

Staging Dissents: Drag Kings, Resistance, and Feminist Masculinities

The relationship between feminism and drag king performance is complicated. While many drag kings hail their performances as feminist, feminists critical of drag king performance often accuse drag kings of valorizing hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing patriarchal norms, or engaging in the subjugation of femininity through performances that use masculine tropes. In particular, strains of radical feminism that reify the connection between gender presentation and biological sex are unable to imagine a female-born person's relationship to masculinity that is not about access to male privilege and the assertion of patriarchal and heterosexual ideologies in lesbian space. This line of thinking initially gained traction within feminist circles through the publication of texts such as Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971), both of which link the existence of transgender bodies to the ongoing oppression of women as a class. Recently, the increased visibility of transgender celebrities within the public sphere, as well as some recent small gains in transgender rights, have caused a resurgence of these ideas, empowering feminists who question the existence of transgender identities to voice their disdain more openly (Stryker and Bettcher 2016).

The radical feminist critique of drag king culture is linked to a tradition of feminist skepticism around the inclusion of transsexual women in feminist politics.¹ This line of feminist thinking understands male privilege as something innate and guaranteed to all individuals assigned male at birth: "What goes unrecognized," says Raymond, "consciously or unconsciously, by women

¹ By marking the bodies at the source of this conflict as "transsexual" rather than "transgender," I am acknowledging the particular identity politics that mark this dispute. I am also recognizing Susan Stryker's (2008) claim that the meaning of the term "transgender" has evolved over time. Our contemporary usage of the word, which includes "transsexual" under its umbrella, does not accurately reflect the reality of the particular moment in feminist history that Raymond and Greer write from: "*Transgender* itself was a term then undergoing a significant shift in meaning. Robert Hill, who has been researching the history of heterosexual male cross-dressing communities, found instances in community-based publications of words like *transgenderal*, *transgenderist*, and *transgenderism* dating back to the late 1960s. . . . By the early 1990s . . . *transgender* was coming to refer to something else—an imagined political alliance of all possible forms of gender antinormativity" (Stryker 2008, 146).

who accept such transsexuals as women and as lesbian feminists is that their masculine behavior is disguised by the castration of the male ‘member.’ Loss of a penis, however, does not mean the loss of an ability to penetrate women—women’s identities, women’s spirits, women’s sexuality” (1979, xix). This claim is, first and foremost, made in the service of prohibiting anyone born without female reproductive organs from accessing lesbian, feminist, or women-only spaces. Others have extended Raymond’s critique, however, to include the claim that transsexual women (and subsequently, drag queens) are reinforcing traditional gender roles for women through their over-the-top enactments of femininity (Hawkes 1995; Kleiman 1999; Schacht 2002). This line of thinking is then further extended to make claims about drag king identity—specifically that drag kings represent a valorization of male dominance and a rejection of femininity (and thus feminism).

This critique of drag king identity can be summarized by the introduction to Sheila Jeffreys’s *Unpacking Queer Politics* (2003): “Some of the lesbians who had demonstrated their commitment to achieving male power and privilege by assuming a ‘butch’ identity, by packing and holding ‘drag king’ contests to see who could move most convincingly like a man, and particularly a gay man, moved towards the mutilating surgery and hormone consumption which promised ‘realness’ in their quest. The change from the heyday of lesbian feminism . . . to a situation where, in some influential and much publicized parts of the lesbian community, masculinity is the holy grail, could not be more profound” (1). For Jeffreys, as well as other feminists engaging with critiques of drag king performance, the drag king becomes part of a larger resistance to feminist relationships with masculinity. The drag king becomes a figure representing an explicit rejection of femininity and feminism. Jeffreys is unable to imagine the possibility of a relationship to masculinity that is not about access to male privilege and the insertion of patriarchal ideologies into lesbian spaces. This suspicion is part of the larger feminist trend that discounts most gender deviance, in particular through attempts to police who is allowed into women-only, feminist, and lesbian spaces.

Jeffreys’s recent monograph, *Gender Hurts* (2014), explicitly marks transgender bodies and the experiences of anyone who wants to explore their gender identity as relying on stereotypes that exist explicitly to restrict women’s agency (20), a move that clearly marks those who explore their gendered subjectivity as sworn enemies of feminist organizing. A chapter in this same monograph, coauthored with Lorene Gottschalk, claims that transgender men and butch women reinforce heteropatriarchal values (194), destroy lesbian spaces (195), undermine the feminist integrity of the National Women’s Studies Association (197), intentionally access patriarchal dividends at the expense of women (199), and abuse their partners at high rates (207–8). These

perspectives on people who are intentional about their relationship to masculinity extend to drag kings as well. Drag kings are sometimes also butch and sometimes also transgender, but they are always in conversation with feminist and/or lesbian spaces and always engage directly with the tropes and expressions of masculinity. This reading of masculine expression thus marks drag kings as performers who are always reinforcing the heteropatriarchy, always undermining feminist and lesbian spaces, and always gaining social success at the expense of women.

In opposition to this line of thinking, many drag kings understand their performances as occupying specifically feminist spaces, through the creation of a subcultural language and the creation of feminist-centered communities. This move counters the claim that femininity or femaleness and biology correlate directly to each other and rejects the impulse to draw strict boundaries around the category of “woman.” In particular, by focusing on drag kings’ narratives of their relationship to masculinity and by closely reading the texts of these masculine performances, we see a very different picture of the possibilities embedded in a space where masculinity and feminism meet.

In part, the tension described above centers on the question of what it means to perform masculinity and whether or not performances that embrace masculine expression can be feminist. This article intervenes in this conversation by asserting that drag king masculinity has aspects of feminist performance embedded in its structure. Drag kings manipulate gendered agency, through both parody and reappropriations of hegemonic masculinity, in ways that have the potential to act as subversive feminist performances. By engaging explicitly with hegemonic masculinity—that is, the form of masculine expression that is most valued within an American cultural context—I contend that drag kings are reclaiming a space to separate masculinity from sexist oppression. Further, this parody and reappropriation serve to create unique subcultural codes, messages about masculinity that are apparent *because* of the audiences who attend drag king performances. The subcultural space of a drag king performance allows for the development of an explicitly feminist masculinity, one that might help us “enable cogent critique of patriarchal norms of masculinity as well as underwrite alternate norms of masculinity compatible with feminist values and commitments” (Almassi 2015, 4). In other words, many drag kings deploy dominant or hegemonic masculinities in ways that do not celebrate the existence of a gendered hierarchy but rather serve to reimagine these tropes within an anti-oppressive context.

In light of these factors, I suggest that even hegemonic masculinities can do the work of feminism when they are written onto the bodies of drag kings.

Further, I propose that we reimagine the language we use to talk about drag king identity more generally. Most analyses of drag king culture follow J. Jack Halberstam's (1998) understanding of drag kings as a representation of female masculinity. This language accurately and productively describes the history of drag king culture as something that emerges within explicitly lesbian spaces. However, the reality now is that not all drag kings understand themselves as female-bodied. With a growing number of drag kings identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming, the time is ripe to reconsider the language we use to talk about these performers as a group.² For that reason, I suggest that we shift from talking about drag kings as representations of female masculinity to talking instead about drag kings as representations of feminist masculinity.

Method

My project is rooted in the anthropological traditions of participant observation and autoethnography. In standard anthropological research, participant observation involves an individual spending an extended amount of time (normally between six months and one year) living in a space separate from their own cultural environment. My project deviates from this traditional model in that I conducted my participant observation among my own community (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). Autoethnography is a research process that links the autobiographical and the personal to the social, cultural, and political (Ellis 2004). My use of autoethnographic methodologies in this project follows Leon Anderson's proposal for an analytic autoethnography, which requires that "the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (2006, 373).

This article draws on data that I collected between 2011 and 2013. In total, thirty-one performers who identified as drag kings participated in this project. For this writing, I will be focusing on the experiences of members of the Gender Studs, a drag collective based in Bloomington, Indiana, as well as public performances at the 2011 International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKE), a semiregular gathering of drag performers from

² For a discussion of this shift, see Eve Shapiro's (2007) article about the Disposable Boy Toys, a drag troupe based in Santa Barbara, California. Of particular significance is Shapiro's claim that "before participation in the group, 25 members admitted embracing hegemonic gender identities, with only 3 members identifying as transgender or genderqueer. After participating in DBT, members described gender as a range of masculinities and femininities and claimed complex sets of gender identities" (267).

around the country. I amassed the data discussed in this article using a combination of participant observation, informal interviews, autoethnography, and semistructured interviews to collect information about my participants' performances styles and their understandings of what constituted success as a drag king.

Initially, I used participant observation and informal interviews to gather information about my participants' performance styles and perceptions of success. I watched over two hundred hours of drag performance and participated in thirty-four shows. While I was working with the Gender Studs, I participated in regular troupe performances; attended social events based around the troupe community; engaged in informal conversations about performances before, during, and after shows; and participated in more formal meetings about the present and future of the troupe. Thirteen drag kings have passed through the ranks of the Gender Studs during its tenure, although the troupe has never contained more than ten performers at one time. Following this participant observation phase, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with twelve of my thirty-one participants, seven of whom were members of the Gender Studs. Each of those interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. I recorded, transcribed, and coded each interview.

My relationship with my participants, and in particular the perceived power dynamic between us, was sometimes complicated by my status as an insider in the community I studied (Vaidya 2010). Insider research presents a number of benefits, particularly in the form of access and a language shorthand, but it also carries challenges. Dydia DeLyser (2001), in a reflection on Doug Pourteous's ethnographic work, notes: "Rather than being swept up in a research situation, he found it was his informants who were caught up in their perceptions of his research" (443). I found this truth particularly challenging while speaking with participants who were themselves graduate students in the social sciences. I experienced participants deferring to my status as "expert" in ways that were likely directly linked to our shared identities as both researcher and performer. These interactions highlighted for me the need for open communication in insider research in ways that are probably not necessary for community outsiders. I began to work more actively to displace my status as expert because such a classification runs counter to the ways I understand the research process.

Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp (2005) discuss similar challenges in their methodological reflection on their work with the drag queens at the 801 Cabaret. While Taylor and Rupp don't share an identity as performers with their research participants, they still found themselves navigating complications that arose because of their shared identity as queer. They close their narra-

tive description of the complexities that stem from the realities of two white, university-educated lesbians conducting research among racially and economically disenfranchised drag queens by reminding their readers that “the tensions and contradictions we encountered in the research process were not just problems to be overcome; they also proved to be productive for our thinking” (2133). This project has been profoundly influenced by Taylor and Rupp’s call for feminist researchers to embrace the messiness that comes with participant-based research. As a researcher, I dedicated significant energy to releasing the need for control and allowing for tensions and cloudy moments as central components of an explicitly feminist research praxis.

This writing uses the stage names of my participants and the pronouns they use when they are in drag. These names and pronouns do not necessarily reflect the daily lived realities of the drag kings that I work with, but they do encapsulate their identities as performers. This move aligns with the language my participants use to talk about themselves—those who present their gender differently when they are on- and offstage use different pronouns to refer to themselves in different settings. This, for many of my participants, helps differentiate their stage personas from their lived identities.

An introduction to drag as resistance

It’s a cool October Saturday in 2011, the second full day of the fourteenth IDKE. Nearly two hundred drag kings, burlesque performers, and gender-bending artists have gathered at the Agora Ballroom in Cleveland, Ohio, for the showcase—an exposition of some of the best collective and individual drag our community has to offer. The evening is winding down; everyone is tired from a long day of skill sharing, community bonding, and preparation for this evening’s event. The attention shifts, however, when Spacee Kadett walks on to the stage. Spacee is a drag king from Detroit, relatively well known among drag king communities, and many IDKE attendees have been looking forward to his performance with some anticipation.

Spacee comes on stage with a microphone in his hand, wearing a brown sport jacket over a white T-shirt. His hair is teased into a pompadour, and his relatively thick sideburns extend just below his ears. With a knowing smirk on his face, Spacee nods to the folks controlling the music, and the opening notes of Lady Gaga’s 2011 hit single “You and I” begin to pipe through the ballroom.³ Instead of singing the intended lyrics of the song, Spacee reworks the words into a number that is half parody, half political statement about

³ Lady Gaga, “You and I,” written by Stefani Germanotta (Lady Gaga), track 13 on *Born This Way*, Interscope Records, 2011.

cultural appropriation. The subject of Spacee's attention, Lady Gaga's recent performance as a drag king at MTV's Video Music Awards, had sparked some controversy among the drag community. While some performers had hailed it as one of the only recent pop culture representations of drag kings, others had criticized Gaga's slapdash approach to creating a drag persona and relatively inexpert use of hair and makeup techniques common among drag communities. I myself had been both unshocked and unimpressed by Gaga's culture poaching, but I was trying to focus my energies on understanding how others were responding. What is of interest to Spacee in the IDKE performance is not whether Gaga had positively represented drag but rather her eerie similarity to his usual drag aesthetic. He introduces this concept in his modified second verse of the song:

My phone blows up that very next day
 Didja see Lady Gaga on the VMAs?
 Spacee, I could swear that it was you

I laugh out loud cause it's gotta be funny
 I've been doin' this for years and she's makin' big money
 Lookin' like me and doin' what I do

I think I found my long-lost twin
 It's like starin' in the mirror when I'm lookin' at him
 When I look at her face, I think they used
 A picture of me in the dressing room.

As the cheers from the crowd egg him on, Spacee moves into a pantomimed rendition of the song's chorus, gesticulating in such a way so as to draw attention to the striking physical similarities between himself and Joe Calderone, Lady Gaga's drag alter ego:

Something, something about her face
 Something about her big, dark hair and maybe the way she tapes
 Something, something I do most every Saturday night
 'Cause when we're in drag, oh baby, we look alike
 She and I.

What is perhaps most interesting about Spacee's performance at the IDKE showcase is the way his act negotiates multiple levels of gendered expression. On the surface, his appearance is quite masculine, reminiscent of James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*. He has crafted the illusion of well-defined pectoral muscles, paid great attention to the shadowing of his jawbone, and

created just enough of a hint of an Adam's apple to be convincing. Whether or not it is ultimately his end goal, Spacee has created an aesthetic that can easily pass as male. He performs enough of the tropes of masculinity to be recognizable without visually drawing undue attention to his female body. However, this more traditional aesthetic is turned on its head when Spacee lifts the microphone to his mouth and starts to sing, using a voice that is pitched down but still notably feminine. This, coupled with lyrics that draw attention to his drag king status, shatters the image of hegemonic maleness and calls into question the stability of the performance.

This highlights the ways that drag king performers both consciously and unconsciously manipulate the standards of gender performance. Rather than presenting performances intended to pass or crafting performances intentionally designed to flip gender regulations on their heads, many drag kings navigate the space between the two—strategically drawing on tropes of dominant masculinity while simultaneously undermining those very standards. This movement between and among multiple gendered spaces challenges the assertion that drag kings are uncritically reproducing the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Critics who accuse drag king performances of celebrating masculinity at the expense of femininity miss the nuances entwined in a performance that moves through both masculine and feminine spaces. Spacee Kadett's masculinity in his IDKE performance can be read as explicitly feminist—his willingness to use his markedly feminine voice creates a space for an alternative version of masculinity that exists in harmony with femininity, not in opposition to it. Instead of understanding drag kings as bodies that serve to highlight existing social patterns, I propose that we think more strategically about the ways drag king identity both supports and challenges cultural standards of gender performance. A thorough investigation of every drag king performance ever staged would surely reveal some performances that celebrate masculine dominance or belittle femininity in antifeminist ways. However, while these performances may be what some always expect to find, they are not the norm. Focusing on potentially damaging social messages found in isolated performances misses the broader possibilities for social transformation found within drag king communities as a whole.

The manipulation of passing, in particular, becomes a site where many performers challenge external expectations of drag king performance. The desire to pass as male or as appropriately masculine is the characteristic of drag king performance that draws the most attention from radical feminist drag detractors. These critiques claim that drag kings are reifying detrimental gender norms, valorizing masculine dominance, and normalizing violence against femininity. Embedded in this critique are several key assumptions: that drag kings want their audience to believe that they are male and that this

desire stems from an internalized sense that masculinity and maleness are somehow superior to femininity. Setting aside the question of the legitimacy of those claims, I would instead like to argue that they both rest on incomplete information about how drag kings understand what it means to pass. Rather than a definition of passing that is rooted in a desire for the audience to perceive them as authentically male, drag kings often deploy a notion of passing more akin to the one proposed by José Esteban Muñoz in his discussion of the genderqueer performance artist Vaginal Davis:

Passing is often not about bald-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality, where a dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form. In traditional male-to-female drag “woman” is performed, but one would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how “real,” as an actual performance of “woman.” Drag performance strives to perform femininity, and femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women. Furthermore, the drag queen is disidentifying—sometimes critically and sometimes not—not only with the ideal of woman but also with the a priori relationship of woman and femininity that is a tenet of gender-normative thinking. The “woman” produced in drag is not a woman but instead a public disidentification with woman. Some of the best drag that I have encountered in my research challenges the universalizing rhetorics of femininity. (Muñoz 1997, 92)

Muñoz locates passing within the broader context of disidentification, that is, a process that “resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification” (83). For Muñoz, the relationship that a drag performer has with passing is inextricably linked to other modes of dominance and inequality. Rather than understanding drag as participating in those structures of inequality, Muñoz sees within drag the possibility for conscious resistance and a refusal of interpellation. This space for intentional resistance, while it is executed in a variety of different fashions in practice, is one of the primary reasons I propose reimagining our analysis of drag king performance in terms of feminist masculinity in lieu of female masculinity.

While drag kings do attempt to pass, in a multitude of ways, they are seldom trying to pass as “men.” Rather, I contend that we might read drag king performance as an attempt to pass as queer, a bold statement in a world that

is quick to reinforce the expectation that everyone has a “true” sex. In other words, I don’t believe it is productive to read drag king performance through the same lens we might use to read the masculinity of men. Drag kings are always already occupying a hybrid space, one that forecloses access to the male-bound masculinity celebrated by mainstream culture. By consciously crafting gendered performances that reject the expectations of a two-gendered society, drag kings separate a successful presentation of masculinity from traditional markers of male privilege in ways that have the potential to be both feminist and subversive. In the remainder of this article, I will highlight the feminist potential of drag king performance by considering the ways that the bodies of drag kings have buttressed feminist writing and by highlighting case studies of feminist masculinity within drag performance.

Drag kings in feminist literature

My reading of drag king performance as feminist draws from two interrelated theoretical strands: the possibilities for agency embedded in a reading of gender as performative and the possibilities for resistance found in intentional uses of camp aesthetics. These positions, when taken together, set the stage for a reading of drag king performance that is not universally uncritical but allows for a nuanced view of the feminist possibilities within drag performance. In this context, I am following bell hooks’s definition of feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2000, viii). While there are certainly other definitions of feminism that I find particularly generative, I have chosen hooks’s because the critiques leveled against drag kings are deeply rooted in accusations of sexism. For that reason, I am anchoring my discussion of drag king performance in a reading of feminism that explicitly centers sexist oppression. In this literature review, I will trace the relationship between drag kings and feminism as a way to set up a discussion of the Gender Studs. Following this overview, the remainder of this article will use the Gender Studs as a case study for thinking about the feminist possibilities inherent in drag king performance.

Gender and agency

According to Judith Butler’s model of gender performativity, the citational nature of gender can be illuminated by a careful examination of a practice such as drag: “Drag is not the putting on of gender that belongs to some other group, i.e. an act of *expropriation* or *appropriation* that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to male and ‘feminine’ belongs to female. . . . Drag constitutes the mundane way in which

genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (2004a, 127). For Butler, drag is theoretically interesting not because it represents some sort of unique condition but rather because of the mundane that drag encapsulates. Drag highlights the fact that “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (127). This early analysis of drag performance has been used to valorize drag as an ultimately subversive form of gender expression—a type of resistance against the status quo. Butler addresses this claim in *Bodies That Matter*, where she revises her position on the usefulness of drag: “I want to underscore that there is no necessary relationship between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and *reidealization* of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (1993, 125). The revision that Butler makes here is one of latitude, a clarification of the limits of the potential to create a rupture in the gendered system.

This model is derived from the work of J. L. Austin (1975, 6), who deploys what he calls “performative utterances” to understand the relationship between speaking and reception. For both Austin and Butler, the model of the performative accommodates the fact that an utterance may be rejected, an assumption that underlies much of Butler’s later work on the possibilities for agency and resistance within a specifically gendered performative utterance. Butler invokes Austin’s call to “remember . . . that we might in some sense or way *imply* lots of things to be so when we say ‘I promise’, but this is completely different from saying that the utterance, ‘I promise’, is a *statement*, true or false, that these things are so” (1975, 45). Austin’s account of the “obvious” differences between an implication and a statement relies on the notion that we must look at the total picture when considering a speech act. For Austin (and later, Butler), this means that the “situation in which the utterance is issued” (52) figures as heavily into the reception of that utterance as the actual words being spoken. Butler’s work is useful for a reading of drag king performance in a feminist context because she provides the language to challenge the claim that drag kings are always already valorizing masculine dominance at the expense of women. It may not be productive to read Butler’s work as universally celebrating the subversive potential of drag; however, her turn to drag as an illustration of the tenuous nature of gendered norms certainly suggests that drag kings are not engaging with masculinity in the same ways as men. In fact, I extend Butler’s framework to argue that even when drag kings don’t explicitly undermine traditional norms, the intent of the performance and the reality of the space still create possibilities for different kinds of resistance. It matters, in the context of drag performances, that drag kings are always already assumed to be presenting a

version of masculinity that deviates from the expected connection between maleness, manhood, and masculinity.

Returning to Spacee Kadett's performance at IDKE, it becomes clear how drag kings can serve to illuminate the multiple levels of citational practice that Butler nods to. His initial entrance reinforces his masculinity through references to widely recognized tropes of maleness. His tailored jacket, matching pants, and white T-shirt all cite a particular type of masculine presentation that is easily legible. The styling of his hair and makeup further reinforce his masculine presentation by eliciting memories of James Dean, a widely recognized cultural symbol of counterhegemonic American masculinity (Kim 2006). All of these citational practices participate in the process of repetition Butler describes—they become legible in this moment precisely because they are already legible. Spacee's female body does not need to create confusion in this context because the nature of his performance in the initial moment of presentation performs in a legible enough manner to allow for a collapse of male/masculine/heterosexual desire into a single moment of performance. He has successfully participated in the gendered process that Butler describes.

However, this citational cycle becomes disrupted as soon as the performance starts. In addition to drawing on the cultural references to masculinity, Spacee is now citing another cultural text—Lady Gaga's 2011 performance at the Video Music Awards. This added citation serves to reinforce the presence of Spacee's female body, since Gaga's performance as a "male impersonator" was packaged as just that: an impersonation. Further, when Spacee picks up the microphone and begins to sing, the pitch and tenor of his voice further undermine the connection between maleness and masculinity that he previously established. The process of repetition is disrupted by the introduction of citations that are discordant with traditional masculinity. Reading Spacee's performance through the lens of Butler's argument, I contend that this performance engages in a very particular type of gendered resistance, one that highlights the possibilities for agency in gendered expression more generally.

While Butler only deals loosely with agency in her early work, she takes up the question of agency more explicitly in her more recent book-length work on the question of gender performativity. In *Undoing Gender*, she addresses the power of social norms but hangs on to the idea that we can maintain some agency. In response to those who would accuse her of being too voluntaristic, she writes, "one looks *both* for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, and for *the limits* of those conditions. The limits are to be found where the reproducibility of the conditions is not secure, the site where conditions are contingent, transformable" (Butler 2004b, 30). This

can be seen as a modification of her original framework; Butler's early work on gender performativity is not highly specific about where agency lies, other than in the possibility for resistance. Here, she addresses the question with greater specificity, acknowledging that a certain set of conditions must be met in order for resistance to be possible. She recognizes the power of social norms to interpellate subjects into the gendered order. However, at the same time, Butler is unwilling to let go of the idea that there is some possibility for resistance within the gendered system, specifically at the moments where cracks and slippages challenge the stability of the social. This happens through a process of misrecognition, a place where the system fails to accurately render legible the body in question.

What's become important for Butler in this revision is the potential for living a livable life. She locates intelligibility as central to the process of becoming read as human and therefore central to a livable life: "to be called a copy, to be called unreal, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that. For to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject as a possible or potential subject. But to be unreal is something else again. For to be oppressed one must first become intelligible" (2004b, 218). For Butler, the possibilities for agency hinge on the potential for recognition. For drag kings, I contend that gender fluidity becomes allowable in staged spaces precisely because drag kings are recognized as performers who directly engage with gender. This creates a space to develop a relationship with legibility that allows performers to separate themselves from the antifeminist views often associated with masculinity. Halberstam reinforces this idea in his mixed-media project *The Drag King Book*, arguing that "there are no essential relationships between being a masculine person and performing as a Drag King, but there is some relationship between performing masculinity and diminishing the natural bonds between masculinity and men. . . . When butches perform as Drag Kings, they build a new, flashy masculinity upon their own carefully cultivated masculinities and tend to create startling effects of realness and convincing male effect. When transgender Drag Kings put on male drag, they thoroughly detach masculinity from men and even maleness from men" (in Volcano and Halberstam 1999, 150). Reading drag in this light allows us to understand its performance as an explicitly feminist project—one that actively undermines sexist ideologies by reimagining masculinity in the context of nonnormative bodies. Following Halberstam's claim that drag kings detach masculinity from maleness, I contend that their performances actually undermine versions of masculinity that denigrate or exploit femininity. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this article, some drag kings are engaging with questions about

the possibilities of legibility and recognition in ways that are much more critical than the feminist dismissal of their work would suggest. In lieu of taking a singular position on the question of whether or not subversion is possible from within the gendered order, the drag kings I work with have a much more nuanced and situational approach to the question of gender fluidity. This supports a reading of drag as distinct from maleness and the subjugation of women.

Parodies of hegemonic masculinity

One way in which drag kings do explicitly feminist work is through performances that parody or make explicit the limits of hegemonic masculinity. This thread of drag performance is particularly common among the Gender Studs, whose performances will be the focus of the remainder of this article. Far from being a celebration of hegemonic masculinity, drag kings who engage in parody performances are using comedy as a venue to expose the limits of traditional masculine norms. These routines often highlight the excesses of masculinity, infusing cultural expectations with a heavy dose of camp. Halberstam (2005) reads drag kings' parodies as texts that "highlight the ways in which most masculinity copies and models itself on some impossible ideal that it can never replicate" (135). For the Gender Studs, the feminist potential of parody performances is central to their appeal—particularly within the context of subcultural spaces that are in tune with the cultural cues used to challenge dominant norms. In other words, members of the Gender Studs engage with parody intentionally and with particular political objectives. Within this context, performers are both intentionally undermining the inherent link between masculinity and maleness and reimagining how masculinity can exist in a context that is not inherently antifeminist or anti-femininity. Performers are also engaging intentionally with camp aesthetics in their performances, a move that creates space for subcultural, feminist readings of masculine expression. My use of the word "camp" here follows Susan Sontag's (1999) definition: "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (53). While camp is traditionally thought to exist in the context of gay male subculture (Babuscio 1999), I follow Pamela Robertson (1999) in arguing that there is space to understand camp as an explicitly feminist practice. In particular, the type of camp deployed by the Gender Studs "has an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment; we can thereby examine forms of camp as feminist practice" (269). In other words, the camp of the Gender Studs creates a space for feminist masculinities precisely because of the ways in which camp highlights the weaknesses in constructions and performances of hegemonic masculinity.

Gender Studs member Rock Ruffergood's routine set to LMFAO's "Sexy and I Know It" is an example of a drag performance that explicitly challenges hegemonic gender ideologies. To begin, the song itself pokes fun at "sexy" hypermasculinity.⁴ The song opens:

When I walk on by, girls be looking like "damn, he fly"
 I pimp to the beat
 Walking down the street in my new LaFreak, yeah
 This is how I roll, animal print, pants out control
 This real fool with the big ass 'fro
 It's like Bruce Lee rock at the club
 Girl look at that body
 Girl look at that body
 Girl look at that body
 I work out.

The over-the-top, campy nature of the lyrics continues, as LMFAO go on to describe all of the various situations in which the singer's "sexy" body leads to having to rebuff the sexual advances of everyone he encounters. The song is, as a text by itself, already poking fun at predatory hypermasculinity. Lyrics such as "We headed to the bar, baby don't be nervous / No shoes, no shirt and I still get serviced" engage with existing cultural texts that reinforce predatory versions of male sexuality. However, instead of reifying these narratives, LMFAO points to the excess inherent in their messaging. Far from celebrating predatory hegemonic masculinity, "Sexy and I Know It" pokes fun at perceptions of masculine sexual dominance. This is a moment where a casual observer, unfamiliar with the text in question, may read this piece as a celebration of the objectification of women. However, the music video for the song clearly cues the viewer in to the camp designs of this piece. The refrain of "Girl look at that body / I work out" is paired with images of a wide variety of men, many of whom have bodies or gender expressions that deviate from the mainstream understanding of desirable masculinity. This includes men who are overweight, men who have excessive body hair, and men who are wearing clothing that is not coded as appropriately masculine. At one point, the video pans in to a close shot of five men wearing neon spandex bottoms: one is wearing gold spandex capri pants, three are wearing neon leopard print spandex capris, and one is wearing a neon leopard-print bikini bottom.

⁴ LMFAO, "Sexy and I Know It," written by Stefan Kendal Gordy, GoonRock, Erin Beck, George M. Robertson, and Kenneth Oliver, track 4 on *Sorry for Party Rocking*, Interscope Records, 2011.

The pairing of the predatory lyrics with clothing that clearly deviates from masculine norms cues the viewer in to the parodic intent of the text as a whole.

Rock Ruffergood's performance continues in this spirit of parody. Instead of choosing an outfit in which he actually could feel sexy, Rock's costume for this number generally consists of skintight animal print pants (he owns both leopard and zebra), green sneakers with the tongues sticking out, a sleeveless green T-shirt that reads "I Love New York," a purple and black camouflage bandana tied around his head in the style of Rambo, and tinted aviator sunglasses. His facial hair is styled into a large handlebar mustache, and his half-inch-thick sideburns extend just below his jawline. Far from celebrating conventional masculinity, Rock Ruffergood's drag in this number invokes the kind of man that bar-dwelling individuals fear encountering. He describes his character in this number as such:

I do it as like—I put on a giant handlebar mustache and a sleeveless shirt, and I do it as sort of like, I don't know—I can't even really describe the nature of the character except for the fact that it works when you see it. Sort of a retro, '70s, big sunglasses kind of douchebag. You know? That guy that would come up and throw his arm around some random girl he doesn't know at the bar and then everybody else would laugh, and then that girl would find some excuse to slink away. I just do it as a sleazeball [*laughs*]. And it's always worked.

By explicitly marking his character as being in the realm of the "douchebag" or "sleazeball," Rock is acknowledging that this particular performance deviates from idealized representations of hegemonic masculinity. However, far from being a problem, this truth is central to Rock's decision to continually perform this number. Both the enjoyment Rock derives from performing this number and the enjoyment his audience derives from witnessing the performance stem from the challenge to traditional masculinity and the parody of that particular archetype of masculine sexuality. Rock's performance actively pokes fun at hegemonic masculinity—a truth putting his performance at odds with the radical feminist accusation that drag king performance valorizes violent masculinity. The violent masculinity in Rock's "Sexy and I Know It" routine is the subject of a joke, not an archetype to celebrate. Rock's performance operates as a cogent critique of traditional, patriarchal masculinity. His invitation to his audience to laugh at an archetype that might otherwise inspire fear creates a feminist space where patriarchal dominance is challenged and ridiculed.

Similarly, Max Powers, another member of the Gender Studs, uses musical comedy for the purpose of making a statement about masculine norms. Max first unveiled his "Dick in a Box" routine at a holiday-themed show in

2010.⁵ As the opening lyrics of the Lonely Island song play throughout the bar, Max Powers walks out with a large present tied around his waist:

Hey girl
I got somethin' real important to give you
So just sit down and listen.

The bar fills with giggles, as the audience members who are familiar with the song prepare themselves for the camp that is sure to follow. As the song's chorus proclaims: "It's my dick in a box," Max Powers begins (very slowly, and with much exaggeration), to unwrap the present tied around his waist. Max tantalizes the audience, peeling back a small corner of wrapping paper and inviting a nearby audience member to peek inside. By the halfway point of the song, Max has the entire bar's attention. Even the bartenders have stopped what they are doing to watch the performance—waiting to find out what Max will ultimately reveal. At the end of the song, Max finishes opening the box with a huge flourish, revealing a dildo inside the box. This moment reveals the absurdity of the situation and draws attention to the reality of Max's physical body. For Max, following through on the promise of the song's chorus (a "dick in a box") is an impossibility. Instead of shying away from that reality, Max makes it central to the routine's denouement, thus further solidifying his very campy relationship to the promise of male genitalia. As Max holds his pose at the end of the number, his dildo loosely flopping from the momentum of the reveal, he challenges his audience to laugh. Instead, he has clearly gained their admiration. The entire bar begins screaming and clapping, and Max saunters off stage. His challenge to the physical manifestation of masculinity has been well received, and he spends the rest of the night fielding compliments from eager young lesbians.

For both Rock and Max, success in these performances is explicitly not about passing as male or the appropriation of male privilege or power. On the contrary, these performances are situated within a larger conversation about what it means to valorize aggressive masculine sexualities. Rock's pleasure in making ridiculous the cultural propensity to valorize blatant expressions of desirability and Max's punny take on the possibilities of male genitalia as gift both raise questions about the validity of hegemonically masculine sexual expressions. These performances are feminist in their willingness to stare at a predatory or violent masculinity and reimagine it within a feminist context. For Rock and Max, the sexually aggressive male is not

⁵ Lonely Island featuring Justin Timberlake, "Dick in a Box," written by Andy Samberg, Akiva Schaffer, Jorma Taccone, Asa Taccone, Justin Timberlake, and Katreese Barnes, Universal Records, premiered on the December 16, 2006, episode of *Saturday Night Live* on NBC.

something to be celebrated but rather something to be mocked. The glee with which the audience receives both of these performances marks the success of the message. The resistance in these performances, then, derives from the joy experienced by the audience in these parodies of sexual exuberance. By inviting their spectators to laugh at masculine sexuality pushed to its logical extreme, Rock and Max are reminding us of the weaknesses embedded in its very structure.

Appropriations of hegemonic masculinity

Even when drag kings are performing the tropes of hegemonic masculinity in more traditional or legible ways, they are still often thinking critically about their relationship to those portrayals. These performers are often still engaging with masculine codes through a feminist lens; thus representations of hegemonic masculinities do not necessarily translate into an acceptance of those masculinities. Further, these drag kings are still using a campy aesthetic. Camp, then, becomes a way to reappropriate these masculine standards and reimagine them in a way that aligns with lesbian subcultural codes.

Damien Masters performs a routine to Olly Murs's song "Troublemaker," which fits much more solidly into a model of traditional masculinity than Rock Ruffergood's "Sexy and I Know It."⁶ The lyrics to "Troublemaker" are about a tumultuous relationship between the lead singer and a woman in his life:

You had me hooked again from the minute you sat down
 The way you bite your lip got my head spinnin' around
 After a drink or two I was putty in your hands
 I don't know if I have the strength to stand, oh oh oh . . .
 Trouble troublemaker, yeah
 That's your middle name, oh oh oh . . .
 I know you're no good but you're stuck in my brain
 And I wanna know . . .
 Why does it feel so good but hurt so bad? Oh oh oh
 My mind keeps saying
 "Run as fast as you can"
 I say, "I'm done," but then you pull me back, oh oh oh . . .
 I swear you're giving me a heart attack
 Troublemaker!

Instead of taking a literal approach to a performance of this song, such as acting out the story line embedded in the lyrics as they are playing, Damien's

⁶ Olly Murs featuring Flo Rida, "Troublemaker," written by Olly Murs, Steve Robson, Claude Kelly, and Tramar Dillard, track 3 on *Right Place, Right Time*, Epic Records, 2012.

rendition of “Troublemaker” removes the focus from the plotline of the song (which makes explicit claims about female culpability in an unpleasant relationship) and instead draws attention to himself as a performer. Rather than highlighting the masculinity presented in the song, the music and lyrics become a backdrop to highlight Damien’s strengths as a performer.

This shift in focus is prompted by Damien’s wardrobe and choreography, both of which are styled to appeal to his audience, consisting primarily of gay men in their early twenties and lesbians in their early thirties, rather than to invoke the type of presentation most appropriate to the song. The crisp white button-down shirt, glittering suspenders, fedora, and minimal facial hair that Damien wears during his performance are crafted to respond to the desires of his audience, not to allow him to pass as male. By shifting the focus away from passing and onto his performance, Damien falls short of celebrating the norms of dominant masculinity.

This resistance to hegemonic masculinity is further challenged by Damien’s use of choreography in his “Troublemaker” routine. Damien has no formal dance training, so the dance moves used in this number would not be considered overly sophisticated from a choreographer’s perspective. However, the routine includes enough flashy movement, spins, and dips to enchant his audience and draw the focus away from the lyrics of the song and onto his movement. Damien received further proof that he had successfully made his movement the focal point of this piece when Vincent Debeauté, a twenty-three-year-old mister, asked Damien’s permission to use his choreography in an upcoming competition.⁷ The fact that Vincent wanted to use aspects of Damien’s performance in a context where the presentation and choreography would be judged indicated to Damien that he had succeeded in making that aspect the centerpiece of his performance. Even though there were still elements of hegemonic masculinity present in Damien’s “Troublemaker” performance, he worked actively to craft an overall experience that was not seen as uncritically valorizing those elements. By making his skills the focal point of the piece, and by crafting his aesthetic to suit the desires of his audience, Damien maintained a more critical relationship to the masculine stylings he was engaging. In a move not unlike the strategy employed by Spacee Kadett at the IDKE, Damien walks the line between performing a recognizable masculinity and performing a gendered expression that is actively designed to challenge gendered ideologies.

⁷ “Mister” refers to a male-bodied, gay-identified performer who participates in the pageant circuit. Misters engage many of the same performance tropes as drag kings, but they perform with male bodies as reference points. Mister performances tend to celebrate gay masculinities, and within pageant circuits they are almost always positioned as the masculine counterparts to drag queens.

In a fashion similar to the routines by Rock and Max discussed above, Damien's "Troublemaker" routine resists the urge to use his ability to pass as male as the hallmark of success. However, while Rock and Max take their resistance into the realm of parody, Damien structures his resistance around the reappropriation of a more traditional social message. While the lyrics of "Troublemaker" construct a fairly traditional male-pursues-female narrative, Damien restructures the message by crafting a performance that will appeal specifically to his audience (and very few in the audience have an interest in a male-pursues-female love story). The success of this routine comes not from Damien's ability to pass as male but rather from his appeal to his largely lesbian audience and from inducing Vincent Debeauté's desire to emulate his choreography.

The cautions leveled by Butler about the dangers of assigning unlimited subversive potential to drag performance are certainly worth taking seriously. It would be irresponsible to claim that there exists no drag that reifies existing gender norms, makes a mockery of femininity, or reproduces structures of inequality. However, these types of drag are generally not the norm. The participants in my research, when they chose to center passing in their performances, were often consciously positioning themselves in relation to the social structures around them in a way that closely aligns with Muñoz's (1999) understanding of disidentification. Butler's position focuses exclusively on the social categories of "man" and "woman," while many of my participants also belong to other minoritized groups that do not fall on axes of binary gender. I contend that a more intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) to performer identity allows for a more generous reading of the subversive potential of drag that is oriented around a desire to pass. Both intersectionality and intentionality become crucial to a reading of drag as potentially subversive. In other words, drag cannot be read in a social vacuum. We need to take into account both the identity and the intention of a drag king when evaluating a performance for subversive potential. The performer's social position in the world and their intent in crafting a particular performance will both affect a performance's subversive potential. It is the combination of these two things—a performer's social position and their intent—that opens up a space to read drag king performance as enacting an explicitly feminist masculinity.

Conclusion

Critiques of drag king performance that mark the genre as inherently anti-feminist miss the broader social context from which these performances emerge. Whether or not they strive for realness in their presentations of masculinity, drag kings perform gender in ways that can work to undermine the

sanctity of masculine dominance. This undermining of masculinity can take the form of parody (in the cases of Rock and Max) or appropriation (in the case of Damien); what these representations have in common is a desire to redefine masculinity as something that is pleasing within the subcultural spaces where drag kings operate. Whether that pleasure is derived from the undermining of hegemonic norms or the reimagination of masculinity as something that feminists can feel good about celebrating, what remains constant is a challenge to the idea that masculinity can only be celebrated at the expense of the feminine.

A feminist reading of drag king performance must center the possibility that drag has the potential to interrupt the replication of gendered norms. When drag kings perform masculinity with bodies that are explicitly marked as not hegemonically masculine, they are not celebrating the norms of masculine dominance. Rather, I contend, they are intervening in our cultural celebration of masculinity by reimagining masculine standards as explicitly queer. This move does not function to diminish femininity. If anything, it diminishes the pressures of a bi-gender society. The feminist masculinity enacted by drag kings, then, is found in the ways they create space for masculinity outside the degradation of women and the ways they (both intentionally and accidentally) separate masculinity from maleness. Ultimately, a feminist reading of drag king performance requires that we consider the broader social contexts from which these performances emerge. Dismissing the work that drag kings do as inherently antifeminist simply because they engage with masculinity misses the larger picture.

Centering a feminist interpretation of drag king performance may also necessitate separating analyses of drag from the lived realities of the sexed body underneath the costume. While the lived, sexed realities of drag kings are certainly relevant to their narratives and performances, the variety of relationships to sexed bodies found among drag king communities calls for a new mode of analysis. While the sex a performer was assigned at birth and the gender they were socialized with will certainly always impact interpretations of their performance, it is not universally true that all drag kings are women performing as men. A more nuanced reading of individual performers is required to unpack the realities of any given relationship between sex, gender, and performance. Reading drag king masculinity as feminist masculinity instead of female masculinity allows us to talk about the performances of drag kings as a collective without making assumptions about the lived reality of any individual performer.

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