proposition, I argue that those of us dedicated to queer activism and knowledge production would do well to start from the assumption that lesbians, gays, bisexuals, asexuals, and transgender and intersex people have little to nothing in common with each other, to dwell in and on the differences therein, and to work across—not in denial of—those differences.¹⁴

Of course, it would be easy to assume that the differences between kings and queens and between lesbians and gay men outlined in the preceding chapters are unique to the bar or the city where I conducted my fieldwork. But in point of fact the constitutive attributes of kinging and queening can be located within a national historical tradition. Contemporary U.S. drag has a gestural and discursive lineage that can be traced as far back, in the case of queening, as the late nineteenth century. This genealogy is the focus of the next chapter.

¹⁴ A recent episode of the ABC sitcom Modern Family expresses the fundamentality of these differences quite pithily. Two gay characters explain by way of Venn diagram that, “While often lumped together, gay men and lesbians have less in common than one might think.” Gay and straight men overlap in their gender, gay men and straight women overlap in their attraction to men, but in neither identity category to the circles representing gay men and lesbians intersect (Melman 2012).
CHAPTER 3
GESTURING BACK:
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DRAG PERFORMANCE

[O]ne could easily get the impression that the self-concept exists primarily as a linguistic construct, independent of people’s bodies. However…, we propose that the self-concept may be more embodied than it is traditionally assumed. Thomas Schubert & Sander Koole (2009, 828)

It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive “things.”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002, 216)

In her groundbreaking ethnography of American drag queen subcultures, anthropologist Esther Newton defined drag as “the clothing of one sex when worn by the other sex” (1972, 3). As I have suggested in the preceding chapters, that term has evolved in the forty years since Newton’s study was published into a far broader category that has less and less to do specifically with cross-dressing. Nowadays, drag is variously used as an umbrella term for gender performance and queer performance, as well as to refer to performance that borrows from drag iconography (as in, “Lady Gaga is such a drag queen!”). It describes self-presentation that insists on its own constructedness, like that of high femme style; self-presentation that contradicts one’s day-to-day gender identity (thus a butch woman may consider wearing a dress a form of drag); and a vast web of gestural, vocal, linguistic, performative, tonal, and stylistic signifiers immediately legible to people who are culturally “in the know.”

In this chapter, I home in on one of these signifiers in particular, gesture, in order to produce a phenomenological account of drag as culture. It would be easy to dismiss this study’s ethnographic findings as isolated examples of drag performance from which it is impossible to generalize about the work and symbolism of U.S. drag more broadly, let alone gay and lesbian cultures as a whole. This chapter locates the performers of Bounce/Union Station within a gestural lineage of drag dating as far back as the late nineteenth century. The continuity of some common drag gestures across time and geography is all the more remarkable when one considers that the practices of kinging and queening have cropped up relatively independently in virtually every one of the United States. Unlike other performance genres, notably ballet and modern dance techniques and the Delsarte method of acting, drag has no systematic documentary history. Its origins cannot be traced to a single founder or even to a small number of independently operating visionaries; no impresario codified a movement vocabulary or traveled the country, recruiting students. Consequently, evidence of the gestural evolution of drag is fragmentary, ephemeral, and disjunct. To reconstruct a genealogy of drag gestures, I rely
on decades of archived queer ephemera—diary entries, photographs, postcards, banners, videos, short-lived zines, newsletters, interviews, magazine reviews, publicity materials, and personal papers. Using this patchwork of historical documents, this chapter chronicles the development of the internally coherent gestural repertoires and postural modes employed, respectively, by drag queens and kings across the country and highlights the radical discontinuity between the two genres. It historicizes the social and aesthetic linkages and fissures between kinging and queening described in Chapters 1 and 2 by specifying the gestures that constitute masculinity and femininity in drag performance. In so doing, I hope to show that people and events long since past can be physically indexed by living bodies.

**Gestures as gendered**

Film director and theater practitioner Sande Zeig once observed, “Without the body of the actor, there is no theatre. By controlling the production of our gestures, we radically alter our theatre from the start” (1985, 14). As we have seen in the preceding chapters, cross-dressing is but a small part of drag, despite being its most recognizable feature. Wearing clothing associated with the opposite gender is not enough to constitute a drag performance; this is especially evident in the case of e.g., transgender men, for whom adopting the normative trappings of masculinity is part of everyday life, and in the case of butch lesbians who feel more comfortable moving through the world in clothing typically designated as menswear. On the contrary, for kings and queens alike, drag is a constellation of gestures that evokes legibly gendered states of embodiment only to dismiss them as absurd (in the case of kings) or exaggerate them to abstraction (in the case of queens). So central to drag performance is gesture that one might invoke Zeig’s assertion as an alternate definition thereof: to do drag is to control the production of one’s gestures.

But precisely how do gestures convey gender? Feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young (1980) offers a number of concrete distinctions in the way men and women typically carry themselves and interact with the space around them. Situating herself in conversation with Simone de Beauvoir’s existential theory of femininity and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the lived body, Young identifies four general tendencies in women’s performance of gross movements: 1) we tend to restrict the fullness of our movements, 2) we move our bodies in a general direction rather than toward a specific target, 3) we localize movements to a single body part even when a task would be accomplished more efficiently by engaging other muscle groups, and 4) we protect our bodies from awkwardness and harm more consistently than do men. The first three tendencies correspond to three phenomenological (counter)modalities: ambiguous transcendence, the failure to constitute oneself as a subject organizing space by bodying-forth (making use of the body’s full capacity); inhibited intent, the failure to connect body with aim; and discontinuous unity, the failure to constitute space as an extension of one’s body. Based on these observations, Young concludes that women experience space as enclosed and double, inasmuch as we unconsciously divide space between the “here” to which we confine our movements and the “yonder” within which “someone” could move...but not I” (1980, 40–41). She further reasons that this feminine body comportment and spatiality
stem from a double consciousness by which women simultaneously regard ourselves as subjects constituting space and objects constituted by space. Not only does the hesitation entailed by this liminality (I can/my body cannot) account for the fourth tendency above, it also makes women more likely than men to fail at ordinary physical tasks, which leads us in turn to underestimate our abilities, and on and on in a self-perpetuating cycle. For Young, this embodied double-consciousness is paradoxical, if not entirely negative: women move this way because we expect to be looked at, yet our contained experience of space may be said to guard against the gaze. This interpretation of feminine spatiality as defensive or protective is echoed in a more recent empirical study, which found that while men rated themselves happier and scored better on a test after receiving positive feedback while sitting upright, women felt and performed better after being praised while seated in a slouched position (Roberts and Arefi-Afshar 2007). Like Young, the study’s authors speculated that women, watching themselves being watched, might feel unduly exposed sticking their chests out as an upright posture forces one to do. Moreover, having been socially conditioned to see themselves as inferior beings, for women “the slumped position, indicative of lower status, was felt as more natural and appropriate, and thus it was in this position that they performed better” (724).

Similarly, Zeig suggests that gestures are masculine by default. It is the inability to properly or successfully execute a movement that marks the gesture as feminine. Thus, as has become customary in western accounts of gender difference, masculinity is defined by its presence, femininity by its absence of the masculine. But unlike Young and Roberts and Arefi-Afshar, Zeig resists casting feminine body carriage in a positive or even functional light. On the contrary, she compares feminine movement to a disability, a deliberate amputation of one’s full subjecthood:

Feminine gestures are the indicator that one is in agreement with and accepts a system that has literally made more than half of the population infirm. Women’s bodies have been so trafficked that the most simple, direct and functional movements are completely foreign to us. Some examples? Throwing, pushing, lifting, running—not to mention hitting, hauling or hammering....[T]he gestures designated to the class of women are the gestures of slaves. To reproduce these gestures in life or on stage is to support and maintain the institution of oppression. But sometimes, we have internalized this oppression to such an extent that it is unrecognizable. (1985, 13)

Zeig thus usefully points out that internal, restrictive, and passive bodily comportments are, in fact, learned behaviors, naturalized but not natural. Of course, her valuation of masculine-ascribed gestures and concomitant devaluation of feminine-ascribed ones is equally arbitrary, since any of the above-named gestures (throwing, pushing, hitting, hammering, etc.) might in some contexts be considered bad or at least valuatively neutral. Nevertheless, Zeig’s implication that only feminine gestures are unnatural (or, at least, that they are less natural than masculine gestures) does resonate with the present account of drag because, as I have argued in the preceding chapter, drag queens cultivate a simulacral image. If feminine gestures are indeed, as Zeig suggests, degraded reproductions of
originals that never existed, then they are perfectly suited to a performance genre that trades in enactments of gender which don’t exist in nature, so to speak.

Drag queen Miko Chanel’s signature moves aptly demonstrate this surreal gestural quality, as well as queening’s disjuncture with the female-embodied feminine comportment outlined by Young. Even in moments of stillness and pedestrian movement, Miko’s physicality—her controlled angularity and palpably uncomfortable body positioning—is hyperbolic. She leans back with her hands on her hips, which are always exaggeratedly thrust forward à la Fosse; she tilts her head and torso back, arms outstretched with palms up; her walk is a cross between a strut and a march in which she lifts her feet fully off the floor with each step. Miko moves with targeted direction, thus defying Young’s feminine norm of inhibited intent (i.e., aimless movement). And at the end of every performance—which, for Miko, always involves high kicks, backflips, and extend series’ of rapid chainé turns—she buckles at the knees and flops on her back, stands up, passes out again, and repeats the shtick several more times until the audience is fairly frothing with applause. Miko’s “fall out” thus highlights the work of gender performance: she literally collapses at the end of her number, as if to tell the audience, “You see what I go through for you!” She calls attention to the seams of gendered embodiment, thereby performing femininity with what Derrida called différence: a femininity that has neither existence nor essence.

The alignment of femininity with artificiality and masculinity with spontaneity (presupposed by the work of Zeig, above) is borne out by the movement vocabularies of drag queens and kings, respectively. Queens’ gestures and comportment are highly stylized and deliberately choreographed whereas kings’ performances appear to be more improvised (although, as we shall see, this is merely an appearance), reflecting the parallel assumptions that femininity is put on while masculinity emanates unaffectedly from within. Performers quite literally embody this contrast through their movements. Kings movements tend to mobilize the whole body, engaging multiple body parts simultaneously or originating in one body part and then traveling to others. Queens movements are often more isolated and disconnected such that each body part moves independently of the others. The difference is most obvious in two gestures that both types of performers frequently employ: the hair flip and the pelvic gyration. When Logan Behold’s long mane falls into his face, he thrashes his entire upper body in order to swing it back over his shoulder; his head aligns stiffly with his spine such that the head and torso move as a unit to produce a quick, forceful motion. But when Shari Turner faces the same problem, she simply rolls her head in a fluid, circular motion without engaging her torso at all. The use of the hips is similarly gendered. Kings move their pelvisses front to back, either loosely with their knees bent and feet planted firmly or while engaging their body in a plank position in order to simulate sex with a tipper who has laid down on the stage; queens shake their hips side to side or circularly, maintaining a tension in the rest of their body so as to make the pelvic movement more pronounced. In both cases, we see that the embodiment of drag queen femininity follows the feminine motile tendency that Young terms discontinuous unity, the unconscious engagement of a single body part in executing an action for which kings (and, in theory, most masculine individuals) would mobilize their entire bodies.

Young’s phenomenological model accounts for much of drag performers’ spatial relations and gestural repertoire. The individual gestures of queening are indeed more
readily identifiable than those of kings precisely because drag queens adopt the feminine intersubjectivity; queens view themselves as both subjects and objects of the gaze and therefore attend closely to the physical appearance of their bodies in any given moment. Consequently, they rely more heavily on stillness, posing, and discrete sequences of choreography than do kings. Thus, while a king’s neutral posture is square and relaxed, many queens adopt a distinctly posed, mannequin-like posture. For example, when standing in place, Rosario Garcia flexes her legs straight, bends slightly forward at the waist and elongates her spine, leaving only her arms free to move. This insistent presentationality carries over to a queen’s dancing and walking, which are so self-consciously choreographed that if one filmed her performance, each frame would contain another picture-perfect pose. This tendency reflects Young’s ambiguous transcendence, the feminine tendency to restrict one’s movements, because queens’ movements do not constitute space but rather are constituted by space.

Kings, by contrast, carve out space and are less attentive to the precise positioning of their bodies from one moment to the next. Xavier Alexander Jade occupies the stage as if his body required the full eighty square foot expanse; his exaggerated gestures and purposive saunter—slow, intentional, kicking each foot forward—mark the space around him as his own territory. Ace Daniels’ signature move is a whirlwind of a spin: rather than crossing one foot in front of the other and turning to unwind the legs, he plants one foot firmly, winds up by twisting almost imperceptibly away from that foot, and releases his body rapidly toward the standing leg with the free foot grazing the floor as he spins. Although his body remains tightly enclosed during this maneuver, a comportment that may initially seem feminine per Young’s model, his constitution of space is masculine inasmuch as the risk of falling off balance in this uncontrolled turn creates a wide berth around him. Likewise, Donnie Waste frequently hovers at the lip of the stage, leaning so far forward that his weight draws him onto his tiptoes, threatening to topple into the crowd at any moment.

The gendered occupation of space was described to me by Trenton Ford (stage name Timmy Knight) as a feminine propensity for convexity versus a masculine propensity for concavity. By observing the posture and gestures of women and men as they went about their daily lives, he noted that, “A lot of women, when they walk, even if they don’t know it, they still have a little bit of a swing in their hips, and they walk with their shoulders back [and their] ass out...It’s more squared up for men. [And] because you’re more masculine [and] you’re squared up here [in the shoulders and upper torso], it squares up your hips with the ground so you don’t have the wobble, the butt shaking, hips swinging.”1 Similarly, the key to sitting like a man, according to Trenton, is to keep the legs apart, pull the core back, and let the arms hang loose and forward, thereby marking a formidable sphere of negative space in front of the chest. To sit like a woman, by contrast, is to abdicate one’s claim to the space in front of one by closing or crossing the legs, arching the spine slightly forward, and keeping the arms close to the body. So unlike the queen who circumscribes her rather limited personal space with sagittal chest isolations that emphasize the spinal curve and the forward thrust, kings’ patterns of movement are typified by Logan Behold’s tendency to let his limbs orbit around a hollowed out chest or

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1 Interview with author, February 19, 2010.
Travis McNasty’s space-clearing stance: a wide second position with a deep knee bend, and an exaggeratedly concave torso that snakes laterally rather than front-to-back.

As is clear from Trenton’s comments above, against all appearances, kinging’s performance of masculinity is just as intentional and studied as queening’s embodiment of femininity. Indeed, some of the CKG’s members underwent an extensive training program before they were ever allowed to take the stage. Jess (Xavier) and Terrah (Miss Red/Christopher Dane) recalled workshops led by former troupe manager Adam Apple in which “[you’d] list genres of music from classical to country to rock to rap, and then you’d sit in a chair and you’d work from your face down. So you’d literally just do facial expressions first to match the song. And then you’d do the next one and so on and so forth, and you’d get critiqued on each one. And then you got to use your upper body and your arms, and then you got to stand and actually use your feet. And it actually worked very, very well because I [X] am very well-rounded in all genres of music.”

Several kings reported watching music videos and videos of other drag kings on YouTube to get a handle on how performers in different genres embodied masculinity differently. Moreover, Trenton talked about watching interviews with various artists “so I would see how they’d react when they’re not performing. I would see how they were interacting when they were just being interviewed, compared to when they were doing their performing [on stage], and there’s a big difference in how they perform when they do a live performance and when they do it in [a music] video, too.”

Not only do Trenton, Jess, and Terrah’s reflections on the practice of kinging belie the notion that masculinity, unlike femininity, is not a pretense or a set of learned behaviors—after all, as Trenton reminds us, even unimpeachably male and masculine rock stars exhibit masculinity in different ways depending on the context—but they also underline a salient categorical distinction between kings’ and queens’ use of gesture. Kings, as discussed at length in Chapter 1, perform a diversity of masculinities, and these correspond to broad differences in posture and physicality rather than to any specific, concrete gestures. The detached toughness of rap, for example, calls for a loose posture everywhere but in the hands, which remain fairly stiff and generally alternate between fists and open palms with the fingers spread wide apart. Rock masculinity, however, emphasizes physical strength and therefore requires a good deal of flexion in the muscles, leading to an overall stiffness. Country western’s salt of the earth flavor demands the strong, rigid back and mobile limbs of a cowboy, farmhand, or manual laborer. And jazz and R&B standards give rise to a controlled coolness; thus, when Bryce Chambers performs James Brown’s “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World,” he tosses the mic stand around with seeming abandon and kicks a leg sharply to accent a downbeat, creating the illusion of casualness, but from the waist up his body is tense.

Queening, conversely, tolerates far less gestural variation among performers and across an individual’s performance repertoire because, as illustrated in the preceding chapter, queens embrace a singular version of femininity. Consequently, their movement vocabulary is more codified than kings’. Archival documentation indicates that when it comes to bodily comportment, the history of male to female drag has followed a fairly straight line from the late 1800s to the present. Photographic evidence shows that the

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2 Interview with author, February 12, 2010.
postures and gestures of queening have remained largely unchanged for more than a century. Unsurprisingly, a different story emerges from the historical record on kinging. Although the aesthetics of female to male performance remained steadily white and upper class until the latter decades of the last century, the few archival images we have of drag kings suggest that the genre never had a particularly consistent gestural repertoire.

A gestural genealogy of drag

In a file labeled “Research Materials, 1926-1997,” the legendary comedian and female impersonator Charles Pierce stored several Xeroxed sections of a book on the art of impressions. The text provides detailed guides to recreating such gay idols as Bette Davis, Barbra Streisand, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, and Mae West (not to mention Clint Eastwood, The Elephant Man, and Gandhi). The step-by-step instructions for each celebrity are a mélange of camp and didacticism. Thus the lesson on Liza Minnelli includes such directives as:

Put on record of *Cabaret*. Get ready to gush. Make all movements sudden, sharp, and exaggerated; i.e., fling out your arms, twitch head, jerk shoulders, throw one hand high above head...[L]ean the weight of your torso onto your right leg and slide your left leg out behind you, slowly counterbalancing the weight of your body...After song has finished, gush, twitch, giggle, and brush hair out of eyes. Thank audience in breathy sobs...At end of song bend knees and raise one arm high above you, clenching your neck with the other hand as if trying to strangle yourself. (At this point you may not find it necessary to try and strangle yourself, as several people will offer to do it for you).

As this excerpt demonstrates, there is a reason why celebrities like Bette Midler, Marilyn Monroe, and Joan Rivers are sources of inspiration for drag queens. Their over-the-top personalities capture the exaggeratedness and excessiveness of drag queen femininity. But perhaps more importantly, their signature gestures and tics are eminently quotable. And as the archival evidence of queening makes clear, repeatability is an essential trait for drag queen gestures.

A series of photographs taken over the course of a hundred years substantiates this trend. In a cabinet card circa 1870, the comic singer and cross-dresser William Horace Lingard poses in a virginal white, high-necked, bustled day dress and an elaborately styled powdered wig (*Figure 1a*). The bangs form a tiny innocent curl; behind them falls a cascade of ringlets pulled back from his face and parted crisply in the center. He sits primly, his legs crossed toward the camera, his upper body draped seductively over a cloaked table. His forearms too are crossed, resting ever so delicately upon the table; an ornate fan in one gloved hand partly eclipses his jawline. Lingard’s body faces diagonally to the right, but his face, angled slightly downward, is directed toward the left, his eyes looking coquettishly ahead.

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1 Box 14, Folder 35, Charles Pierce Photographs, Papers, Costumes, and Memorabilia, Coll2008-019, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
World War II. A publicity photo for the San Francisco nightclub Finocchio’s’
female impersonator revue features a performer lounged almost identically across a
backless stool, her hands planted firmly on its edge to prop her up, fingers grazing the
oversized fan balanced against it (Figure 1b). Her demeanor is far less reserved than
Lingard’s—more seductive than coy. Rather than hiding behind the fan, her body remains
open and exposed. Her gaze is directed heavenward and out to some point beyond the
camera.

1971. Empress Shirley of the San Francisco-based gay service organization the
Imperial Court, sprawls lavishly across a clean, white surface (Figure 1c). Holding herself up
with one gloved hand, weight poured into her right hip, bosom thrust proudly forward, her
legs curled to the side and hidden beneath a voluminous satin skirt, she throws her head
back and laughs. Her smiling eyes are engaged with someone standing off to her right—
possibly the photographer, possibly the viewer.

These images span a century, and yet the body positions assumed in all three are
remarkably similar. The quality and focus of the subject’s gaze varies over time, reflecting
women’s changing role in U.S. society, but in nearly every other respect—the angle of
incline in the torso, the line of the body, even the spread of the fingers in the latter two—
the pose is nearly identical. Such patterns emerge repeatedly within the photographic
archive of U.S. drag queen performance. Cutting across decades and encompassing
territories as diverse as San Francisco, Hollywood, Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Cleveland,
New York, Detroit, and Miami, these images nonetheless reveal an extraordinarily
consistent repertory of gestures and poses. What they all share in common is the capacity
to enhance the illusion of a female body; thus, the poses are meant to reflect what Rupp
and Taylor call “drag queerness” rather than femininity as it is expressed by “real” women
(a problematic distinction to which I will return in Chapter 5). To name just one example,
rather than protecting the body from harm and awkwardness as Young observed biological
females do, drag queens generally keep their bodies open and vulnerable in order to
enhance the illusion of womanly curves.

One nearly universal method queens of the last century have used to achieve this
aim is what I call the pageant queen stance. Like a Miss America contestant in the
swimsuit competition, a queen stands with her weight transferred entirely onto one leg,
forcing that hip to jut out, while crossing the opposite, bent leg in front (see e.g., Figures
3a, 5b, 5c, and 6b). This technique not only makes the hips appear wider, but it also
creates soft curves in the line of the body, a distinct feature of feminine posture as
described by Trenton Ford above. These curves are often further exaggerated by hinging
backward at the waist as the queens in Figure 6 do. Note that the performers in 6c are
participants in the Closet Ball, a contest for novices. As such, the image confirms that this

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4 In this section, I use the terms “drag queen” and “drag king” anachronistically to refer to performers who
would have been referred to as (fe)male impersonators or transformist(e)s in their own day. In contemporary
usage “impersonator” usually denotes a performer who embodies a specific celebrity or celebrities in voice,
mannerisms, and appearance (e.g., Frank Marino, the Vegas headliner who has performed as Joan Rivers in
various revues since 1985). However, from the late nineteenth century up through the vaudeville era, a male
or female impersonator was any actor who cross-dressed for the stage, whether they mimicked a particular
celebrity or played a character of their own devising. I thus default to contemporary terminology to avoid
confusion.
posture is either so common that even a spectator who had never actually done drag would have internalized it or so integral to the practice that a seasoned queen would have taught it to her protégé.

The body’s curvilinearity is also deepened by subtle postural twists. As is clear from the photos reproduced here, rarely, if ever, does a queen stand with her whole body facing straight forward, as the effect of this would be to square and flatten the body’s dimensions. Instead, she takes a cubist approach to her posture, facing the diagonal, angling her upper and lower body in opposite directions, and using her arms to advantageously shape the surrounding negative space. Thus, in Figure 3d, Bounce’s Shari Turner’s hips face left, her chest faces right, her left elbow presses into her side, and her right elbow cuts into her waist, narrowing her midsection and lifting her right breast. The result is a flawless hourglass figure. In Figure 4b, southern queen Sadhji’s weight-bearing hip protrudes back and left, her free leg curves back and right, her torso angles forward left, and her right arm dangles a few inches away from the body, creating a space that carves a curve in her midsection, with her face turned ever so slightly to the right. The length of her body thus forms a subtle S shape, emphasized by a hand that rests lightly on her protruding hip, following the line of the curved opposite leg.

Indeed, the hands play no small part in the physical production of drag queen femininity. They have been used at least since the beginning of the last century to alternately convey demure playfulness and vampy seductiveness. Queens articulate the latter by grazing their bodies seductively. This can range from subtle—as vaudeville and early film star Julian Eltinge demonstrates, touching his hand lightly to his bosom, as if to still his heart (Figure 7.1a)—to “come hither”—Eltinge’s fingers curling slightly upward in a beckoning motion (Fig. 2a); an unidentified model lying on her back and sliding her hand down her abdomen; Akashia cushioning her chin on the back of her hand (Fig. 7.1b-c)—to overtly sexual—Shari Turner running her fingers through her hair; KiArra Cartier Fontaine caressing herself; Kari Nickels digging her nails into her exposed breast; Rosario Garcia grasping one end of an exceptionally thick candy cane, the other end of which is planted firmly between her lips (Fig. 7.2). Conversely, a daintier mien is communicated through limp wrists, softly cupped palms, and delicately separated digits. In this vein, Eltinge gracefully handles an umbrella with only the tips of his fingers (a gesture echoed by an unidentified queen at a 1986 drag ball) (Fig. 8a-b); stage actress and mime Jean La Monte takes a fold of her diaphanous skirt between her thumb and forefinger, raising her free hand in an affectedly elegant gesture that signifies, “don’t speak” (Fig. 4a); Francis Blair fluffs her pale blonde tresses flirtily (Fig. 8c); another unidentified queen bends her wrist back, palm up, like a game show model exhibiting the prizes up for grabs (Fig. 8d).

While drag queens articulate their femininity through a precise and transmissible body of gestures and affectations, kings have historically performed masculinity through a more abstract, character-driven relation to space. Based on what little documentary evidence is available, it appears that drag king masculinity remained relatively static and unvaried until at least the 1980s. In a still from a 1980 production of Eve Merriam’s Obie

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Note that while performers evoke femininity by playing on archetypes like the tease, the vixen, or the femme fatale, sexuality is invoked only in the most abstract sense to reinforce their gender identity and remains undirected as to any specific act or object of desire.
Award-winning *The Club*, arguably the most popular female-to-male drag show of the latter half of the twentieth century, a pair of mustachioed, white-gloved, and morning coat-clad performers ham it up mid-song (Fig. 9). Their chests thrust boastfully forward, they contort their faces into zany, eye-popping, vaudevillian expressions. The Edwardian styling of these two actors derives from one of three stylistic genres available to drag kings prior to the last twenty to thirty years: the tuxedoed gentleman (Fig. 10), the dapper dandy (Fig. 11), and the military man (Fig. 12). Just as the kings of CKG carry their bodies differently depending on the type of music to which they are performing, each of these personae dictates a way of interacting with space and with the audience or another actor.

The tuxedoed gentleman, for example, is upright but relaxed—even the seated Gloria Hodes (Fig. 10e) straightens and elongates her spine rather than hunching back into her chair—and this connotes a commanding confidence, the sign of a man aware of his own authority. Indeed, all but one of the kings pictured here tilt their heads slightly downward as if looking at his inferiors, giving off an air of self-assurance and superiority. The archetype is forceful and dynamic. Whilst the queens relate to their bodies primarily as props for producing femininity, kings use their bodies to do things: to forcefully gesticulate their meaning or desires (Fig. 10c), to invite a lady to dance (Fig. 10b), to hold an instrument or hat (Fig. 10a, d). Not surprisingly, this sense of easy purposiveness pervades images of the dapper dandy and the military man as well. In the decades before women’s liberation, to be a white, upper-middle class man was to enjoy a position of unquestioned power and entitlement. It is this absolute belief in one’s own importance that typifies drag masculinity throughout most of the twentieth century, rather than any concrete movements or poses. In both drag performance and society at large, femininity was and largely continues to center on the body’s appearance—its shape, its movements—while masculinity consists in the body’s actions—a physicalized, palpable sense of power.

Thus, the main difference between the three character typologies is an unarticulated (and, frankly, unexamined) class hierarchy. A soldier, for instance, especially prior to the Vietnam War, may well have come from any stratum of the socioeconomic ladder, while a man in formalwear is almost certainly a member of the upper crust. But the significance of this discrepancy is leveled by the tacit assumption that all of these men, by dint of their gender, deserve respect. Indeed, the first evidence I have found of the turn toward a more diverse array of masculinities does not arrive until 1992. In a story on the Closet Ball from the *Las Vegas Bugle*, we find a close-up of “Millie,” aka “Mitch the Bitch” (Fig. 13). Mitch sports a Fu Manchu moustache and a plaid flannel shirt with cut-off sleeves. His long hair is partially covered by a bandana. Hanging from his neck is an ankh, the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, formed from crude signs for the male and female sex organs. He is pictured only from the chest up, but his shoulders are square and he gazes confidently straight ahead. This picture marks the first image of a drag king in casual dress, the first to highlight a distinctly working-class subjectivity, and the first to toy with androgyny. Unfortunately, given the extensive lacunae in the archive of drag king performance, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when the practice began to transition from portraying masculinity as a generalized state of authority to masculinity as a complex of identities refracted through class, race, and sexuality.
The paucity of information about the history of kinging is bemoaned by Michelle Parkerson, a documentarian who chronicled the performance work of Stormé DeLarverié, the lone male impersonator of the Jewel Box Revue, a drag queen showcase that toured the U.S. and Canada from 1939-1973. Speaking to The Washington Blade in 1987, Parkerson argued that the historical invisibility of drag kings relative to queens is no coincidence:

Female impersonators are popular because they are trivializing the already trivial...Those things that are ‘about women,’ representative of women, are already trivialized within society. The big hairdos, the big breasts—the sexist stereotypes—are meaningless as to ‘femaleness.’ But...male impersonation is a more threatening situation. The idea of women parodying the attire of power and privilege, and doing it with such grace, is very threatening...There is a media hush about [male impersonators], both on and off stage.

Parkerson lauded “the impersonators who can ‘expose the straws the whole image is built on...with the control of the hand and the line of the jacket’” (Pisik 1987, 13). To wit, drag queens are more popular, more deeply ingrained in modern American culture than drag kings because the latter bolsters regimes of power while the former upsets them. Or, in Mimi Schippers’ and Raewyn Connell’s terms, respectively, queening performs hegemonic femininity while kinging resists hegemonic masculinity.

Writing for The Village Voice two years earlier, Erika Munk framed the relationship between kinging and queening quite similarly. “Men in drag on stage and women in drag on stage aren’t symmetrical, parallel, or even yin and yang. They’re no more in balance than men and women in any other roles” (1985, 80). Munk goes on to historicize her claim that the inequities of traditional gender roles map neatly onto the public reception of theatrical cross-dressers, citing theater critic W.R. Totterton’s portrait of turn-of-the-century male impersonator Vesta Tilley:

‘A dapper young man in an exquisite purple holiday costume strolls from the wings leaning on his bending cane. He comes to the centre of the footlights, and poses with crossed legs and staring monocle, the features deliciously quizzical and inane. A perfect picture...the picture speaks and the illusion is piquantly broken, or, rather, the optical illusion continues, only there is another person present—the woman artist who unfolds the tale....Every gesture is right; every tone is right—striking the delicate chord between irony and burlesque.’ In Edwardian England, delicacy was more easily reached by women, irony and burlesque were more easily accepted by men, than they are now—no doubt because women had no votes, no choice, no power, no freedom. (1985, 81)

So in contradistinction to the revulsion and anxiety many contemporary Americans experience when faced with a woman dressing, walking, occupying space—in short,

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6 While I agree with the general sentiment behind Munk’s assertion that we should not think of kings and queens as partners, counterparts, or mutual inversions, I would stipulate again that not all drag queens are biological males and not all drag kings are biological females.
“behaving like”—a man, in the decades before suffrage and first wave feminism, the same encounter was viewed as delightful, if titillating, entertainment because women posed no real threat to male supremacy.

Munk’s and Parkerson’s parallel observation that kinging threatens the gender hierarchy in a way that queening never can returns us to the discursive registers of earnestness and camp. Drag queens can circulate within the mainstream of American culture because a) femininity is always already frivolous, inconsequential, ergo no cause for concern; and b) the emotional remove on which camp is predicated insistently calls attention to the artificiality—the performed-ness—of their performances. Kings, however, have not and likely never will enjoy the same kind of widespread attention and acceptance, and this is not just because masculinity is a priori a more serious business in our culture than femininity, but because the rhetorical practice of earnestness (i.e., emotional authenticity) undermines their performances’ status as theater. Earnestness by definition is genuine, literal, real, and the possibility that this earnestness may itself be an illusion is almost certainly lost on those observers not primed to read king performances against the grain. The perceived realness of kinging, born of its refusal of queening’s aesthetic excess and reinforced by performers’ seemingly unaffected gestures and overall bodily comportment, is menacing enough to make most Americans—including some gay men—scoff, close their eyes, and cling to the comforting notion that gender crossings are only permissible when obviously self-conscious, that femininity is the absence of power, and that masculinity is sacrosanct.

Conclusion

In making the case that theater requires the actor to consciously attend to the substance and symbolism of her gestures, Zeig “posits that there are no ‘natural’ gestures for the class of women and the class of men; that gestures may be classified and systematized in terms of gender usage; that these systems may be adhered to or, to the contrary, not adhered to” (1985, 13). Simply put, gesture is a choice. This is precisely what makes them so easy to appropriate for the purposes of drag. But the question of whether or to what extent a gesturer (authentically) embodies the gender to which that gesture corresponds is, emphatically, moot. The issue of authenticity is beside the point because, as many have argued before me, authenticity presumes a subject. Rather, as I will argue in the final chapter of this dissertation, when we talk about embodied action and experience, what matters is that the interaction of a body—any body—with a gesture like throwing gives rise to the concept masculinity, and masculinity consequently becomes a descriptor of particular material relations rather than of particular bodies.

What is clear about the embodied practice of drag is that it articulates masculinity and femininity through radically different relations between the performer’s body, space, and time. In the case of kinging, the concept of masculinity that emerges is shaped by the imprint of race and class as they are performed in popular music and culture. Kings’ approach to movement is full-bodied, unspecific, and historically contingent. The monolithic conception of femininity that emerges from queen performance, however, is a function of a historically and geographically stable catalogue of gestures and postures. The
gestural reinforcement of a self-identical drag queen femininity—a gender in its own right, largely unrelated to female femininity (if such a thing categorically exists)—serves to erase the racial, sexual, and socioeconomic inflections that are so central to kinging as a praxis. This refusal to engage with real world social structures is the reason for the normalization of drag queens (and the invisibility of drag kings) in contemporary U.S. culture. We might well see such normalization as a sign of progress for the gay community. Unfortunately, the mainstreaming of the drag queen has happened at the expense of a nuanced discourse of racial, ethnic, and economic difference. And as we will see in the next chapter, the erasure of such differences has devolved into the espousal, by some of the country’s most prominent drag queens, of a homonationalist ideology through the ambiguous register of camp.
The master narratives of lesbian and gay U.S. urbanism [include] anti-rural twice-told tales such as the compulsory metropolitan migration from wicked little towns; the city as the sole locus for queer community, refuge, and security; and the non-metropolitan as a perpetual site of isolation and exclusion—so much so that one scholar offers that “urban/rural contrasts have structured the very subjectivity that allows people [in the United States] to think of themselves or others as gay.”

Scott Herring (2010, 10)

Queerness as a process of racialization informs the very distinctions between life and death, wealth and poverty, health and illness, fertility and morbidity, security and insecurity, living and dying. Race, ethnicity, nation, gender, class, and sexuality disaggregate gay, homosexual, and queer national subjects who align themselves with U.S. imperial interests from forms of illegitimate queerness that name and ultimately propel populations into extinction.

Jasbir Puar (2007, xi–xii)

The GRANDE CZARINA must above all, display a good example and a sense of responsibility wherever he goes. He must always represent the true dignity and joy of being homosexual and all homosexuals of goodwill must know in their hearts by this example that the CZARINA is not a symbolic institution, but a real and loving individual.

Goldy Montana, 1971

If you track the programs from the San Francisco Coronation Ball—the annual ceremony in which the gay service organization the Imperial Court crowns a new Empress and Emperor—an interesting pattern emerges. Beginning in the early 1970s, each program contains a running list of royal court members, catalogued chronologically and by imperial rank, and year by year the list grows longer and more complexly taxonomized as the Court expands to include a constellation of Prince Consorts, Grande Dames, Counts and Countesses, Ambassadors, “Honor Guards,” and “Ministers of Unity.” A queer family history coheres in this act of naming and multiplying; relatives are born, nurtured, and sustained through the text—a one-stop administration for birth certificates, marriage licenses, and title deeds. And then, in 1991, a new genealogical marker appears. Facing the ancestral tree is a page proclaiming, “This Evening is in honor and dedicated to those who

1 Grande Czarina Peninsula Ball program, Sexuality and gender collection, CU-BANC, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
2 Royal proclamation from Empress Jonni VII announcing members of her court, Box 18, Folder 4, Tavern Guild of San Francisco Records, 1995-02, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, California.
have passed on before us.” A list of deceased former Empresses, Emperors, Duchesses, Dukes, Princesses, and Princes follows, and at the bottom of the page, a qualification: “This is a list of Royal Family Members. We honor all our Brothers and Sisters we have lost.”

There is something deeply moving and starkly personal about the sense of continuity the royal lineage construct creates—a construct, it’s worth noting, not unlike the house and family structures that organize barroom drag culture. It is a documentary practice of grieving and remembering in the wake of the AIDS crisis and a legitimation of the idea of found family amongst gay transplants to the Bay Area, many of whom had presumably been rejected by their biological families. By meticulously rehearsing this list of names year after year and textually memorializing lives lost, the Coronation program and the royalty construct more broadly create a sense of permanence within a community born largely by chance and hobbled by waves of death. That such a community would find solace and affirmation in a rhetoric of kinship is not surprising. What is less obvious, however, is that the impulse to build a kinship system should dovetail so easily and uncritically with the choice to articulate that system through a colonialist lexicon. Campy as the Court’s use of that lexicon may be, the fact that imperialism remains the organizing trope of the world’s second largest LGBT organization (and certainly the world’s largest association of drag queens and kings) is a detail worth interrogating. More to the point, it is a detail that, I argue, has had lasting consequences for the history of drag and for the polemic timbre of “queer” discourse more broadly. I begin, therefore, with a question: Why and to what effect did and do the Courts mobilize imperialism as a rhetoric of community building?

Origin stories

According to the legend reproduced in formal and informal publications of the last forty-five years, the now-international reach of the Imperial Courts had its inception in the personage of José Sarria, a fixture in the post-WWII San Francisco gay community. A true renaissance man, Sarria’s accomplishments include serving in the Army; headlining at The Black Cat nightclub, a gay hangout where he garnered acclaim for his drag satires of operatic arias and introduced the now-iconic anthem, “God Save Us Nelly Queens”; becoming the first openly gay man to run for public office (his candidacy preceding Harvey Milk’s election by sixteen years); and in 1962, founding with his friends the country’s first gay business association, the San Francisco Tavern Guild, to combat police raids on gay bars. Following the Tavern Guild’s first major public event, the 1965 Beaux Arts drag ball at which he was crowned Queen, Sarria declared that, queens being a dime a dozen, he would promote himself to the rank of Empress of San Francisco. Thereafter each year saw the election of a new Empress and, subsequently, the election or appointment of an

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4 The largest is the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Organization (ILGA).

5 I thank Linda Williams and Paul Fitzgerald for their personal insights on the Emperor Norton’s legacy for San Franciscans, which led me to delve deeper into Sarria’s choice of namesake and its significance.
Emperor, Duchess, Duke, Prince, Princess, and a host of Lords and Ladies-in-Waiting. The Imperial Court styled itself as a GLBT service organization, hosting charitable events, raising awareness of community-related issues (police harassment, homophobic legislation, boycotts of anti-gay establishments, the needs of LGBT seniors, and eventually the AIDS crisis), and endorsing gay-friendly candidates for public office. In the years following Sarria’s self-anointment as Empress, the Court System expanded east, north, and south and currently boasts close to seventy chapters in cities throughout the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. But its reach has also extended backward in time, for in a most peculiar and intriguing gesture of queer kinship, Sarria assumed the additional alias, “The Widow Norton,” thereby inscribing himself into the biography of a local legend whose notoriety was matched only by his idiosyncrasy.

Joshua Abraham Norton, a well-to-do businessman whose sanity and fortune were lost when an ill-timed investment in rice went south, was one of San Francisco’s most recognizable and beloved citizens until his death in 1880. On the heels of his 1858 bankruptcy, Norton fled the city only to return a year later, having reinvented himself as “Norton I, Emperor of the United States,” a title he subsequently amended to include “Protector of Mexico.” Norton’s delusions of grandeur were humored by several local newspapers that printed his decrees on topics ranging from his “official” dissolution of the United States Congress to his infrastructural vision for linking San Francisco to the East Bay. Remarkably, the city at large embraced and encouraged Norton’s eccentricities. Establishments he frequented honored the imperial currency Norton printed, police officers were obliged to salute him in the streets, and on one occasion Norton allegedly prevented a race riot by reciting the Lord’s Prayer. When the Emperor eventually dropped dead on a city sidewalk, a local business association footed the bill for an extravagant burial befitting a man who had reigned, in his own mind at least, over North America for twenty-one years. As many as thirty thousand are said to have attended his funeral. And when half a century later the city of San Francisco relocated all remains buried within city limits to a new gravesite in Colma, it paid for a suitably regal tombstone marking the final resting place of “Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico.”

Much could be said of the Emperor Norton’s story from a performance studies vantage. Had he lived in this day and age, Norton would almost certainly have been imprisoned or institutionalized. And yet, only a hundred and fifty years ago, what we now read as undiagnosed mental illness afforded this man the opportunity to lead a life of his own creation. Norton’s imperial fantasies were simultaneously authorized, embodied, and maintained by a collective act of metropolitan acceptance. His life was an historical instantiation of the cliché “believing makes it so.” Incredibly, the hypostatized fiction of Norton’s imperial rule survives into the present: in 2004, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a resolution to name a new stretch of the Bay Bridge after the man who had prophetically decreed in 1872 that such an artery be built.

Norton as both man and legend might thus be viewed as the impetus for and structure of a massive performance over time. What apparently began as a flight of fancy—the San Francisco Bulletin publishing Norton’s initial declaration of imperial rule—spontaneously blossomed into a large-scale act of “playing along.” But I would argue that to interpret San Franciscans’ response to the Emperor as merely a sustained gesture of
goodwill or irony, or even as a communal decision to humor a sick but harmless man, is to seriously underestimate the significance of Norton’s life and legacy. That urban-dwellers of every race, class, and profession accepted his self-proclaimed authority (by accepting his false bank notes, publishing his edicts, furnishing him with a new uniform when the old one grew tattered) is itself a powerful mandate. Indeed, I would assert that the realness of Norton’s megalomaniacal fantasies was renewed with each individual and collective act of legitimation. As such, Norton’s story represents an existential crisis for contemporary scholars who insist on a hard and fast division between what is real and what is performed, a topic about which I shall have much more to say in Chapter 5. But it also illustrates one of the quintessential lures of metropolitan life: the perennial fantasy that in the city one can be whomever one wishes to be.

Metropo-telos

The trope of moving to the city to find or reinvent oneself has propelled countless literary, biographical, and popular coming-of-age narratives of the last two hundred years. Whether to leave behind a sordid past, pursue a dream, or seek enlightenment, arrival in a Western metropolis has been represented as the developmental climax for protagonists of traditional bildungsroman, immigrant oral histories, celebrity biopics, and more recently homosexual coming-out stories. The mythological force of urban escapist narratives is animated by what Michel de Certeau has identified as the city’s conflicting promises of anonymity and visibility.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau juxtaposes the experiences of looking down on Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and walking the streets below. The godlike, voyeuristic elevation of the former subject, which replicates that of the mapmaker or city planner and permits one to see only the institutional places—streets, buildings, parks—perpetuates “the fiction of knowledge [which] is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (1984, 92). But a city is more than that which can be visually mapped. Certeau contends that the real work of making and maintaining city spaces is executed by the “ordinary practitioners of the city [who] live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk...bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it...A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (1984, 93, emphasis author’s). This metaphorical city is (re)generated through personal accounts (e.g. *Use this alley as a shortcut; This is where I met my husband; There used to be a bookstore here*). For Certeau then, the unplanned, unpredictable uses of city space actually constitute the city. Deviations from the official layout and the authorized uses of urban space constitute the real and the norm.

Certeau’s example thus permits a reading of Norton’s imperial reign as a form of spatial practice. Though Norton lost any official claim to ownership of city land when he forfeited his real estate holdings circa 1855, he reclaimed his geographical and genealogical ties to San Francisco by figuring himself as, among other things, a civil authority, a one-man mint, a lawmaker, and an inspector of streetcars. His particular use of the urban landscape and its resources transformed him from eccentric indigent into local celebrity.
Moreover, Norton’s rebirth as Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico bears a striking resemblance to canonical histories of homosexuality in America.

Perhaps the most famous of these, John D’Emilio’s account of the post-WWII formation of a homophile movement, traces the roots of a collective gay identity to the late nineteenth century when “interlocking processes of urbanization and industrialization created a social context in which an autonomous personal life could develop” (1998, 11). As the industrial revolution decentered the family unit as the means of production for food and other material necessities, sex and love gradually became the province of “individual choice.” As a culmination of this socioeconomic trend:

In America’s cities from the 1870s through the 1930s, there emerged a class of people who recognized their erotic interest in members of their own sex...Gradually finding methods of meeting one another, these men and women staked out urban spaces and patronized institutions that fostered a group life...[A] subculture of gay men and lesbians was evolving in American cities that would help to create a collective consciousness among its participants and strengthen their sense of identification with a group. (1998, 11–13)

On D’Emilio’s account then, the birth of a homosexual community and identity is virtually indistinguishable from the birth of the modern city. As media and cultural studies scholar Mary Gray astutely notes, this authoritative “narrative of rural to urban migration” has effectively “graphed gay visibility as a political accomplishment onto the space of the city” (2009, 9). The ontological importance of the metropole has been unquestioningly propagated by queer theorists from George Chauncey to Samuel Delaney to Michael Warner to Gayle Rubin to Didier Eribon, and before them by gay intellectuals the likes of Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney, Christopher Isherwood, and Gore Vidal.6 As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, gay urban migration narratives were a foundational trope of Imperial Court mythology and continue to animate many of drag queen performance’s defining conventions. But for now, a few brief observations should suffice to establish the filial bonds between Emperor Norton and the queer heirs to his adventures in world-making.

The circumstances of Norton’s self-reinvention map neatly onto the logic of gay urbanism. Central to this logic, according to Gray, is an “antipathy between familiarity and queerness” which presupposes three precursors to realizing one’s true queer self: “the privacy to explore one’s queer differences beyond the watchful eyes of those who presume to know everything about one; a visible community able to recognize and return one’s queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution” (2009, 5). These requirements are presumed to be coextensive with cosmopolitan life and antithetical to country life. That Norton: 1) pursued his idiosyncratic thoughts and desires despite the fact that his “real” identity as a washed-up entrepreneur was a matter of public record; 2) enjoyed recognition and acceptance from his fellow San Franciscans despite

6 A more thorough historicization and critique of gay urbanism can be found in Judith Jack Halberstam’s essay, “The Brandon Archive” (2005) and in Scott Herring’s chapter on ex-urban queer autobiographies in Another Country (2010).
and/or because of his peculiar identity; and 3) publically lived this identity free from social, medical, or psychiatric rebuke, may begin to account for Sarria’s anachronistic queering of the former’s imperial existence.

According to the official lore propagated by the International Court System’s publicity materials, some time after proclaiming himself Empress of San Francisco, Sarria “drew upon the legend of the Emperor Joshua Abraham Norton” in order “to further enhance this title”:

Heir in spirit, if not by law, to this extraordinary man, Sarria named himself the Widow Norton and began annual pilgrimages to Norton’s grave in nearly [sic] Colma where he, accompanied by the Emperors of San Francisco, drag queens and members of the gay community, would pay their respects with flowers to Sarria’s departed “spouse.” For the past 30 years José’s annual pilgrimage to Joshua’s gravesite is full with [sic] fanfare, pomp and camp and attended by people from all walks of life from throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Adding a further twist (and, arguably, further legitimacy) to an indisputably bizarre series of historical appropriations, the proprietors of Woodlawn Cemetery were so tickled by the resurgence of interest in Norton’s legacy that Sarria had sparked that they installed a formidable marble tombstone at his burial site (Gorman 1998, 9). Sarria later purchased an adjoining plot and on it erected a matching headstone engraved, “José Sarria, Empress Norton I, The Widow Norton.” The International Court Committee subsequently procured all the surrounding plots for the future use of royal family members (Norstad 2006).

Now a legend in his own right, Sarria’s reenactment of Norton’s funeral cortège, his entailed embodiment of the grieving widow, and the cemetery’s enthusiastic response thereto represent an appropriation of the Emperor’s quirkily brilliant practice of space. The ritual “pilgrimage” to Woodlawn, the reliving of an historical event, and the reimagining of an already-imagined imperial line utterly confound the distinctions between sanctioned and unsanctioned uses of public space, staged and real community gatherings, biological and imagined kinship, and even homo and hetero. At the 1986 cortège, Sarria proclaimed, “Joshua Norton was a believer in individuality, freedom, uniqueness, fun and the gay/lesbian/bisexual community. He taught us to be whole, free, fun-loving human beings” (Bluestein 1986, 30). Setting aside the fact that there is no evidence that Norton held any beliefs about the GLB community whatsoever (beyond the ripely ambiguous detail that he was a lifelong bachelor), it appears nevertheless that Sarria believes his imperial fantasy-cum-reality relies citationally upon Norton as a source of credibility. And if we are to take him at his word, then we must ask under what

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7 An interviewer once remarked that Sarria’s adoption of the moniker, “the Widow Norton” “blithely disregarded the fact that the eccentric Emperor Norton...had never married” (Everett 1985, 14). On the contrary, I would suggest that this title and the performances it continues to spawn depend on Norton’s (lack of) marital status. To wit, Norton’s refusal of marriage makes possible a queer reading of his identity.
conditions, from which angle of vision, and in what respects a delusional, penniless man who, by all popular accounts, survived on the kindness of strangers, might be viewed as a credible source. Since Norton’s ethos clearly does not square with Aristotelian notions of good character, trustworthiness, and expertise, I’d like to propose that, for Sarria and his successors, Norton’s claim to empire modeled an appealing and fruitful use of disidentification—one by which he transformed the mainstream social economy that had failed him into an alternative reality that dignified his unconventional existence and served his individual needs. But the consecration of Norton as a queer patron saint is not without its problems. Primary among these are the adoption of a nationalist-colonialist discourse and the resultant interpenetration of this discourse with the Imperial Court’s real-world political actions and ambitions.

Manifest destiny!

A program from the 1971 San Francisco Coronation Ball,\(^8\) inaugurating the Empress Cristal VI and commemorating “the first five years of Imperial rule” provides some initial insights into these points of tension. This hundred-odd-page tome is a remarkable document which variously chronicles the history of the Tavern Guild and its community works and events; the lives of Imperial Court members and other notable characters in the gay community; past and present gay landmarks and gathering places; and political challenges and accomplishments. More yearbook than playbill, the program’s captioned photographs and handwritten recollections testify to the integral role drag queens played in constructing, sustaining, and defending the rights of a gay community in postwar San Francisco.

One of the first pages of the program features an elaborate, custom-designed seal representing the Empire of San Francisco’s five-year history. Like a family coat of arms, the seal weaves together royal symbols (crowns, scepters, orbs, crests); religious imagery (“the Goddess Diana and the God Victory”); the “symbolic animals of the first five Empresses”; and frames a diptych of the Empress José I and her late husband, the Emperor Norton I. With the economy of a few pen strokes, the image quite literally entwines the concepts of lineage, mythology, monarchy, and governmentality.

The imperial autobiographies that follow reinforce this rhetorical enmeshment by painting San Francisco as a figurative imperial center and literal gay cultural mecca. Empress Willis V reminisces in third person:

[W]hile on his tours [of San Francisco] he saw the need to unite the populace on a common front of brotherhood, love and peace...[H]e visited all points and gathered [sic] centers passing out flowers as a symbol of peace and good will...This caught on, the common folk of the streets, the gentry of the country estates, and all followed suit and so it was, a landslide popular vote that made our Willis Empress V de San Francisco.

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\(^8\) Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section are drawn from the Coronation Ball program, Sexuality and gender collection, CU-BANC, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
Empresses Reba IV and Shirley III, respectively, recount personal journeys much like the archetypal rural-to-urban narrative identified by Mary Gray above:

My parents...sent me to an austere military school to give me a sense of humility. After going through several head masters, they found that I was not suited to be dressed like everyone else. They sent me abroad to study language and foreign culture—To a Texan, my native State, ‘Abroad’ meant Mexico, where eventually via La Cuidad [sic] de Mexico, I ventured to San Francisco.

I was asked to leave Ohio...Oh, that big mouth ice man? milk man? or was it the paperboy—oh well! So I packed four trunks full of gowns and off I flew to San Francisco to blossom forth as one of the bitches of San Francisco...

Finally, and most poetically, Empress Bella II recalls, “With cases of Ribbon and Staple Gun in hand, he now, because of Greeley’s [sic] influence, goes West. (Gay Man!)”

In these highly stylized, questionably veracious, generally self-aggrandizing narratives, we see the confluence of several formative rhetorical tropes for the Imperial Court System: 1) a utopian vision of and belief in a unified gay community born of pseudo-imperial activism; 2) the displacement of individual gay male suffering, through camp discourse, onto geographically and racially othered (that is, non-metropolitan and/or non-white-American) spaces and bodies; and 3) the inexorable lure of the city (specifically San Francisco) as the endpoint of individual and collective queer socio-sexual maturation—a principle I will call manifest faggotry.

Manifest faggotry is a play on manifest destiny, the nineteenth century political philosophy cum imperial rationale that god sanctioned U.S. territorial expansion. The connection to recent gay history is especially evident in Empress Bella’s satirical invocation of manifest destiny’s slogan, “Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.” Ironically, while this quotation is an inducement to colonize the unpopulated West through agriculture, Bella’s appropriation (and mine) index the inevitable, teleological, existential draw of San Francisco for suburban, rural, Midwestern, and southern gays. The exhortation to “grow up with the country,” though absent in Bella’s reformulation, resonates with D’Emilio’s assertion and Gray’s skepticism that coming of age as a gay man or woman can only take place in the city. Thus, whereas manifest destiny was used to justify westward expansionism, the annexation of Texas, and the modernizing march of progress, manifest faggotry has been used to naturalize left coast queer cultural expansionism, the annexation of displaced gays and lesbians, and the ostensible westward march of queerness. (As if to certify this accomplishment, the sixth Imperial Court of Santa Monica chose as their coronation theme, “How the West Was Won.”)

Indeed, manifest faggotry and its entanglement with rhetorics of imperialism provides the foundation for an account of José Sarria’s life, rehearsed in the 1971 Coronation program and so widely reproduced as to acquire a quasi-hagiographical tone. (Indeed, a journalist writing about a now-elderly Sarria and his circle of friends in Palm

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9 Imperial Court (IV), ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
Springs speculated, “For gay men...these old queens might be examples, as saints are to Catholics, of how to be more fully human, how to live with true grace” (Gross 2007, 70.) Printed alongside a calligraphed proclamation of the authority of Empress José I, the climax of this account is Sarria’s bid for city supervisor. Despite the fact that he “did practically no campaigning in any location other than the ‘Black Cat’ [Café, where he regularly performed],” and although “it was a foregone conclusion that he did not have a chance,” Sarria managed to garner some six thousand votes, enough to place him ninth out of thirty-four candidates. Though he failed to capture a seat on the board, “victory was there, for he had run the gamut of the political circus without being smeared by a single opponent.” And as the story goes, Sarria’s political aspirations were in no way dampened by this initial setback: four short years later, “he was crowned the Royal Empress de San Francisco and ruled for one year with great grandeur [sic] and much pomp—thereby uniting the community as it is today.”

Now, Sarria’s run for elected office was no small accomplishment. Some, including Sarria himself, have suggested that in mobilizing thousands of voters to support a campaign which was, by his own admission, something between a long shot and a charade, he singlehandedly gave meaning to the idea of a gay voting bloc. And while I do not wish to diminish the significance of this benchmark in U.S. gay history, my concern with this narrative lies in the easy slippage between the mainstream political and the faux imperial. Of course, this refusal to hold sacrosanct the rules and proprieties of heteronormative society is a hallmark of camp discourse. As queer theorist David Halperin observes, “[T]he purpose [of camp] is to avoid the relentless earnestness of heterosexual theatrics that confuse compulsory social roles with essences, that refuse to recognize personal authenticity as a cultural performance” (2008, 92).

And yet, José Sarria, like Joshua Norton before him, incorporated into his disidentificatory “cultural performance” of candidacy the very same mainstream social structures—government legitimacy, political constituency, secret balloting—that depend on the fiction of “personal authenticity” that camp seeks to undermine. Walking an almost imperceptibly fine line between earnest acceptance of normative procedures and the subversive combustion thereof, Sarria’s simultaneous engagement with sanctioned forms of activism and camp critical distance hinges on a paradoxical conflation of “real” and “imagined” political authority. The final flourish of his life story as quoted above speaks strongly to this tension: “he was crowned the Royal Empress de San Francisco...thereby uniting the community as it is today.” Not for nothing, an (albeit oftentimes false) sense of national unity is the goal of democracy and imperialism alike. The transition from democratic to imperial language becomes still more resonant when one considers the trope of gay urbanism discussed above. Since the mid-1940s, the gay community of San Francisco has, in a sense, annexed the gay communities of less tolerant cities and towns nationwide. Thus, the notion that Sarria united the city’s gay population might also be read as a gesture of imperial consolidation. And in the decades since Sarria founded the Imperial Court, its discursive consolidation of “real” politics and imperial “theatrics” has become increasingly thorny.
Homonorm, homonation: Nicole Murray-Rodriguez and the “real” politics of “faux” empire

Archival records of the Imperial Court from inception to present paint a picture of its involvement in politics from the local to the federal level: A handwritten note from Thomas Kranz, candidate for the 1974 Democratic nomination to the California Assembly thanks Los Angeles Emperor Lee Leonard for his help and interest. A letter from San Diego Mayor Roger Hedgecock lauds the city’s eleventh Imperial Court for its “remarkable community service...throughout both the gay and non-gay communities.” A full-page ad in the 1979 San Francisco Beaux Arts Ball program for Carol Ruth Silver, candidate for District Attorney, features a large photo of Silver and Harvey Milk conferring at a Board of Supervisors meeting. A greeting from Dianne Feinstein, then-mayor of San Francisco, welcomes out of town guests to Coronation 1980. In March 1977, a blurb in Focus magazine explaining the organization’s burgeoning bureaucracy pays queer homage to the U.S. Constitution:

In 1973, the elected ‘Royalty’ of five Gay Communities joined together as the Imperial Council of California (I.C.C.) in order to form a more perfect union of the California homophile communities...The Political Advisory Council was established in 1975 because of the growing concern and involvement of the courts on behalf of Gay Civil Rights. The I.C.C. Political Advisory Council believes that gays must not only come out of their closets, but step into the voting booths and begin asserting a new force on our state’s politics. [Emphasis added.]

To this end, an I.C.C. Political Advisory Council press release dated May 1976 officially endorsed Tom Hayden for U.S. Senate and Jimmy Carter for President in the Democratic primary, and a voter’s guide for the June 1978 Democratic and Republican primaries issued by the Imperial Court of Long Beach, exhorted constituents, “Make your gay vote count.”

But perhaps no single member of the court has done more to forge the connection between camp royalty and political legitimacy than Nicole Murray-Ramirez. Six-time Empress de San Diego, Nicole the Great, as she is now known, was selected as the heir apparent to José Sarria in the mid-nineties—a line of succession formalized in 2007 when he dubbed her Queen Mother of the Americas and officially handed over control of the International Court System. Over the last thirty years, Murray-Ramirez has made no secret

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10 Unless other wise noted, all references in this section are drawn from the Imperial Court subject folders, ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
11 Beaux Arts Ball programs, Sexuality and gender collection, CU-BANC, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
12 Empress Nicole the Great has, at various times, gone by both Nicole Ramirez Murray and Nicole Murray-Ramirez. I default to the latter in this chapter, as it is the name she currently prefers, but use the former as appropriate when quoting historical documents. Similarly, Murray-Ramirez’s complicated gender and sexual identities make pronoun selection difficult: she initially identified as a gay man, then for five years as a pre-operative transsexual, and presently “considers herself a gay man who at times does drag” (International Court Council 2009). I use feminine pronouns in referring to Murray-Ramirez, following the precedent set by her current publicity materials, except when quoting documents that employ the masculine.
of her efforts to legitimate the activities of the ICS by making herself indispensable to the political machinery of southern California. A 1996 bio traces her lifelong interest in government, beginning with her election as “president of the Western States Federation of Teenage Republicans” and including her work on the campaigns of Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater. It goes on to note that her birthday “has been officially proclaimed to be ‘Nicole Ramirez Murray Day’ in both the cities of West Hollywood and San Diego by their respective mayors” and offers evidence of her political experience in the form of a photo array featuring Nicole with, among others, Dianne Feinstein, Cesar Chavez, Coretta Scott King, Harvey Milk, Ted Kennedy, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Clinton. Since the mid-eighties, Murray-Ramirez has been involved with the United San Diego Elections Committee, the San Diego Police Chief Advisory Board, the San Diego Regional Task Force on AIDS, the Mayor of San Diego’s GLBT Citizen’s Advisory Board, and the National Board of Directors of the Human Rights Campaign Fund. In 2003, she was appointed to the San Diego Human Relations Commission and in 2012 was reelected as its chair for an unprecedented fourth term.

Beginning in 1976, Nicole undertook to solidify the Court’s mainstream appeal by rhetorically severing its “camp” and “community” functions. During the ensuing two years, several press releases, newsletters, op-eds, and Court campaign brochures included versions of the following statement, which first appeared in a state of the empire address published at the end of Nicole’s first reign as Empress de San Diego: “The title and the office [of Empress or Emperor] are two different things. But when combined, the results are purposeful and humanitarian. The ‘title’ is strictly a camp and very social. The ‘office’ is used as a catalyst to raise funds to benefit the entire Gay community, and to act as a community spokesman in support of our civil rights.” This imperative to distinguish the title from the office testifies to what would become a perennial tension within the ICS between the camp edict never to take oneself too seriously and the organizational desire to establish a certain degree of clout within the wider gay and straight communities. By 1986, an observer at the Third International Court Conference of the Americas noted that “the major thrust of the meeting was on gaining credibility within the gay community. ‘Don’t tell them how many trophies you’ve won,’ exorted Empress Nicole, ‘tell them how much money you’ve raised’” (Bluestein 1986, 29).

Such tactics are demonstrative of what queer political theorist Lisa Duggan has termed homonormativity. In her seminal essay, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” Duggan argues that beginning in the early 1990s, a new strand of supposedly centrist gay political thinkers advocated “a dramatically shrunken public sphere and a narrow zone of ‘responsible’ domestic privacy” (2002, 182). This movement was and is characterized by

a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: ‘equality’ becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. All of this adds up to a
corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life. (190)

In other words, a homonormative politics not only proposes to approximate traditional heteronormative family structures within an essentialized homosexual minority, but it also insists that said minority prove its (literal and metaphorical) social worth by supporting that most normalizing of Western institutions, the free market. Thus, consumerism becomes the main—if not the only—acceptable form of political action. 13

Illustrative of the ICS’s implicit adoption of this doctrine is a history of the San Diego Imperial Court (Murray-Ramirez’s home chapter, it’s worth reiterating), published in 1996. Touting its border-defying charitable doings, the Court refers readers to its sponsorship of Tijuana, Mexico, a city “less than a half-hour away from San Diego, but with oppression, poverty, and hardships that make the problems on our side of the border pale by comparison.” The Court cites as examples of its benefaction fundraisers to purchase body bags that the Mexican government denied AIDS victims, as well as its annual winter blanket drive. “Sometimes,” it adds, “Court members travel to Tijuana’s very poor neighborhoods and pass the blankets out themselves.” The altruism of these deeds is undercut, however, by the casually self-congratulatory tone of the very next sentence:

For well over a decade during San Diego’s Coronation weekend, there is a fun bus trip to Tijuana, Mexico, made up of “visiting royalty” from across North America. The afternoon includes entertainment, shopping and sight-seeing, including the annual stop at a local Mexican Gay bar, where an outrageous and campy election is held for the “Emperor and Empress de Rio Tijuana.” This “camp election” has resulted in the struggles of Tijuana reaching the ears of Courts throughout North America.

Blatant paternalism aside, this passage is remarkable for its un-self-consciously ironic implication that, were it not for these modern-day American “faux” colonizers swooping across the border to rescue the impoverished residents of a former Spanish colony by holding a party that mocks but also reinforces imperialism, Tijuana would remain a helpless insect squirming on its back. Embedded in this example of what Jasbir Puar calls “neocolonialist...U.S. missionary and savior discourses” (2007, xiii), is the neoliberal assumption that just by going to play in these oppressed parts of the world, we Westerners can resignify our capitalist exploitation thereof as benevolent patronage.

Puar expands on this tenuous relationship between gay neoliberal identity politics and the proliferation of globalizing impulses. Queer subjects, she says, especially in the United States, are in the midst of a major image overhaul. Many of the leading voices in the gay rights movement, eager to shed the public perception of gays and lesbians as “figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic),” are now promoting the gay community’s “tie[s] 13 As if to affirm this, the Court of Spokane chose as its 1978 Coronation Ball theme, “The Wonderful World of Disney—A Land of Enchantment.”
to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families).” The upshot of this public relations campaign is that:

The politics of recognition and incorporation entail that certain—but certainly not most—homosexual, gay, and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the ‘measures of benevolence’ that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. This benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity.

This disturbing trend, in which certain special gays scrabble for the state’s “measures of benevolence” at the expense of those misfortunate queers who fall outside the “ever-narrowing parameters” of privilege, Puar names homonationalism. It is, in other words, “the dual movement in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas” (xxiv).

I would argue that the International Court System subscribes both tacitly and overtly to this normalizing and nationalizing impulse. Despite its espousal of an inclusionary politic, the Court System executes its ostensibly service-oriented mission through a distinctly exclusionary discourse. It attempts to build family and community by using language that is steeped in a history of racism, classism, and colonialism and excuses these racist, classist, and colonialist innuendos as camp. An image of a white queen in blackface dressed in a maid’s uniform from the 1971 Coronation program is captioned, “Does anyone need a good up-stairs maid?” On another page from the same document, a headshot of Empress Willis has been pasted onto a drawing of a woman in an elaborate kimono, framed by Chinese characters and their alleged English translation, “Confuscious [sic] say: ‘Loyal subjects who pay homage to Empress receive good and large fortune in The End.’” A flier for a 1984 production of Li’l Abner sponsored by the Imperial Council of San Francisco announces, “There will be a Dogpatch lookalike contest...so come in costume!” A Bay Area Reporter article on SF Coronation 1985 is entitled, “Mongolmania: It’s a Khan-Fab as SF Crowns Empress Sissy,” in honor of that year’s theme, “Xanadu, The Court of Kubla Khan”; featured photographs of costumed revelers include one with the caption, “Tibetan Nobles for a night are Lee Raymond and Grand Duke Michael Boseman.” Similarly, the Grand Duke and Duchess of San Francisco selected as the theme of Coronation 1991, “From Renaissance to Glasnost: A Russian Fantasy.” The racial and ethnic appropriations even infuse the very language by which court members describe their offices, e.g. His Imperial Highness, Prince Consort Daniel, The Polish Prince(ss); VooDoo, Czarina of Polk Strasse; and Sweetlips, Czarina de Turk Strasse. No less than three foreign languages comprise the latter title (Russian, French/Spanish, German), highlighting both the excess of queening and of camp more generally (the more languages the better) and its ambivalent relationship to race and ethnicity, as discussed in Chapter 2, (because so many cultures are conflated in this one title, they all become meaningless in their lack of specificity). Thus, as much as the ICS fancies itself a gay counterpublic, it discursively pillages other cultures in the name of camp irony. This trend exemplifies what
Caren Kaplan has referred to as a “transnational ‘fiesta’ of differences that mystify and codify power relations” (1994, 141) and thus help to “coher[e] whiteness as a queer norm” (Puar 2007, xxiv).

This is problematic because on the one hand, the ICS seeks to expand its membership by claiming to embrace “all imaginable gay lifestyles—leather, drag, wealthy business people, students and women,”¹⁴ and on the other it tries to shore up its political clout by emphasizing the middle- to upper-class values of those (almost exclusively male) members. Like the word queer itself, which presumes to encompass all LGBTIA people while actually representing only a select few, the ICS at once invites and silences those less palatable queers—rural dwellers and residents of non-coastal cities, blue collar and uneducated gays, social and political radicals, sex workers and the sexually promiscuous¹⁵—unless they are willing to refashion themselves in line with the normative ideal. This appears to be the subtext of Empress Chuchu de San Fernando Valley’s remark that “for many people the Court System is a means of personal growth. His own involvement gave him the self-confidence to complete his education. ‘The Court System is incredible,’ Chuchu said. ‘We’re educated, we’re sophisticated. Doctors, lawyers, people of high caliber are involved in the organization’” (Bluestein 1986, 30).

Indeed, by the late seventies, the qualifications required just to run for office in the Court System virtually guaranteed that “people of high caliber” would remain the public face of the organization. The first two questions on the application for Emperor and Empress of Los Angeles at this time were, “Do you have sufficient income and/or savings to attend all southern California coronations?” and “Do you have sufficient income and/or savings to attend major out-of-town coronations?” The form also demanded that candidates disclose whether they rented, leased, or owned their home and inquired, “Do you realize that you must present an image of respect and sobriety at all public events?”¹⁶

Now, I concede that sobriety does not typically top the list of characteristics one uses to describe drag queen performance culture. But the insistent appeal to a “high caliber” image certainly does. As I argued in Chapter 2, images of wealth and celebrity are queening’s bread and butter. Queening is obsessed with appearances and with the creation of larger-than-life personae to the point of eclipsing all other aspects of socially-produced identities. This tendency thus replicates manifest faggotry’s equation of the city with privilege, as well as the anonymity/visibility conundrum attendant upon it. To wit, queens are hypervisible in their celebrity aspirationalism and yet simultaneously unintelligible with respect to sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

I want to suggest, then, that the history of the International Court System shows that manifest faggotry is a precursor to homonationalism. Scott Herring’s observation, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, that “the master narratives of lesbian and gay U.S.

¹⁴ Taken from a March 1977 Focus magazine clipping, “Your ‘Imperial’ Questions Answered.”
¹⁵ Indeed, an article in the Long Beach Post dated October 1993 mentions that “[t]he Court, sad to say, had a few who were prostitutes” and chastises those “few bad apples who have ruined it for those who just wanted to have fun being out of the closet in Drag.” Whereas that Court was once run by the so-called riff-raff of the gay community, the author, Emperor Darryl/Empress Dorothy Big Mouth now feels compelled to apologize for its sordid past and to announce a new, more respectable era for drag queens.
¹⁶ This document is undated, but based on context and because it is typewritten and the ICS began using word processors as early as 1985, my best guess is that it was produced in the late 1970s or early 1980s.
urbanism [include] anti-rural twice-told tales such as the compulsory metropolitan migration from wicked little towns” bears a striking resemblance to Jasbir Puar’s argument that “normativizing gay and lesbian human rights frames...produce (in tandem with gay tourism) gay-friendly and not-gay-friendly nations” (xiv). In other words, over the last twenty years, neoliberal gay rhetoric has evolved the classic polarization of the U.S. into “gay-friendly” areas (San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Miami) and “not-gay-friendly” areas (just about anywhere in between) in step with globalization. The “wicked little towns” ideology of American gay urbanism has been projected onto wicked little regions of the world, particularly the Middle East and large swaths of Africa.

Of course, manifest faggotry and the International Court System that champions it are not quite so insidious as homonationalism and the state-sponsored institutions that mobilize it. Most obviously, despite its deployment of racist and classist language and ideology, the ICS has never, to my knowledge, been responsible for falsely imprisoning, torturing, or detaining people of Middle Eastern descent in the name of homeland security. (Though I would propose that the embeddedness of this kind of language in gay male popular and performance culture accounts at least in part for the ubiquitous and legitimate concern that the white, upper-middle-class, gay male body is the hegemonic norm of queer life. Still, in contrast to homonationalist discourse, there is no “terrorist” element articulated as the constitutive outside to the ICS’s mostly male, mostly white, mostly middle- to upper-middle class center.) As much as manifest faggotry implies a certain level of arrogance toward rural- and suburban-dwelling queers, it is also a tactical assault on heteronormative notions of nation, ownership, and space. The International Court System is not a “real” empire, in the historical sense of occupying territories and enslaving their inhabitants, any more than the queer community is a geographical location. Indeed there is, I suggest, an implicit desperation in manifest faggotry and in the imperial language of queening that does not exist within a homonationalist discourse.

Conclusion

The 1971 Coronation Ball program with which I began this chapter betides an ever-expanding gay nation in San Francisco, an imperial optimism undercut by the specter of loss that haunts its pages. Fourteen of these are populated with photographs of seemingly unremarkable jazz clubs and drug stores, parking lots, piles of rubble, and buildings under construction. Brief captions situate each image within San Francisco’s gay history: a liquor store labeled, “Dancing bar of the 40’s;” a print shop which was “the first—the grandmother of all gay bars;” a toppled stack of two-by-fours recalls the “gayola scandals;” a laundromat occupies the “early home of the Tavern Guild;” a Mexican restaurant, once the site of a “famous raid;” an empty storefront, all that remains of the “1ST motorcycle bar.” The process of documenting these former landmarks reinstantiates them as queer spaces; by marking spaces that no longer house gay landmarks as spaces that are still somehow queer, the mapmaker re-stakes the gay community’s claim to them. Recalling once again Certeau’s notion of spatial practice—the mechanism by which we constitute a city through ordinary, everyday uses—we might read this photographic archive as a means of stabilizing the gay metropolis, even if only for a moment. Reinvesting these
ostensibly a- or heterosexual locations with queer symbolism and sentiment is thus an act of re-presenting, reclaiming, reconsolidating them under the aegis of the gay empire. But even as it stabilizes a queer geography, the program highlights its ephemerality. Most mid-century San Franciscans were likely entirely unaware of these landmarks because gay life took place largely underground. For many, then, the gay landscape painted by the program never existed in any concrete, physical way, and as a key to these erstwhile establishments entitled “Where have our landmarks gone?” attests, that landscape no longer exists even for queers. I want, therefore, to suggest that, much like the compulsive documentation of royal family members inducted and deceased at the peak of the AIDS epidemic, these photos simultaneously map and mourn a gay empire—one that performatively is and yet never really was.

And yet, as I will argue in Chapter 5, this figurative community and its metaphorical empire do effect something real. We should not ignore the bleeding between camp elections and local/state/federal politics, between the theatricality of drag personae and the performance of real community services, between the confabulation of family histories and the earnest desire to be recognized as a valuable member of society. Nor, would I suggest, is it useful to attempt to cleave a neat line between them. The futility of such efforts, and the promising potential of drag and other performance practices unleashed when we abandon them, is the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5
TOWARD A THEORY OF OMNIPERFORMANCE

In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points...The space and time which I inhabit are always in their different ways indeterminate horizons which contain other points of view. The synthesis of both time and space is a task that always has to be performed afresh.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002, 162)

This dissertation has hitherto challenged the assumption that the constituent groups of the queer umbrella must share some ontological sociopolitical bond. We might now ask whether it is possible to extend the differences between queening and kinging practices outlined in the first three chapters to a more general theory of what constitutes gay male versus lesbian cultural practices. But a more productive question is, what would be the use of making such a distinction? Of course, highlighting these dissimilarities decentralizes the white, upper-middle-class, gay male body as the hegemonic norm of queer life. However, taking this exercise to its logical extreme, one might speculate that the relative invisibility of race in queen performances bespeaks the broader gay male population’s resistance to grappling with race relations, or that drag kings’ affinity for blue-collar iconography reflects a wider lesbian commitment to social justice. To be clear, I absolutely do not mean to suggest that drag queens (and by extension gay men) disavow critical engagement with power structures or that drag kings (and by extension lesbians) are single-mindedly focused on disrupting these structures. To draw such a conclusion is simply to invert one dualistic hierarchy within queer culture, idealizing lesbianism and demonizing gay men, while leaving the structure of hierarchy fully intact. And while drag performance can tell us something important about the cultures that produce it—e.g., that for many lesbians, to be masculine is to physically index a particular working-class narrative—I want to make the stronger claim that performance generally, and drag specifically, offer us a theoretical wormhole of sorts—a new metaphysic for thinking (queer) identity that is not a priori structured around binarism and hierarchy. Toward this end, I offer a critique of performativity as it has been used in much radical queer and feminist thought of the last twenty years. This usage, I argue, has perpetuated the construction of theatrical performances like drag as “politics light”—a dilute version of the “real” thing and a lame substitute for “actual” activism. Moreover, it has severely restricted performance’s analytic and strategic utility outside the humanities and beyond academia.

The epistemological framework that underwrites most academic treatments of drag and of staged performances in general relies on what I call the metaphoric use of performance. Studies predicated on this framework view performance as a (mere) metaphor for real-life phenomena, rather than as a real-life phenomenon in its own right. Such usage enables, and in some cases encourages, the transvaluative deduction that the
The content of the argument must be metaphoric (ergo insubstantial) as well. One particularly clear example of this can be found in Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor’s ethnography Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret (2003). The authors adopt the language of performance studies, which they define as “literatures which employ the metaphor of performance” (214) — to suggest that drag is a political protest strategy of the queer dispossessed. They advocate a more complicated reading of performances as almost always partaking of both [politics and culture], such that politics and entertainment are deliberately interwoven with the goal of winning acceptance of the message [about gay rights].

Further, cultural performances typically are staged to elicit strong emotion and are experienced by the audience as *play rather than serious*, which allows them to attract participants who might not otherwise attend a political event…[P]erformances have the potential to promote the internal articulation of collective identity among the performers and segments of the audience who share interests with them. At the same time, as we have seen, cultural performances can contribute to the external articulation of collective identity between members of the different groups who gather to participate in the event, on the one hand, and the larger community, on the other. (Rupp and Taylor 2003, 216, emphasis added)

Although I have a larger quarrel with the naturalization of abjection implicit in Rupp and Taylor’s assumption that drag must justify itself through a legitimating claim to “the political,” my concern here is to show that an aspirational framing of performance imputes a false chronology to identity formation. Rupp and Taylor’s formulation of drag as a “deliberate, conscious, and strategic use of cultural entertainment” (217) presumes an ontological relation between gayness and drag, in which the realization that one is gay precedes the choice to perform theatrically as a queen. Suggesting that the queens intentionally present their performance work as a form of play through which to subversively articulate a serious message about homophobia precludes a reading of drag as in fact productive of the identity that the authors here claim it merely expresses. Simply put, I think that drag does far more identity work than an argument premised on the distinction between stage performance and the performance of everyday life can convey.

A metaphorical use of performance cannot, for instance, account for the gender-transformative experience related to me by Jess, the FTM-identified king who performs as Xavier Alexander Jade:

> I actually found out what “trans” was through drag. I had never heard of it. I always figured I was, you know, different. I always wore boy clothes throughout school, always got teased, always had short hair… I didn’t know how that fit into my life quite yet, but being in drag gave me more confidence than being out of drag… There were times when I would stay in drag all night long and be like, “Yeah!” Then I’d go home and I’d get all depressed because I had to take it off, and I’d completely change into this other person… [Drag is] a way for me to express things that I could never really express without, per se, “the mask” on. It breaks me
out of my shell, shows me who I can be, yet who I really-maybe-shouldn't-don't-wanna be...It definitely helps me emotionally with my confidence and the way I talk with people. Because I used to be so closed off and so angry that I disrespected and mistreated people very badly. But now that I've learned where that comes from, it's a little bit easier to not do that anymore. It makes me more comfortable with who I am instead of just being angry all the time because I don't know who I am.¹

For Jess, then, his drag self is in many ways more real than his real (i.e., offstage) self. He is most comfortable in his own skin, most capable of honest expression, when he is playing the part of Xavier, so to speak. Indeed, he frames this irony quite astutely by referring to drag as “the mask,” in quotation marks, implying that on the contrary, his offstage identity, anchored uncomfortably and illogically as it was at the time of the interview in his pre-transitional female body, is the true facade. Drag gives Jess the language, the permission, and the knowledge paradigm to name and embody his sense of self as a man. Or, to take a good deal of license with Simone de Beauvoir: He was not born a man. He became one by performing in drag.

This more complicated conception of drag's relationship to gender identity is echoed, albeit in quite different terms, by Terrah, the femme-identified queer woman who performs as both a bio femme, Miss Red, and a drag king, Christopher Dane:

I don't want anybody to ever think that just because I'm feminine that I cannot portray that masculine stereotype onstage. I don’t think that that’s fair. I don’t think that as a woman that’s something that is off limits to me. I don’t think that as a femme that’s something that’s off limits to me. I don’t think that only butches can do drag. At all...For me, getting in drag is getting an opportunity to play a masculine stereotype. It’s not about feeling more like myself onstage because I don't feel like a man...I think it just depends on the performer mostly as to what reasons they do drag. Like Krucky [a king who identifies as a woman and who performs as Travis McNasty], he does it because he wants to feel like that rock star onstage. You look at Krucky and you see a short little butch dyke, but for those four minutes he’s on stage he’s a rock star. And I think that that has really helped him come out of his shell. I think that drag, if you use it in the right way, it'll help you grow so, so much.²

Terrah’s use of drag, while quite different from Jess’s, is also generative inasmuch as it enables her to experience femininity as a nonrestrictive identity.³ By portraying

¹ Interview with author, February 12, 2010.
² Interview with author, February 12, 2010.
³ The notion of femininity as restrictive or constrictive has underwritten a great deal of feminist theorizing from Beauvoir to the present and is summed up rather provocatively by psychoanalytic theorist Susan Bordo: “[T]he general rule governing the construction of femininity [is] that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited” (1997, 96). For examples from other disciplines, see Young 1980; Morgan 1984; Blum and Straucci 2004; Greenfield 2006. For critiques of this representation of femininity, see Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002.
“masculine stereotypes”—and doing so with a facility that belies her femine identification—Terrah breaks with feminine stereotypes and in the process transforms femininity into a habitable descriptive signifier. The grammar in which she discusses a fellow performer further attests to the slippage between drag performance and the performance of gender in everyday life. In referring to the offstage persona of her colleague, Krucky, Terrah defaults to the masculine pronoun. Playing fast and loose with pronouns in this manner is a commonplace among both the drag kings and queens at Bounce, such that many performers use feminine and masculine pronouns interchangeably when speaking of other performers. At times, a given performer is described as both “he” and “she” within the span of a single sentence. Such pronominal fluidity testifies to the impossibility (or at least, the impracticability) of separating on- and offstage gender performance. Importantly, however, this phenomenon applies exclusively to performers who identify with the gender into which they were normatively considered to have been born. Transgender performers are uniformly designated by the gendered pronouns which they identify: Kari Nickels, the MTF queen, is a “she” without exception, and FTM king Timmy Knight is always referred to as “he.” The culture of drag performance, I want to suggest, makes possible this inversion of the pronoun problem encountered by many genderqueer and ambiguously gendered individuals. Drag carves out a space in which the only stable gender identity is one that deviates from the norm.

In using ethnographic observations of drag shows to investigate larger problems in the construction of putatively queer identities, communities, and philosophies, the relation between the two I wish to communicate is, therefore, decidedly not one of allegory to actuality. Rather, it is that of microcosm to metaphysic. I want to position drag as a miniature of the discursive formation “queer,” the study of which can yield important information about the metatheoretical project of queering social, political, and cultural thought. By zeroing in on two concrete iterations of cultural performance, namely drag king and queen shows, I hope to give the reader pause as to the discourse of artifice that inflicts most discussions of gender (as) performance. I argue instead for a theory of performance that does not limit itself to the realm of mere metaphor, one that actually, unapologetically, and without qualification breaks down the boundary between stage performance and the performance of everyday life. Such a thoroughgoing reconceptualization, I suggest, opens up radical new possibilities for an understanding of gender and sexual identities and communities as legible, recognizable, and analyzable cultural objects, while simultaneously nullifying totalizing discourses of authenticity, stability, and stasis.
And yet it turns.
Galileo, when asked to recant

In advancing a theory of gender performativity, Judith Butler states in no uncertain terms that “[t]o claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ as oppositional” (2006, 45). Nevertheless, the twenty-plus intervening years since the publication of *Gender Trouble* have seen the rise of a critical paradox in performance studies, namely, that performance at once reduces everything to bodies (to the exclusion of the social) and reduces everything to discourse (to the exclusion of the material). This is, of course, an effect of the hierarchical mind/body dualism, which confusingly declares that while the body is literal matter, the mind is what really matters. Within the context of performance, the matter of what matters is made murkier still by the antinomy of offstage/onstage, often translated as “real life/ imitation of life,” wherein the real is presumed to exist in a relation of ontological superiority to the imitation. I will attempt in this chapter to unravel the discursive bind that arbitrarily juxtaposes “theatrical performance” with “the performance of everyday life” and in so doing to move performance theory beyond the tiresome necessity of reckoning with the “real.” I do this because, despite the misconstruction of performance as metaphor identified above, I remain convinced that performance theory has the greatest potential to resolve a number of the rhetorical conflicts that perennially plague queer theory and the queer movement.

In spite of the philosophical revolution inaugurated by Butler’s argument that gender (and, as others have subsequently shown, sexuality, race, ability, and class) is a doing rather than a being and that authenticity is a fiction, when we make assumptions about what constitutes queerness and whose lives, voices, and ideas should count as queer ones, we are implicitly claiming that queerness *is essentially* something, that it has certain essential elements, and that discourse which neglects one or more of these elements (lesbianism, e.g., in the vignette with which this dissertation began) automatically ceases to be queer. In this way, queer theorists get caught between wanting to believe that nothing is (essential) and nevertheless feeling that some things are. Thus, as a woman who identifies as a woman I am intellectually certain that my femininity exists only inasmuch as I perform it through my clothing, grooming, posture, movement, and so on. Tomorrow I could shave my head, don boxers, baggy cargo pants, and an oversized T-shirt, sit with my legs apart, and perform the ritual markers of masculinity. I could do these things, but I would feel a bit disingenuous: I would feel, that is, as if I were not being myself. The same general idea structures countless narratives of coming out as gay or transgender:

One day Mom caught me in one of her dresses and threatened to put me out in the street...I was scared but it didn’t stop me. (Richard Fung in his video memoir *My Mother’s Place* (1990))

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4 Stephen Hawking refers to this possibly apocryphal exclamation in his edited collection of essays by foundational physicists and astronomers (2002, 397).
I don’t have any sort of gender problem. I’m a man! I know what I am. (Shequida, a drag queen cited in Valentine 2007, 13)

“Sometimes I’ll get the occasional ‘Well, how did you know that you were [gay]?’...For me it’s just always been there. I knew from the time I could think for myself on. It was pretty obvious,” he concluded gesturing to his thin frame and tight-fitting tank top with a flourish. (“Ricky,” a high school student interviewed in Pascoe 2007, 66)

I have always felt like one of the guys. I dreaded puberty. When I started growing tits I thought my life was over and just learned how to “deal” with having them. I’ve been trying to hide them as much as possible since I’ve had them, but drag...It was finally okay to portray what I wanted to be. I met some people that let me know that I could do something about changing my outward appearance to match the way I feel and who I am. (Donnie Waste, a drag king and self-identified “borderline genderqueer/transman,” interviewed by author, March 15, 2010)

When I was thirteen, I wanted a punching bag and boxing gloves for my birthday. I believe that these accoutrements of masculine competition signified for me a way to keep adult womanhood at bay...I was told that boxing was not appropriate for a girl my age and that I should pick out something more feminine...Next came gender-appropriate clothes and all manner of social prohibitions. I personally experienced adolescence as the shrinking of my world...When I look back on the set of limitations that female adolescence bestowed on me, I feel a kind of rage. (Halberstam 1998, 267–268)

As Gayle Rubin insightfully notes, “People often assume that if something is social it is also somehow fragile and can be changed quickly... [F]rustration with the enduring quality of certain things sometimes leads people to think that they can’t be socially generated” (1994, 69–70). And yet gender and sexuality are socially generated. And yet we cannot and do not want to change what and who we feel we are. And yet it turns.

Trapped within this catch-22, performativity-based theory often turns in on itself. Caught between the conviction that identity is always already performed (always context contingent, always demanding to be reproduced) and the negative connotations of performance discourse (fakery, insincerity, falseness, inauthenticity) writers often hedge their bets, wittingly or not, by setting limits on performance. Such is the case in Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret (Rupp and Taylor 2003), which, I’ve argued, distinguishes the conscious or premeditated act of (drag) performance from ostensibly unconscious or automatic lived experiences (of queerness). A similar line is drawn by performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson in his provocative interrogation of racial authenticity, Appropriating Blackness (2003). Johnson argues that race is performative inasmuch as ongoing contestations over what constitutes authentic blackness actually produce
blackness. But his mobilization of performance discourse is conditioned on a critical proviso:

Blackness [is not] always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing. In this respect, blackness supercedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance—the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of racial identification. (8)

Ultimately, I want to suggest that this argument, like Rupp and Taylor’s, devolves as a result of assuming an implicit valuative hierarchy of performativity over performance. On the one hand, Johnson maintains with Butler that blackness can be neither authentic nor inauthentic since it exists only in terms of appropriation; every definition of blackness, therefore, is equally produced by virtue of blackness’s performativity. On the other hand, performance cannot account for the fullness of blackness as an embodied state of being because it is, in his own words, a “spectacular,” “theatrical fantasy” (8), which is to say unreal, invented, inauthentic, and at odds with a “material way of knowing.”

The rather paradoxical relation between performance and performativity operating in Johnson’s rhetoric is, in point of fact, nothing new; it is expressed quite explicitly—albeit in far less politically engaged terms—by the grandfather of performativity theory, John L. Austin. Early in the lecture series How to Do Things with Words (1975), Austin makes an important qualification about the types of speech act that may properly be called performatative:

[A]s utterances our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these...we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy...Language in such circumstances is in special ways—in intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. (21-22)

Performance, in other words, is a bastardization of performativity. Whereas performative utterances produce tangible real-world effects—a legal marriage, for example, is effected through the exchange of “I do”s—utterances spoken in theatrical performance are so potentially damaging to the function of language that they must be excluded from performativity’s purview. I want to suggest in counterpoint to Austin and Johnson that performance and performativity need not be treated as mutually exclusive discursive modes.⁵

⁵ It is not my intention here to conflate Johnson’s definition of performativity, which includes performance with the caveat that performance alone may be an insufficient trope for theorizing the material conditions in which identity is lived, produced, and embodied, with Austin’s definition, which not only excludes performance but moreover casts it as a threat to the social function of language.
A significant challenge to these models is posed by Daphne Brooks’ book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006). Brooks takes as her subject “Afro-alienation acts,” cultural performances that transmute the conditions of abjection and alterity into strategies of self-making (4). Crucially, Brooks draws her examples entirely from the realm of “staged” performance to show how “theatrical” performances reclaim, reperform, and, indeed, reappropriate the real-life experience of blackness. Her chapter on Henry Box Brown, a former slave who mailed himself to the free North in a crate, is especially demonstrative. After escaping slavery, Brown became a visual and performing artist and made a career of reenacting his passage to freedom for paying audiences in North America and Europe. Brooks argues that Brown’s black body transformed from a white colonial commodity into property fully his own—a vehicle for lived experiences of his own choosing—precisely at the moment he publicly restaged his escape. That is, Brown performatively produced his (real) identity as a free black man through the (staged) performance of freedom, much as Jess, the drag performer quoted at length above, crafted his real identity as a transgender man by performing as a man onstage.

Compare Brooks’s analysis of Brown to Rupp and Taylor’s formulation of drag performance as protest, and it quickly becomes clear that the distinction between the lived experience (of race, gender, sexuality, etc.) and the staged performance thereof is not so solid as it may initially seem. Practically then, where Johnson reads performance as connoting a spectacle and intentionality insufficient to the task of articulating the invisible and unconscious experience of blackness, Brooks suggests that epistemological and embodied experiences of blackness are themselves performances. Brooks productively extends Johnson’s claim that blackness writ large is neither authentic nor inauthentic: there is no blackness writ large, but there is blackness made body, and the performance of blackness (and, I want to suggest, of queerness, straightness, femininity, masculinity, and androgyny) is always and equally embodied whether on stage, in the street, in a classroom, or at home. What Brooks’s work suggests is that grounding any discussion of performance in an ontology of the body renders the question of authenticity moot.

The need for such an ontology of the body is echoed and expanded in feminist scientist Karen Barad’s (2003, 801) answer to the question, “Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?” Drawing on the work of physicist Niels Bohr, Barad reverses the causality of representationalist metaphysics, in which individual entities (subjects and objects) preexist the possibility of relations; for Barad, the world is instead comprised of ontological relations, which can subsequently be divided into subject and object. Consequently, there are no ontological boundaries between entities; entities only become intelligible as such within the context of antecedent relationships. This reconception leads Barad to suggest a new epistemological lexicon in which phenomena (not things) are the “smallest material units—relational ‘atoms’” (822) and agency is expressed in terms of intra-actions within those phenomena rather than interactions between things or actions of one thing upon another (815).

So, to borrow an example from science, light looks variously like a wave or a particle, depending on the nature of the experiment. In crude terms, the divergent results of these experiments parallel the results one would expect from shooting a machine gun versus an
industrial pressure washer at a wall with two large holes in it. The discrepant results of these experiments perennially frustrate physicists’ “efforts to specify the true ontological nature of light” (815 n. 21). The wave/particle conundrum ceases to be contradictory, however, when we recognize that

the objective referent [of the experiment] is not some abstract, independently existing entity [light] but rather the phenomenon of light intra-acting with the apparatus. The first apparatus gives determinate meaning to the notion of ‘wave,’ while the second provides determinate meaning to the notion of ‘particle.’ The notions of ‘wave’ and ‘particle’ do not refer to inherent characteristics of an object that precedes its intra-action. There are no such independently existing objects with inherent characteristics.” (815 n. 21, emphasis author’s)

Because we are looking at a different phenomenon in each experiment (the intra-active relation of light with a gun-like apparatus versus that of light with a washer-like apparatus), it should come as no surprise that the observations issuing from each one (particleness and waveness, respectively) should differ as well.

Barad’s account goes on to redefine agency, not as a quality of some material objects, but rather as a reconfiguring of phenomena: an action perhaps more appropriately captured by a verb, “agentize.” Since on this view all matter, human, nonhuman, and discursive alike, can agentize (act), agency becomes irreducible to (the capacity for) language. Materiality and discourse become inseparably coconstitutive, “mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity” (822). And because material relations are endlessly changing and changeable through intra-action, there can be neither an ontological thing nor a telos toward which the process of becoming leads. If, to return to a prior example, the phenomenon we are studying consists of relations between my body, a buzz cut, menswear, and open-legged seated posture, the intra-action might give meaning to the concept “masculinity” or even “female masculinity” for any given observer. And yet, whether unconsciously or by conscious choice, I routinely keep my hair long, shop in the ladies’ department, and cross my legs knee over knee when I sit down—a set of intra-active relations which to most people signifies femininity. But the point I wish to make about this admittedly narcissistic thought experiment is this: neither of these scenarios is any more real, any less performed, any more constructed or any less essential than the other; the latter amalgam of relations simply tends to arise more frequently. It is primarily for this reason that friends, family, acquaintances, and I myself would identify me as a normatively feminine woman—not because I was born this way, or was psychically conditioned to feel this way, or was socially inculcated with the expectation that I present myself this way, or because one day I made a considered decision to look and act this way (although each of these may be true within the context of any particular intra-action). Rather, I, as a person with an identity that consistently makes me legible as myself to myself and others over time, only exist as a function of relations. And it is the relative consistency of these relations over time that gives weight to gender. Thus, one might be gay or masculine or genderqueer but only

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6 This is my term, not Barad’s.
inasmuch as one does (agentizes) intra-actions that give meaning to gayness or masculinity or genderqueerness.

Despite the emphasis on temporality in this example, the reframing of performativity as intra-activity marks a significant shift away from repetition-based understandings of performativity, such as Butler’s citationality (1993), Richard Schechner’s restored behavior (1985), and Victor Turner’s ritual (1982). Performativity here is not about reiteration or pattern or copies of originals that are themselves copies. Nor is it about particular gestures whose repetition over time sediments something like an identity. Since the referent of performative intra-action is always a relation and not a thing, the issue of repetition becomes virtually obsolete. Because bodies are constantly intra-acting with other matter (people, computers, ideas, the weather), there is no metaphysical expectation that meanings (e.g., identities) will be reproduced consistently. Within this performative framework, which I am calling omniperformance, there is no longer cause to debate whether a “biological” female who identifies as a woman is a more authentic woman than a masculine-identified “biological” female, a bedroom cross-dresser, a professional drag queen, or an MTF transsexual because the meaning of “woman” is coextensive with each new intra-action.

This is not to deny the relative historical stability of the concept “woman.” Gender has undeniably served a host of patriarchal and heterosexist ends and, consequently, has left deep scars on the flesh and psyches of people who live on the edge or underbelly of its norms. Omniperformance does not account for the historical uses and abuses of gender; rather, it is an instrument of change. The insistence on continuity of identity, a foundational trope of gender injustice, is produced and sustained by—ergo only possible within—a representationalist metaphysic. By contrast, intra-actions, the discursive and material relations that preexist the possibility of distinguishing bodies from identities and that encompass each person, can shift from moment to moment, day to day, year to year; hence, the meaning of gender issuing from any one bodily intra-action could potentially be subject to revision just as often.

The point here again is not merely rhetorical. The paradigm I offer challenges the rigidly policed boundary between performance and performativity. Johnson tacitly assumes such a distinction in the excerpt cited above. Butler, however, insists upon it: “It is important to distinguish performance from performativity,” she notes. “[T]he former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject” (1996, 112). Here I take her to mean that the concept of a subject did not and could not have existed prior to the invention of discourse, ergo discourse creates both the general idea of a subject and specific, individual subjects. Like Austin’s performative utterance that creates a new state of affairs by virtue of being uttered, Butler’s notion of performative discourse creates, reproduces, reinvents, or denaturalizes subjects by virtue of being discourse. In the case of performance, by contrast, since a performance is an action, and an action cannot be performed in the absence of a performing subject, then the existence of a subject must precede the existence of a performance. While I follow Butler’s logic with respect to performativity, I disagree inasmuch as I believe performance can also challenge the assumption of a subject before the Law. The fault I find in her argument is that the distinction between performance and performativity hinges on a conflation of the subject
with the body. That is, where Butler assumes that an action must be performed by a subject, I counter that performance only requires a body, loosely defined. Indeed, the antecedence of bodies/matter/substance is the condition of possibility for the intra-actions through which subjects and objects are performed.

Performance, on this account, has the capacity both to produce and contest “the very notion of a subject,” rendering its distinction from performativity merely discursive, so to speak. Both performance and performativity are radically dependent on the prior existence of a material body in order to produce meaning, regardless of whether that intra-actional production occurs on stage, in casual conversation, while cross-dressed for a drag show, or as the result of a normatively deviant gender identification. Simply put, I am suggesting that there is no difference between performance and performativity, that the rhetorical distinction between the two has exhausted its utility, and that omnipерформance, a paradigm based on an ontology of bodily intra-action accounts for both the theoretical fluidity and the apparent fixity of individual identity. In so saying, I do not mean to disparage or dismiss Butler’s pathbreaking work, to which my own is deeply indebted. Nor do I deny the power of language in producing subjectivities. My purpose is simply to decentralize language as the sole or primary arbiter of subjecthood and to affirm that bodies share in the work of identity formation. In pursuit of this aim, Barad’s insights transport us across a critical impasse, namely, that performativity grants language limitless power to make, break, and subvert identities while glossing over the material conditions and consequences of having a (particularly gendered, sexed, raced, and classed) body.

Whenever there is polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think the truth lies somewhere in between.

Gayle Rubin (1984, 303)

Kinging and queening, as I have articulated them, are a fruitful lens through which to interrogate the broader notion of queer border wars and the problematic elisions engendered and sustained by the rhetorical, political, and cultural ambiguity of the word “queer.” “Border wars,” as I am using it, is a phrase borrowed from Judith Halberstam’s discussion of the tense relations between butch lesbians and transmen. “If we study the fault lines between masculine women and transsexual men,” Halberstam expands,

we discover...that as transsexual men become associated with real and desperate desires for reembodiment, so butch women become associated with a playful desire for masculinity and a casual form of gender deviance...I believe that the confusing overlaps between some forms of transsexuality and some gender-deviant forms of lesbianism have created...a strange struggle between FTMs and lesbian butches who accuse each other of gender normativity. (1998, 143)
While Halberstam is focused on one border war in particular, I think the concept’s explanatory power can be applied to any number of debates about who counts as queer, for what reasons, according to whom. Although I have been primarily concerned with the fault lines between lesbians and gay men as manifested through the practice of drag, queer theory is rich in additional examples: bisexual versus homosexual, butch versus femme, vanilla versus fetish (Rubin 1984), so-called homonormative (i.e., heteroassimilationist; Duggan 2002) lifestyles versus death-driven subcultures (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005), transgender versus transsexual (Valentine 2007), promiscuity versus celibacy versus monogamy (Delany 1999; Warner 1999), men who have sex with men versus gay men (King 2004), and the list goes on. Yet even as queer theorists and activists police these boundaries (e.g., by eschewing gay marriage as inimical to a queer counterpublic ideology), we are paradoxically loath to make claims that might be construed as essentialist or essentializing. “Queerness,” I have argued, is at once a catchall for gender and sexual deviance and a taxonomy of internal interests. It simultaneously seeks to erase differences (by insisting on the inclusion of an ever-expanding array of nonnormative genders and sexualities) and to maintain differences (by framing some bodies and lives as queerer than others). Drag shows, I suggest, produce and reify such proprietary understandings of queerness and queer performance in brilliant technicolor. When, for instance, an audience regular at Bounce’s Girls A-Go-Go dismisses king performances as “messy, unrehearsed,...zero production value,” we see at work the Foucauldian dictum, “discourse is little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze” (Foucault 1981, 66). To wit, such a statement (mis)reads the discursive product of one discipline (kinging, lesbian performance culture) via the rhetorical terms of another (queening, gay male performance culture). Or, alternately, in evaluating lesbian drag according to the (altogether different) standards of gay male drag, the speaker not only appropriates and assimilates the former to the latter, but finds, unsurprisingly, that the former comes up lacking. Or again, in voicing a common refrain of MTF drag devotees, the speaker lays claim to—and implicitly claims knowledge of—kinging as a sector of the drag umbrella, while concomitantly critiquing it for being insufficiently draggy.

This tension within queer studies generally and drag performance specifically mirrors a parallel conflict at the border of performance and performativity that pits “real” enactments of selfhood against “artificially” produced ones. This rhetorical strategy perpetuates an ideological practice of exclusion-in-inclusion; that is, it claims that all identity is born in performance, but some identity performances are less authentic than others. I have argued instead that it is precisely through relations (such as the cross-cultural friction underwriting the aforementioned spectator’s dismissal of kinging’s performatve value) that notions of identity and difference come to exist.

In contradistinction to discursive ontologies that counterpose performativity with embodied experience, innate with acquired identity markers, reality with pretense, I believe, with David Halperin, that such ontologies unnecessarily restrict our ability to make any but the narrowest claims about the relationship between individual and cultural identities. Articulating the controversial proposition that camp is the defining generic convention of gay male culture, Halperin (2008) remarks:

I am well aware of all the reasons why it might seem hazardous even to speak of gay
male culture. The foremost danger is that of essentialism, of seeming to imply that there is some defining feature or property of gayness that all gay men share. But to make such an objection is to confuse a culture, and the practices that constitute it, with the individuals who belong to it and who may not all be gay themselves.

Such a conflation is far more difficult to sustain, however, when one understands both individuals and cultures as effects—not producers—of relations. Viewed through the lens of omniperformance, culture becomes detachable from individual bodies (and thus is not inborn or essential to any particular body), yet culture only exists as an effect of bodily intra-action (and thus is not merely a discursive construction, conjured out of ether, but is instead substantial or, in conventional terms, real).

Conceiving the cultural production of identity and the identity-based production of culture thusly allows identity and culture to be both an action and a state of rest, a construction and an essence. It moves us beyond the compulsory choice of bodies or discourse, and it explodes the idea that staged performances (like drag shows) reflect but don’t produce gender and sexual identities. Most significantly, it circumvents the problematic uses of “queer” I have outlined throughout this dissertation. A relational metaphysic allows us to stake and make claims to and about queer discourses, bodies, and identities without falling back on purely essentialist tropes. Since queerness on this account is the product of a particular constellation of bodies and ideas and not an inherent characteristic of some bodies or ideas, we might begin to imagine scholarly exchange and political coalition based on coexisting, rather than combating, definitions of queerness. We might accept or even admire an argument that defines queerness as a product of certain phenomenal intra-actions involving gay men, knowing that it does not negate or supplant a definition issuing from lesbian-encompassing phenomena. Perhaps then we can undertake the queer work of social justice not as counterparts, arbitrarily juxtaposed along bi- and intersecting lines of preformed difference, but as partners rearranging and reinterpreting the relations that make those differences matter.
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Figure 1
The Demure Lounge
a. Julian Eltinge, 1913

b. Unidentified San Francisco drag queen, ca. 1965

Figure 2
The Seductive Lounge
Figure 3
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Figure 4
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a. Jean La Monte, 1937
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a. Vesta Tilley, ca. 1890

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