

**Are Drag Queens Sexist? Female Impersonation and the Sociocultural
Construction of Normative Femininity**

by

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Abstract

In a great deal of social scientific literature on gender, female impersonators have been framed as the example *par excellence* of cross-gendering and cross-dressing behaviour in the West. Perceived rather dichotomously as either gender transgressive or reinforcing of hegemonic gender norms, female impersonators occupy a very central position within the emerging fields of gay and lesbian, transgendered, and queer studies. Certain schools of feminist thought, dating back to the mid to late 1970s have framed female impersonators as misogynistic gay men who appropriate female bodies and a “feminine” gender from biological women. These theories argue that female impersonators utilize highly stereotypical and overly sexualized images of the feminine, in order to gain power, prestige, and status within the queer community.

This study challenges popular feminist perspectives on drag, first on a theoretical level, utilizing advances in contemporary queer theory and secondly on an ethnographic level, based on a year long field study which involved both participant observation and unstructured interviews with several female impersonators and nightclub patrons at a local queer-oriented nightclub in a city in southern Ontario, Canada. Aiming to understand the degree to which performers identified with the normative femininity they performed, this study argues for a more complex understanding of what motivates individuals to become drag queens, one that incorporates female impersonators unique subjective understandings of their own gender identities. Overall, this study calls for a more holistic perspective on female impersonation, which does not limit itself to any one theoretical model of drag.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The effect of the drag system is to wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex. Gay people know that sex typed behaviour can be achieved, contrary to what is popularly believed. They know that the possession of one type of equipment by no means guarantees the “naturally appropriate behaviour.”

- Esther Newton
(1979:103).

Transsexualism is thus the ultimate and we might even say the logical, conclusion of male possession of women in a patriarchal society.

- Janice Raymond
(1994:30).

Whether rioting against police brutality at the Stonewall Inn or lip-synching to the newest Janet Jackson song at a queer-oriented nightclub, drag queens or female impersonators are one of the most ubiquitous symbols within the Canadian-American queer¹ community. The subject of multiple academic forays into an analysis of “sex” and “gender” constructs in the West, female impersonators have come to represent gender non-conformity in its purest form. Frequently framed by those within the social sciences and the humanities as the provocateurs of gendered transgression and subversion, female impersonators are seen as disrupting the seemingly “natural” link between “biological sexes” and “social genders.” In reaction to this popular theorization of drag as gender transgressive, numerous social theorists began to argue that drag queens actually reinforced, rather than challenged gender conformity and

¹ Throughout this study I will utilize the word “queer” to connote all socially non-normative sexes, genders, and sexualities, including but not limited to, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, pansexual, asexual, intersexed, and two-spirited.

heteronormativity. Some feminist theorists in particular, contended that female impersonators reinforced stereotypes regarding femininity, utilizing the “female gender” as a vehicle to achieve male status superiority within the queer community (see Schacht 2002b for example).

Noting the relatively recent impact of queer, third-wave feminist and transgendered theory within the field of anthropology, the primary goal of this study was to appraise these feminist theorizations of drag through an ethnographic study of female impersonators at a queer-oriented nightclub in southern Ontario, Canada. Operating from within a theoretical perspective that frames categories such as “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality” as socioculturally constructed, I sought to understand how female impersonators viewed the femininity they were performing and the degree to which they internalized its performance as an aspect of their gender identity. The results of this study are in part a critical evaluation of specific feminist theories which have postulated that the gendered performances of female impersonators (i.e. “drag queens”) embody hegemonic masculinity through their appropriation of androcentric images of traditional femininity, utilized to gain power and prestige (see Schacht 2002a, 2002b; Hawkes 1995; Tyler 1991). I wanted to explore whether these feminist theorists were correct in assuming that female impersonators performed normative femininity², solely for utilitarian purposes, neither internalizing nor identifying with the performance outside of the stage context.

² When utilizing the term “normative femininity” I am referring to the ubiquitous social norms, values, and customs associated with being female in Canada and the United States. Normative

This research also aims to challenge pervasive cultural conceptions of what constitutes normative (i.e. traditional) femininity and ideologies that reify essentialist notions of what it means to be a “woman,” “feminine” or “female.” Questions such as whether drag performers and performances are anti-feministic and whether drag queens intentionally employ stereotyped and overtly discriminatory portrayals of “femininity” were explored with my informants. A secondary goal of this research was to explore the theoretical plausibility, articulated primarily by Rupp and Taylor (2003) and Wright (2006), of viewing female impersonators as possessing a unique, yet complex gender that exists outside of the typical North American binary conception. Thirdly, this research study can be framed as a foray into understanding female impersonators as a community with a unique, yet vibrant “drag subculture.”

The results of this study directly challenge the theories of such thinkers as Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, and Marilyn Frye, which are widely cited in feminist literature published between the late 1970s and early 1990s, through an examination of what is defined as “feminine” by female impersonators and an exploration of the degree to which individual performers identified with or internalized their public performances of that femininity. Raymond’s assertion that cross-dressing, female impersonation, and heterosexual transvestism can be perceived as a form of “male self-expression and exhibitionism” ignores not only the fluid and ambiguous nature of concepts such as “sex” and “gender,”

femininity encompasses many of the stereotypes and generalization used in our society to represent “women.” Normatively feminine signifiers could include, but are not limited to, dresses, makeup, long hair, high heels, large breasts, hour-glass figures, etc.

but also the varied subjective understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality expressed by those who engage in gender non-normative behaviour (1994:xxviii). Although many female impersonators in this study engaged in overtly stereotyped displays of the feminine, further reinforcing cultural ideologies of masculine superiority, this was not always the case. Alternatively, gender self-expression and exploration motivated many others, who not only “impersonated” the feminine, but in some extreme cases began to identify with it, relinquishing a “male” sexual identity.

Ignoring these varied motivations and subjective understandings of self expressed by female impersonators, paints an overly homogeneous picture of drag as essentially misogynistic. I have sought to challenge these monolithic theories of drag on two levels, the first a theoretical level, utilizing contributions from the newly emerging field of queer studies, which argues for a socially contextualized understanding of “masculinity” and femininity” as fluid concepts difficult to fix to a single definition. The second level of critique is ethnographic, detailing the plethora of diverse motivations and understandings of drag, as expressed by the female impersonators I worked with. Overall, the findings of this research study call for a more holistic perception of female impersonation within the social sciences, one that neither over-extends any one theory regarding the motivations for performing in drag nor, in particular, omits the voices of those who actually perform as female impersonators.

What is a female impersonator?

Throughout this study I will utilize the terms *female impersonator* and *drag queen* interchangeably. These terms were the most common referents for my informants, although throughout my field research terms like *gender illusionist*, *female illusionist*, *drag diva*, *drag princess*, and *drag performer* were also used. The term *drag performer* in particular is gender neutral and is utilized within the context of this study to connote both drag kings and drag queens. I also use the term *drag performer* to refer to my one transsexual female informant, as the term *drag queen* would be inappropriate; the term *queen* usually being reserved for gay-identified men. For the purposes of this research study, female impersonators will be defined as “individuals [typically gay-identified men] who publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are men, regardless of how compellingly real (i.e. female) they may appear” (Schacht and Underwood 2004:4). This definition although adequate is problematic in that not all female impersonators are gay-identified; one informant in my sample identified as a heterosexual, although most female impersonators in my experience are queer-identified. Female impersonators are also not always male-identified, inasmuch as transsexual female performers and biological female performers are becoming increasingly popular. Transsexual performers typically perform a hyperbolic or exaggerated femininity for the audience as they live both on and off stage as female. Amongst the female impersonators I worked with, transsexual female performers were relatively well received, many having begun their careers as gay-identified male drag queens, transitioning within the supportive context of the nightclub

environment. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp note that their drag queen informants in Key West, Florida made a distinction between drag queens and so-called *titty queens* (i.e. transsexual drag performers or performers who had received breast implants or started taking hormones) (2003:31). During my fieldwork I observed no public distinction being made by performers between those who were transsexual and those who were male-identified. If this distinction existed it certainly was not considered of pivotal importance to my informants.

A source of great frustration for female impersonators, and of confusion for academics and the general public alike, is the distinction between drag queens, transsexuals, cross-dressers and those who are transgendered. Within academia the term transgendered has become an umbrella term for any individual who engages in, performs, or identifies with a socially “non-normative” gender role (i.e. transgresses gender binarism). This includes, but is not limited to drag queens, drag kings, transgendered, transsexual, butch lesbians and effeminate gay men. For the purposes of this study I have defined transsexuals as those who began life as either male or female-identified and now identify as the opposite sex. These are usually individuals who undergo surgical changes to the body (i.e. breast implants), hormone-therapy, or sexual reassignment surgery. Drag queens generally identify as male outside of the performance context and most often do not undergo surgical procedures to appear anatomically female, although some do take female hormones and get breast implants. Cross-dressers are generally heterosexually-identified men,

although not exclusively, who find the donning of feminine attire pleasurable, whether sexually (those who garner sexual pleasure from cross-dressing are referred to as transvestic fetishists) or socially. In fact, many heterosexual cross-dressers were intimately involved in the International Imperial Court System described below (see page 67-68). Most of my female impersonator informants, although not all, were adamant on distinguishing themselves from cross-dressers and transsexuals stating that they gained no sexual pleasure from wearing women's clothing and that they had no desire to transition to a female sex. Stage performance is pivotal to distinguishing cross-dressers from drag queens, whose transvestism is normally limited to the drag show (i.e. performance) context.

The performances of the drag queens in my sample usually consisted of lip-synching and dancing to a popular song, by a female artist. Some informants, occasionally performed impersonations, attempting to physically appear like the female artist they were lip-synching. Popular examples included Reba McEntire, Cher and Britney Spears. Only once during my fieldwork did I encounter a drag queen who performed vocal impersonations, unfortunately this individual was not directly involved in the study. Female impersonators in my sample tended to be evaluated heavily by patrons or other performers on their ability to either lip-synch accurately, appearing as if they were singing the song, or on their dance capabilities. Many performances also involved the use of props (i.e. flags or fans) and complex choreography. Comedy is also an important aspect of female impersonation with many informants offering some

form of comic relief either during or between routines. Typically, heterosexual men, heterosexual women, and queer-identified women were the targets of female impersonators' humour.

Becoming a female impersonator

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of my methodology and findings I feel it is important to present some of the structural issues involved in becoming a female impersonator. Although this section does not describe all the personal, physical, and social challenges female impersonators face, it is an adequate overview of the challenges faced by those wishing to become a drag queen. The process of becoming a female impersonator involves changes to both one's physical appearance and one's social role. Female impersonators have to appear physically female, a process that involves creating the illusion of having a female figure including breasts, thighs, buttocks and genitals. The process of creating a false female chest is achieved through the stuffing of a bra with either silicon breast forms, which can be purchased at many lingerie or department stores, or some other material that could be molded to resemble breasts. During my field observations I noted informants stuffing their chests with everything from nylons filled with rice, to socks, to facial tissue, bathroom tissue, and paper.

The process of giving the illusion of having feminine genitals is much more complicated. Some performers would purchase a garment called a gaff, which has a built-in pocket for tucking the performer's penis between their legs, others would wear tight men's or women's undergarments, pushing their

testicles up into the inguinal canal and pushing their penis back between their legs. This second method was the most common way the performers in my sample eliminated the presence of their penis. To ensure that their penis did not somehow become untucked some informants would also duct tape their genitals in place. To create the illusion of a female figure, including thighs and buttocks some informants would wear foam padding, creating the illusion of wider hips and larger buttocks. Makeup could also be used to aid in the creation of a female body, with performers creating the illusion of cleavage through the use of various shades of foundation and powder, giving the appearance of a shadow on their chest. The process of shaving one's entire body, or at least the portions that would be exposed, is also part of drag preparation process. This activity frequently left the skin blotchy or rashed, a situation which was quickly rectified by performers through the use of a liquid foundation placed on the legs, arms, back, and chest, giving the appearance of an even skin tone.

Makeup on the face was often particularly lavish using shades of eye shadow that would be picked up clearly by the stage lighting in the nightclub. Performers who did not have naturally long eyelashes would wear false ones, covering their natural or fake lashes with a thick coat of mascara. Eyebrows were often plucked so that they appeared high on the face and were frequently very thin. Some informants would even shave off their eyebrows entirely, choosing to draw them in for performances. Foundation was applied to the entire face to cover up stubble or any imperfections and different powders were used to create the illusion of high cheekbones and rosy cheeks. Lip gloss and

lip stick were considered essential to all performers who would usually wear a darker tint around the outer edges of the lips and a lighter tint on the inner regions to draw attention to their mouths while lip-synching during a performance.

Wigs were considered a key expenditure for many of my informants, who typically ordered them over the internet or traveled to large cities, outside the region, to purchase them. Styled and coiffed perfectly, hair that appeared feminine was considered to be the hallmark of a beautiful drag queen. During performances many informants would wear their hair up rather than down, styling either their hair or wigs in an elaborate form. Some informants would even let their natural hair grow out, rather than wear wigs. It was considered a faux pas amongst my informants to lose their wig while performing, so wigs were often secured to performer's heads using bobby pins and sometimes even tape. Another major expenditure for performers was shoes, typically high-heels or stilettos. Performers would frequently have to have shoes specially ordered because it was often very difficult to find shoes in their sizes at stores within the region. During my fieldwork shoes and wigs were the items replaced most frequently, as wigs tended to fall apart or appear matted after continuous use (particularly if performers used chemical hairsprays or other hair products to style them) and heels tended to break often under the weight of adult male performers.

Female impersonators spend a great deal of money on clothing, some buying material to make their own, others going to consignment stores to

purchase second-hand garments. Performers generally wore outfits that tended to accentuate their “female figures.” Miniskirts, bustiers, tube tops and blouses were not uncommon sights on stage. Some performers, particularly those who entered drag pageants or performed to popular ballads, would wear extravagant and lavish evening gowns or dresses, often decorated in bright colours or sequins, drawing attention to their presence on stage. Accessories such as earrings, necklaces and other forms of jewelry were also popular items amongst my informants.

The process of preparing physically for a show took anywhere from one to three hours depending on the regularity at which an impersonator performed (i.e. if they had already removed most of their body hair because of a prior performance). Notwithstanding the time to prepare physically, the psychological preparation for a performance frequently took much longer. Many informants who described themselves as experiencing a degree of stage fright would often drink alcohol or smoke marijuana before performances hoping this process would dampen their inhibitions. Drag routines often involved complex dance and choreography, for which performers would sometimes prepare in multiple rehearsals for weeks in advance of a performance. Picking out the music to perform to and learning the lyrics to a given song was also a time consuming process that performers would often begin weeks prior to the performance.

Becoming a female impersonator also involves changes to one’s social role. Drag queens are both vilified and idolized within the queer community, a

process that most queens initially have difficulty adjusting to. They are often the targets of physical, sexual, and verbal harassment at the hands of both gay and straight-identified individuals alike. As a “minority within a minority,” as one of my informants described it, drag queens often have to “come out” twice, first as queer, then as a female impersonator. The choice to keep their drag identity hidden is often one that some performers accepted, although this can become increasingly difficult as their status within the community becomes more and more recognized. They are frequently forced to deal with many stereotypical assumptions associated with those who cross-dress, including but not limited to, the idea that they are all transsexual (which some are) or that they perform in drag for sexual gratification. As detailed in my findings, female impersonators, as a result of their ambiguous position within the queer community, often have difficulty meeting partners and dating. Gay men often view becoming romantically involved with a female impersonator as stigmatizing and therefore many performers describe female impersonation as an oftentimes “lonely” vocation. Preparing and performing in drag can become a significant time commitment, many of my informants framed it as the “job they don’t get paid for” and spent a significant amount of their social time (most of my informants had daytime occupations) preparing and arranging their routines for the show.

Notwithstanding these negative attributes of drag, there are also numerous social rewards for performing. Many impersonators find they receive a great deal of attention, prestige, empowerment, and status from performing as

a female impersonator. Many of my informants were treated like celebrities within the queer community, often being asked to perform at private parties and other social events. Many informants traveled and performed in various locations across southern Ontario, frequently gaining a substantial following of devoted fans, who enjoyed their particular interpretation of female impersonation. Although most of my informants were not paid for their shows, those who performed in larger cities and become particularly popular often earned a fair amount of money. Female impersonators could also earn money by winning the first prize in annual drag pageants. I was told by one informant that a female impersonator in a large city, located near the region where I performed my research, earned up to \$500 dollars per performance at any given nightclub in that city. A more experienced female impersonator could also gain a lot of money from patron tips. I observed one drag performer in a queer-oriented nightclub receive over \$400 in tips from patrons for one performance.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

The Site

The site of my field research was a small queer-oriented nightclub located in the downtown core of a relatively large city in southern Ontario, Canada. From the exterior, the club itself appears very inconspicuous, nestled between a furniture store and a series of lower-income apartments. The sign above the entrance to the club bears nothing but the club's name and a martini glass emblem, detailing little of the club's orientation toward a queer audience. Once through the front doors, patrons enter into an atrium, where one can find a series of posters advertising important upcoming events, such as drag pageants or holiday celebrations. After exiting the atrium through a second doorway, patrons enter into the club itself, passing first by club staff who check everyone's identification (the club has had difficulty from the police in the past for letting in underage patrons) and offer to check their coats (for a nominal fee). Cover is also collected by club staff on the nightclub's very popular Saturday night dance parties.

The club itself is quite small, compared to other nightclubs in the region, but has a relatively large dance floor and bar area. Once inside one is struck by the ubiquity of very loud dance music, which only ceases during the drag show itself. Demographically, the club appears to be overwhelmingly attended by queer-identified men; however the male-to-female sex ratio tends to be fairly equivalent for the drag shows. In fact I have attended numerous shows where the audience consisted mostly of queer-identified women and very few men.

Beyond immediate sex differences, age is definitely a dividing factor at the nightclub, particularly amongst gay-identified males. Older gay male patrons tended to situate themselves around the bar, at the back of the club or near the pool tables, while younger gay men, typically those under the age of 40 tended to occupy the dance floor area and the surrounding tables.

The Drag Show

The drag show which occurs weekly, on every Thursday night, starting at around eleven o'clock and running until around one o'clock consists of approximately 12 performances, split into two sets (about six performances each set); however this may vary depending on the number of performers per week and the hour at which the show begins. Each week there are approximately four to five performers. However, during my fieldwork I frequently attended shows with well over 10 performers. Each performance takes approximately two to three minutes and usually consists of the drag performer lip-synching and dancing to a popular song. Throughout the show, one performer typically acts as "emcee" (during my field research this was my main informant). The emcee entertains the crowd between performances, usually in the form of jokes directed at themselves, the drag community, or particular club patrons. The emcee also frequently urges the crowd to continue to drink, often through witty comments like "the more you drink, the better we look." Quite frequently patrons would be asked to volunteer to engage in contests, where the prize was a shot of alcohol. These contests typically involved some form of embarrassment or humiliation, for instance being asked

to simulate sexual positions with a random partner or being asked to dance up on stage to a particular song in front of the audience. Typically performers would target people who were coming to a drag show for the first time (known colloquially as “drag show virgins”) or people who they felt were “visibly heterosexual” (in most cases men who were assumed to be heterosexual).

At the end of every drag show, the emcee (my main informant) would perform to a slower song, most often a popular ballad, which would be followed by well wishes and most importantly, safer sex advice (“no glove, no love, no protection, no erection, play safe, but play hard, goodnight everybody”). In between sets and at the end of each performance the dance floor would be opened to all club patrons, who would often continue in their revelry until the closing of the club.

Research Methods

The following two interrelated research questions guided my research:

1. Do female impersonators embody hegemonic masculinity and are they appropriating femininity for their own personal gains?
2. Do female impersonators possess a unique gender of their own that does not fit with dichotomous conceptions of masculinity and femininity?

Throughout my fieldwork at the nightclub my research methodology consisted of participant observation and unstructured interviews with both drag performers and club patrons. I have attended approximately 60 drag shows at the nightclub where I performed my research, amounting to well over 300 hours of observational data. I have also attended drag shows in other cities in

southern Ontario and have attended one drag king show for comparative data. I have performed seven in depth interviews with my key drag performer informants, and eight interviews with club patrons (four male and four female-identified individuals). The drag performer interviews consisted of three components, the first being a section which explored the performers' life histories and motivations for becoming drag queens. A second section explored the unique gender identities and attributes of each individual performer, while a final section explored their understandings of sexism, feminism, and normative femininity. From these interviews I hoped to gain an understanding of what motivated female impersonators to perform in drag and their perceptions of the feminine displays they engaged in. I also hoped to gain an understanding of the degree to which performers identified with the femininity they performed as an aspect of their gender identities. I felt that through understanding their diverse motivations for performing, and the degree to which they identified with the femininity they performed, I could accurately appraise the validity of feminist theories which framed female impersonation as inherently misogynistic.

All interviews were performed outside of the club atmosphere, giving me the opportunity to get to know individual performers both in and out of drag. In addition to formal interviews, I have had numerous informal conversations with all performers at the nightclub regarding my thesis research and have garnered a great deal of information from my social interactions with them. I developed a great deal of rapport with many of my key informants allowing for a depth of interaction, which I feel adds to the richness of my ethnographic

analysis. Having attended numerous social events with individual performers including, house parties, charity events, and social luncheons, I have had the opportunity to get to know them not only as an anthropological researcher, but on a personal basis, as a friend.

The process of developing the degree of rapport I achieved took a great deal of time and effort, but I feel certain that it was achieved more expeditiously as the result of my personal participation in the drag community. In order truly to “participant observe” I performed on several occasions as a drag queen both at the nightclub and at a charity event at the University of Waterloo. I felt that by “spending a day in their heels” I could possibly gain a more nuanced understanding not only of how to perform as a drag queen, but of how the general public reacts to female impersonation. As a gay-identified male performing in drag, I was very quickly accepted into the community I worked with. My status as an anthropological researcher was frequently viewed as secondary amongst my informants, who first and foremost accepted me as another one of the “queens.” At times my status as one of the “queens” was difficult in that I had to consistently remind myself and my informants that I was still doing ethnographic research. As a novice drag queen (I have only performed eight times) I often felt intimidated and inexperienced in light of more seasoned performers, who acted as my “teachers” in the art of female impersonation. My status as a neophyte drag queen acted as a counter to my status as an ethnographic researcher, something many of my informants found to be very intimidating. As a “native ethnographer” I was able to disrupt the

subject/object distinction so popular in ethnographic research and, while not eliminating hierarchical differences entirely, I was able to position myself, in terms of social status, on a more equal plane with my informants (Weston 1998:189-90). The insights garnered from these experiences inform my analysis throughout this paper, but in no way are intended to overshadow the authenticity of the voices of those performers with whom I worked.

Beyond the drag performer interviews, I performed eight unstructured interviews with club patrons. These interviews explored their perspectives on drag, in particular how they felt drag performances represented women and femininity. I interviewed four male and four female-identified participants to ensure a balanced sex ratio, preventing the patron interviews from being male biased, as men do tend to outnumber women in the nightclub. All the patrons interviewed were between the ages of 20 and 38, four were gay-identified (three men and one woman), two were straight-identified (two woman), and two were bisexual-identified (one man and one woman). Patron interviews were designed to elucidate whether patrons felt female impersonators to be misogynistic or sexist. Some common questions were, “how do you feel female impersonators represent women?” and “have you ever been involved in or witnessed a drag performance where you believed that a woman [or female-bodied person] was insulted, humiliated or demeaned? How did this make you feel?”

Ethics

Due to the nature of this research study, in particular its exploration of issues of sexuality and gender, there were many pressing ethical issues to be addressed. Overall, this study entailed minimal risk for participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all informants who were involved in unstructured interviews. They were all informed of the nature of the study prior to the onset of the interview and given the option to refuse to answer any or all questions and to terminate the interview process at any time. All interviews were digitally recorded and were stored in a locked filing cabinet located in a locked office at the Psychology, Anthropology, and Sociology building at the University of Waterloo. No photographs or video-recordings were taken or included in this study.

During periods of participant observation I verbally informed all female impersonators that I would be recording observations at the nightclub. The identity of all participants within this study was kept confidential, I chose not to use pseudonyms within this study, as the process for coming up with alternate drag names for all informants would be quite time consuming. Their stage names tend to be comedic in nature, utilizing double entendres and innuendos, therefore any attempt to replicate or reproduce these names would both an arduous task and a discredit to the time and effort that female impersonators put into creating humorous drag names.

Due to the small number of female impersonators in my sample (7) and their popularity within the regional queer community, it was impossible to ensure that in describing their performances, mannerisms, and unique

behavioural traits that their anonymity would be maintained. Informants were made aware of this on the consent forms which were signed before any field observations or interviews of drag performers were recorded. It is my personal opinion that all these safeguards were followed (i.e. avoiding, as much as possible, detailing unique behaviours, mannerisms, or appearances that might identify a specific individual) and that this process posed minimal risk to participants. All participants were recruited using non-invasive and non-coercive methods. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit interviewees from the pool of female impersonators in the community.

Informed consent was easily obtained from all female impersonators before field observations and interviews commenced. However, obtaining informed consent for making field observations from all patrons posed a serious problem. Therefore all field observations made on patrons were of a highly general nature and did not involve the inclusion of any personal or identifiable information. I felt that the recording of these observations, due to the fact that they are public and therefore available to anyone who attends the nightclub, would pose minimal risk to those observed, beyond any risk which patrons implicitly accept by attending a venue of this type. All patrons who were interviewed had to sign informed consent forms before interviewing began.

Following all interviews participants were given a feedback letter which thanked them for being involved in the study and included my contact information if they had any questions or wished to withdraw their interview material from the project. All research materials including any identifying

information (i.e. field notes, taped interviews and interview transcripts) are to be destroyed approximately 5 years following the conclusion of the project. Upon concluding this study my thesis was made available to any of my informants who wished to view it.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

Drag Queens and Anthropology

With a historic disciplinary bias toward exploring so-called “non-Western” cultures, anthropologists have largely been absent from any social scientific examination of the phenomenon of female impersonation.

Notwithstanding the foundational study of female impersonators in America by Esther Newton in the mid 1960s, few anthropologists have taken up the task of understanding contemporary drag within a Euroamerican context. Of the few notable studies, Constance Sullivan-Blum’s ethnographic account of a small sample of Christian-identified American female impersonators is particularly interesting. Sullivan-Blum (2004) argues that like other queer-identified Christians, the drag queens in her sample tended to naturalize homosexuality and gender variance in order to claim that it was ordained by God, a perspective referred to as “biblical essentialism” (199). This tactic allowed them to rectify seemingly contradictory ideologies regarding their sexualities, genders, and adherence to proper Christian moral practices (Sullivan-Blum 2004:205-206).

Taking an ethnological approach, Sandeep Bakshi compared American drag queens to Indian *hijras*, a category of “transsexual women” in North India and Pakistan, who serve a spiritual role in Hindu and Islamic religious traditions, offering blessings at births, marriages, and funerals (Nanda 1999). Bakshi postulated that although both *hijra* and American drag queens have some capability to transgress dichotomous gender norms, their ability to do this

is limited by social and cultural institutions that are strongly linked to their gendered subjectivity and embodiment (2004:220-221). Drag queens frequently limit their presentation of femininity to a performance context, whether it is at a private party, in a queer-oriented nightclub, or at large benefit or gala (Newton 1972:15). Their gendered transformation is temporary and most drag queens identify as male (mostly gay) and acknowledge the presence of their penis, sometimes even within the performance context, a practice referred to as “breaking the illusion” (Bakshi 2004:221; Newton: 1979:45). Conversely, *hijra* do not identify as male or female and undergo a physical emasculation ritual known as a *nirvan* where their penis and testicles are removed (Bakshi 2004:213-15). Nanda notes that the term *hijra* means “eunuch” and that the *hijra* are given the gendered identification of “neither man nor woman” initially based upon their impotence, a situation which within Indian society negates the label “male,” a status which depends upon a person’s ability to procreate (1999:15). The anatomical transformations achieved through emasculation amongst the *hijra* are not normally found amongst self-identified drag queens, although transsexual female performers do exist (Bakshi 2004:213-15). Within the Hindu religious context, *hijra* serve a legitimate cultural role as ritual performers, which is dissimilar from American drag queens who are frequently viewed as social “deviants” and who usually perform only within marginalized or private settings (Bakshi 2004:216). Although hijras do experience a great deal of discrimination and are frequently the victims of violence, a legitimate cultural space, reinforced through social custom, has been carved out for them

(Bakshi 2004:216). According to Bakshi, the combined ability for American drag queens and *hijra* to subvert hegemonic gender norms is restricted by “limiting their performances to marginalized settings [drag queens] and because of their marginalized status of being impotent and lacking a penis [*hijra*]”. (2004:221).

Moving outside of a North American context, Jennifer Spruill has undertaken ethnographic research on female impersonators in post-Apartheid South Africa, examining the interaction between ethnicity, post-colonialism, and sexuality (2004). Spruill argues that the presence of African drag queens in “traditional African” attire at the Johannesburg Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade, challenges pervasive discourses regarding identity, authenticity, and homosexuality in post-colonial South Africa (2004:94-96). These presentations and performances have the ability to normalize and critically effect perspectives on the cultural authenticity of homosexuality, which many contemporary African nationalists and politicians view as “unAfrican” (see Epprecht 2004 and Hoad 2007), and gender transgressivity within the South African context (Spruill 2004:105-7).

Deploying more general categories of social analysis, homosexuality and cross-gendering have been of interest to anthropologists since the conception of the discipline (see Weston 1993; Boellstorff 2007). In addition to what Kath Weston (1993) refers to as the early “ethnographic” studies of homosexual behavior performed by Westermarck (1906), Ford and Beach (1951), and Cory (1956), a dearth of ethnographic studies to date has explored

the topic of same-sex sexuality outside of a Euroamerican context. Margaret Mead's work in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1963) not only framed homosexuality as a "matter of individual drive or temperament," but also emphasized the importance of sociocultural factors as determinants of "normative" gender performance (Weston 1993:341). Gilbert Herdt's groundbreaking research amongst the Sambia in Papua New Guinea emphasized the great degree of cultural variation regarding societal perceptions of homosexual behaviour through his ethnographic descriptions of ritualized homosexual behaviour amongst young male initiates during rites of passage into adult masculinity (1981).

Herdt's ethnographic work also heavily influenced the academic distinction between "gender" and "sexuality" as unique loci of study. Unwilling to frame homosexuality as sexual inversion, as had been done in the past by anthropologists (see Ellis 1933 and Evans-Pritchard 1970), Herdt recognized that cross-culturally homosexual behaviour, particularly that found amongst men, did not necessarily have to signify a feminine gender performance. (1981). Sambian initiates into the men's society performed fellatio on older initiates, ingesting their semen, in order to develop warrior strength, a behaviour which, within the Sambian context, signified masculinity. The resulting division between "gender" and "sexuality" in anthropology allowed for the reappraisal and reevaluation of ethnographic examples of homosexuality, which could potentially be better understood as examples of cross- or transgendering.

“Third gender” and transgendering practices have been detailed by numerous anthropologists popular examples include Walter Williams exploration of the North American *berdache* role (1986), Serena Nanda’s research on the Indian *hijra* (1993), Don Kulick’s work on Brazilian *travestis* (1998), and Unni Wikan’s analysis of the Omani *khanith* (1982). Including female impersonators or drag queens, under the umbrella category *transgendered* has promoted great debate not only within anthropology, but within all social sciences concerned with the intersection between sexuality and gender. Anthropologist David Valentine in his book *Imagining Transgender: an Ethnography of a Category* (2007) details the difficulty academia has had fixing a solid definition around the category *transgendered*. Noting its contemporary usage by those who understand it as a gender identity label, the term *transgendered* has been used in the past to represent all forms of gender anti-conformity, particularly those outside of the masculine/feminine binary, which includes female impersonators (Valentine 2007:37). Valentine asserts that the term *transgendered* and even the terms *sexuality* and *gender* are rooted in particular academic discourses, which are frequently imbued with certain powers, meanings and restrictions based on those meanings that are undesired, not understood, or inapplicable to those informants whom we as anthropologists label as *transgendered* (2007:37-9). Valentine maintains that “many gay male drag queens are insistent that they are not part of this category [transgendered] as are many butch lesbians,” I will explore this debate in terms of my informants in further detail below, emphasizing the dangers of ignoring the

voices of our informants and the resulting academic and/or ideological imperialism (2007:39).

For the purposes of this research study, I will theoretically utilize the category *transgendered* as a general umbrella term, encompassing any persons who transgress normative binary gender and/or sex roles within their society including, but not limited to, cross-dressers, transgendered individuals, transsexual individuals (male-to-female and female-to-male), drag kings and queens, butch lesbians, effeminate men, and genderqueer or gender-variant persons. I will however, when possible, utilize the sexual and/or gender identity categories used by my informants in order to stay true to their unique and varied perceptions of their sexual and/or gendered subjectivities and to account for the difficulties in defining “transgendered” and the complications associated with using this label unilaterally.

If female impersonators are considered under the category “transgender”, then Esther Newton’s foundational research on drag queens in America is one of the earliest ethnographic studies in the anthropology of gender variant persons. Writing about three American cities (New York City, Kansas City, and Chicago), Newton analyzed the drag queen community as a unique subculture of its own, exploring the individual lives of female impersonators both on and off stage, emphasizing their ability to transgress heteronormativity and gender binarism through performance and their symbolic importance within the larger queer (gay) community. Rejecting the common sociological perspective at the time, which framed homosexuality and drag in

particular as “deviant,” Newton sought to understand female impersonation as a normative profession, both symbolically and socially, within the structural and institutional confines of the gay communities of the Midwestern United States during the mid 1960s. Newton postulated that the social stigmatization and marginalization of gay men was rooted in gender non-conformity (i.e. male effeminacy) (1972:2). Noting the hegemonic superiority of masculinity within American society, specifically, a white, middle-class, “biologically male” form, Newton argued that through what was perceived of as “wrong sexual object choice” and “wrong sex-role self-presentation” gay-identified men were stigmatized by society (1979:104). Female impersonators were seen as embodying “the stereotype;” an ideology that all gay men were effeminate (Newton 1979:2). This resulted in drag queens being viewed ambiguously within the queer/gay community because of their presentation of exaggerated femininity, inasmuch as Newton tells us, “homosexuals admire drag queens in homosexual contexts, but deplore female impersonators and street fairies for ‘giving us a bad name’ or ‘projecting the wrong image’ to the heterosexual culture” (1979:104).

Utilizing theoretical perspectives first proposed by sociologist Erving Goffmann (1963), Newton believed that the stigmatization felt by gay-identified men resulted in a form of gendered polarization within the gay male community; at one pole were cisgendered male homosexuals whose adherence to hegemonic masculine gender roles afforded them certain privileges not accorded to gender non-normative homosexual men (1979:3). Newton

conceptualized these individuals as “masculine, ‘respectable’ homosexuals, the leaders of homophile organizations and so on” (1979:3). The opposite pole was represented by effeminate “trans” gendered homosexual men, who according to Newton “most visibly and flagrantly embody the stigma, ‘drag queens’ men who dress and act ‘like women’” (1979:3). Although this model is grossly overgeneralized and far too simplistic to account for the sheer diversity of gendered performances found within the gay male/drag queen community, Newton believed that “effeminate” homosexual men (i.e. the drag queens in her sample) possessed the greatest potential to subvert dominant gender hierarchies (1972:100-1). Through their “overt” representations of “traditional” femininity, including their physical appearance (i.e. makeup, false breasts, and padded hips), attire, speech patterns, and body language, drag queens deconstruct the seemingly “natural” link between sex, sexuality, and gender (Newton 1972:100).

Newton postulated that drag performances symbolized the differences between our society’s ubiquitous masculine/feminine and inner (implicit)/outer (explicit) gender dichotomies (1979:100). Male sex identification did not ontologically lead to the expression of a masculine gender; drag queens know they are men (the inner self), but choose to act out the gender roles of women (the outer self) (Newton 1979:100-1). Through emphasizing the importance of performativity in the constitution of gender, Newton laid the groundwork for postmodernist and poststructuralist gender theories, particularly queer theory, which hinges on the assertion that sex and gender are not essential or biological

categories, but rather are socially constructed, the result of dominant discourses within any given society. They are given structure and substance through a dialectical relationship between social, cultural, political, and historical factors.

Drag Queens as Gender Transgressors

Queer theorist Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) placed female impersonators in the position of provocateurs of her theory of gender as performance. Building on the work of poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault (1978), who argued that sexuality, in particular homosexuality, was a historical concept; the cumulative result of dominant social discourses regarding sexuality first provided by the church and then by the psychiatric community, Butler claimed that sex and gender were socioculturally constructed, constituted, negotiated, and subsequently performed (1990; 1993). According to Butler, drag performances disrupt the relationship between sex and gender and gender and performance, through “imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency” (1990:175). For Butler, drag reveals “true gender identity” as a “regulatory fiction” achieved through “sustained social performances” (1990:180). In later work, Butler seemed less optimistic in asserting that female impersonation could necessarily subvert hegemonic gender hierarchies stating,

I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic gender norms, at best it is a site of a certain ambivalence (Butler 1993 125).

Concerned that drag queens may actually reinforce heterosexualized gender norms, Butler argued that drag performances may not challenge the ubiquity of hegemonic gender norms, but rather reveal the system by which those norms are created and constituted (i.e. through performance). Butler's contention that female impersonators challenge dichotomous gender roles in our society has been reiterated by other influential American gender theorists (see Lorber 1993 and Garber 1992). Marjorie Garber (1992) in particular, has argued that drag subverts the binary gender system by offering a third gendered option. Some social theorists including transgender activist Leslie Feinberg have argued that drag queens act as martyrs for the queer community and advocates for a more conscious queer politics (1996).

Sociologists Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor deviate from other theorists who argue that drag queens' performances are subversive of gender hierarchies, by locating their transgressive capabilities not in their ability to illuminate the socially constructed and contextually contingent nature of gender, but as a "form of strategic collective action" (2003:212). Locating the study of drag within social movement theory, Rupp and Taylor frame female impersonation as a form of social protest, through "forging a collective identity that manipulates, modifies, and reinterprets group boundaries by drawing (and then crossing) lines between gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people, on the one hand, and heterosexual women and men on the other" (2003:219). A descriptive ethnographic example details how Rupp and Taylor's informants would frequently divide the club patrons into those who practiced fellatio and

those who practiced cunnilingus, subverting the boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual and instating a new organizing principle (oral sex acts), which unite homosexual women with heterosexual men and heterosexual women with homosexual men (2003:134-35). Through drag performance, political messages regarding contentious issues of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity can be challenged, reinterpreted and delivered to an audience in a manner that is both entertaining and non-threatening (Rupp and Taylor 2003:221).

Utilizing Rupp and Taylor's framework, drag could arguably be located in the anthropological literature regarding "rituals of rebellion" popularized by structural functionalists Max Gluckman and Victor Turner. Gluckman coined the term "ritual or rebellion" to refer to any rite in which the established social order is inverted or transgressed, with people occupying the lowest rungs of the social ladder being temporarily allotted a superior position to those who had prior authority over them (Gluckman 1963:114). It is evident during a drag show that drag queens occupy a position that is in some ways privileged compared to audience members, regardless of sex or sexual orientation. However, as Newton aptly details, off-stage drag queens are viewed with great trepidation and a certain degree of discrimination, their display of hyperbolic femininity embodying the "stigma" of femininity as displayed by gay-identified men (1979:7). Following Gluckman's conception of rituals of rebellion the transgression of heteronormativity, during drag shows would be limited to the performance (ritual) context. Rituals, according to Gluckman, aim to maintain

equilibrium within a community, by releasing tension and stress, but they do not necessarily alter the status quo (1963:126-27). Turner however acknowledges the possibility that through the creation of “communitas,” an intense feeling of collectivity, equality, and fraternity experienced by ritual participants, transgression is possible (Turner 1969:126-29). According to Turner, communitas permits “the periodical reclassification of reality and man’s relationship to society, nature, and culture,” it is a period which has the potential to spurn transgressive behaviours outside the ritual realm and effect positive structural changes (Turner 1969:129). Framing drag queen performances as “rituals of rebellion” does not rectify the divide between drag as gender transgressive or as gender reinforcing, but illuminates interesting avenues for further research and analysis.

Drag as Misogynistic/Anti-feminist

The impetus within academia to view female impersonators as the epitome of heteronormative transgression and gender anti-conformity was drastically altered with the introduction of cultural feminist theorization. According to sociologist Arlene Stein cultural feminists sought to promote a universal definition of what it meant to be “female,” promoting an agenda which “sought to reverse the validation of the male and the devaluation of the female” (1997:108). This movement emphasized the similarities amongst all “women,” urging feminists to identify with a distinctive women’s culture, marked by attributes such as “female rationality, mothering capacities, and an ‘ethic of care’” (1997:108). Arguing that drag queens embodied hegemonic masculinity, defining themselves through patriarchal (mis)conceptions of the

“feminine,” feminist theorists vehemently argued that female impersonators were appropriating the roles of “women” for their own selfish gains, whether in terms of money, power, or prestige (Schacht 2002a, 2002b; Hawkes 1995; Tyler 1991; Wright 2006). A particularly prominent proponent of this perspective, sociologist Stephen P. Schacht posits that female impersonators represent the “masculine embodiment of the feminine” and that what is expressed during drag performances is not an appreciation for that which is defined as “female” or “feminine,” but rather a “celebration of male superiority” (Schacht 2002b:167). Drag queens in this theoretical framework use femininity as “real estate” to occupy a dominant status within the queer (specifically gay male) community (Schacht 2002b:167). Schacht (2002b) contends that drag queens have no real desire to become women or challenge hegemonic gender norms; rather their performances reflect stereotypical conceptions of normative femininity, which are frequently denigrating and objectifying (see Ekins and King 2005 and Tewksbury 1994 for other examples). What is being performed, according to Schacht, is not femininity, but rather masculinity parodying femininity, with drag queens being able to receive the rewards of both genders (i.e. power, prestige, and adoration) (Schacht 2002a:175, Wright 2006:4). The practice of engaging in overtly stereotyped displays of behaviours supposedly characteristics of the opposite sex, which come to reinforce society’s normative conceptions of that sex, is not limited to North American female impersonators. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his classic study of the Iatmul of New Guinea describes how during the *naven* ritual Iatmul women would engage in

overtly stereotypic and parodic male behaviours, including the wearing of traditional male garments, in order to properly engage in activities that were seen as inappropriate in Iatmul women's culture (what Bateson refers to as the Iatmul women's *ethos*) (1958:198-99). Transvestic behaviour, for Iatmul women in the *naven* ritual, was a method for engaging in and commenting upon activities and behaviours that they understood to be solely within the realm of the Iatmul male *ethos* (Bateson 1958: 200-203). Psychoanalytic theorist Carol Anne Tyler (1991) argues that drag queens are both the victims and perpetrators of misogyny. Echoing Newton's findings, Tyler notes the denigration of drag queens to the status of "effeminate inverts" in striking comparison to the value placed on gay-identified gender normative (i.e. masculine) men (1991:37). Tyler does however suggest that drag queens embody "phallic women" or man's (mis)conception of that which is labeled "woman" and in doing so frequently parody very stereotypical and sometimes even hostile images of femininity (1991:41).

Arguing against any subversive qualities that could be accorded to female impersonation, sociologist Meghan Wright (2006) postulates that femininity is not the focus of drag queens' performances, but rather what she refers to as "gay masculinity", a gender performance which is valued in drag settings above both hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Noting the importance of the audiences' sex and gender composition, Wright argues that heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and female-to-female sexuality are all denigrated and attacked during drag performances, establishing gay masculinity

at the top of the gender hierarchy (2006:14). In one particular example Wright notes how a drag queen emcee in her sample degraded lesbian-identified audience members by stating that she needed a “cute lesbian helper to pick up her tips,” reinforcing her “masculine” dominance and situational superiority (2006:14).

Extended beyond the drag community, similar arguments had been levied against both transgendered women and men, most associated with second-wave radical or lesbian-feminist theorization. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbian-feminists worked adamantly to eliminate the butch-femme dichotomy, denigrating “butch” lesbians, masculine female-bodied persons, and transsexual men to the status of traitors, who had given in to patriarchal institutions, through their embodiment of normative masculinity (Stein 1997: 98, 105; Valentine 2007:47-48). Women’s Studies professor Janice Raymond in her book *The Transsexual Empire: the Making of the She-Male* (1994) argues that transsexual women, like female impersonators in Schacht’s theoretical framework, represent the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity and are a manifestation of patriarchal control over women. Raymond postulates that the “male-to-constructed-female transsexual...attempts to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women” (1994:99). Raymond extends her analysis as far as stating that female transsexuals are actually “raping” women by reducing them to something that can be constructed from a male body; they are appropriating women’s bodies by trying to become them (1994:104). This

sentiment has also been echoed by other radical feminist authors including Mary Daly in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) who argued that the story of Dionysus being birthed by Zeus offered a mythic dimension to the perpetuation of the feminist fear of being subsumed by female transsexuals (i.e. Zeus births Dionysus following the consumption of Dionysus' mother) (66-7). Popular lesbian feminist author Marilyn Frye argued that both gay male effeminacy and drag offered "no love or identification with women of the womanly" (1983:137). According to Frye, drag represents "a casual and cynical mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trappings of oppression" (1983:137). Critics of second-wave cultural feminist theorization have frequently pointed to the dangers in reifying sex and gender concepts such as "female," "woman," and "feminine." In attempting to fix a stable, immutable and pervasive definition to various sex, gender, and sexual identities, radical feminism has inadvertently oppressed and marginalized those who do not identify with these strict definitions (i.e. transsexual women who are not considered "women" because they lack a uterus). By extension, in arguing that drag queens appropriate "femininity" from "women," are we not bypassing debates regarding the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality; questions which challenge common ideologies such as an essential biological sex or gender, outside of the influence of one's sociocultural environment? At the forefront of denaturalizing sex and gender concepts, queer theory and third-wave feminism have taken into account those individuals who violate

heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality and who refuse to be pinned down by classical definitions of the “masculine” and “feminine”

A Queer Theoretical Critique:

Theoretically, this research utilizes queer theory to challenge many of the popular feminist assumptions regarding female impersonation. Queer theory has not had a long history within the discipline of anthropology being considered relatively novel even within the humanities where it originally emerged as a unique theoretical perspective. Coined by historian Teresa de Lauretis in the early 1990s the term “queer theory” refers to “the study of all non-normative sexualities and genders, and the study of normalizing discourse, with an emphasis on resistance and transformation” (Boellstorff 2007:21). Queer theory, heavily influenced by the work of poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, challenges the essentialism of concepts such as “gay,” “straight,” “masculine” and “feminine” arguing that they are all the collective result of widespread historical, social, cultural, and political discourses. Popular amongst its proponents are gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks (1993), who have contended that what constitutes categories such as “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” are heavily influenced by sociocultural factors.

Within anthropology, both Esther Newton (1972) and Gayle Rubin (1975) are credited with laying the foundation for the inclusion of queer theory within the field of anthropology. Well before the term had even entered academic parlance, Newton’s foundational work in *Mother Camp: Female*

Impersonators in America disrupted the apparent ontological relationship between sex and gender. Newton postulated that one of drag's key symbolic statements was

To question the 'naturalness' of the sex-role system *in toto*; if sex-role behaviour can be achieved by the 'wrong' sex it logically follows that in reality it is also achieved, not inherited, by the 'right' sex...the gay world, via drag, says that sex-role behaviour is an appearance; it is 'outside.' It can be manipulated at will (1972:103).

Newton's emphasis on the "performance" of gender, heavily influenced queer theorist Judith Butler, whose theories of the *performativity* of gender, are considered a cornerstone of contemporary queer studies. Gayle Rubin's foundational article *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex* (1975) was one of the first attempts within academic anthropology to deconstruct the gendered category referred to as "woman" through an analysis of its reification within particular "sex/gender systems." According to Rubin, sex/gender systems consisted of "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975:159). The concept of "woman" was not a biological reality, but rather a social one, shaped by historical, political, and cultural factors. This perspective on the social construction of the "female" gender, was not unique to Rubin's work and had been articulated by numerous social theorists before and after her (see De Beauvoir 1952, Wittig 1981). However, what was unique to Rubin's analysis was her insistence on locating women's oppression, and compulsory

heterosexuality by extension, within the ideologies that constituted any particular sex/gender system.

This argument is extended further in her 1984 article *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. Here Rubin argues that current sex/gender systems arbitrarily construct sexual behaviours and desires as “good” or “bad” and “natural” and “unnatural” marginalizing those people that are viewed as enacting socially “non-normative” sexualities and genders (1984:13). Advocating for the acceptance of all forms or aspects of non-normative sexuality, including sadomasochism, prostitution, and intergenerational sexuality, Rubin spearheaded the movement toward incorporating a queer theoretical perspective into ethnographic analysis, having performed her own doctoral research on leathermen (gay-identified male sadomasochists and leather fetishists) in San Francisco. Like many contemporary anthropologists studying queer sexualities and genders cross-culturally, including Tom Boellstorff in Indonesia (2005; 2007), Don Kulick in Brazil (1998), and Roger Lancaster in Nicaragua (1992; 2003), I will utilize a queer theoretical/social constructivist perspective in deconstructing the various understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality presented by my informants.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The Drag Performers

All the drag performers who participated in the ethnographic interview phase of my research were between the ages of 20 and 35. All had been performing in drag for at least two years, with the most experienced having performed for approximately 13. Each of the performers interviewed had first performed at the venue where I was undertaking my fieldwork, but had subsequently performed at queer-oriented nightclubs throughout southern Ontario and in the case of my main informant, the drag show hostess, some cities in the United States. Noting the relatively low pay (sometimes no pay at all) received for their performances, all the drag performers interviewed had daytime occupations in lower- to middle-income positions, ranging from hairstyling to serving at a local restaurant. Notwithstanding their relatively low incomes, all drag performers spent a significant amount of money on items for their performances, including wigs, dresses, makeup, high heel shoes, and jewelry, which in some cases amounted to well over \$2000 spent per year. Drag performances could also amount to a significant time commitment for individual performers. Preparation for performances could take anywhere between 45 minutes to three hours for individual performers, depending on how regularly they performed and whether they kept activities like shaving between performances. My key informant, the drag show hostess, performed almost every Thursday night during my fieldwork period on top of producing and hosting almost every show. Contrary to popular stereotypes, the drag performers in my sample were not uneducated: two had attended some college

for a short period of time, one was currently enrolled in a graphic design program at a local college at the time of the interview, and one had completed an undergraduate degree in psychology at a local university. In combating the stereotype that drag queens are uneducated, one performer during a popular annual drag pageant held at the nightclub pointed out quite poignantly during the question and answer period that he was in fact college educated.

Unlike Esther Newton's informants in her study of female impersonation in America during the 1960s, none of my informants discussed any prior involvement in prostitution or sex work, most believing that this along with drug use was part of the stereotype that drag queens were frequently forced to confront when approached by club patrons and those outside the queer community. One performer in particular, felt that these attributes greatly contributed to the stigmatization of drag both within and outside the queer community. Newton (1979) aptly describes this extreme stigmatization of female impersonators, both within and outside the queer community, but argues that this is rooted in their feminine gender performance, overlooking the effects of class-based discrimination through association with illegal activities (i.e. sex work and drug use) that many female impersonators or drag performers face in tandem with sex and gender-based discrimination.

Although discussions of drug use were avoided, some informants did admit to the recreational use of marijuana and occasionally to prior use of more illicit drugs such as cocaine or ecstasy. In a private conversation, one informant asked me to comment on the improvement in his physically appearance since

the resolution of his drug addiction. Another informant postulated that “drugs are an issue at the bar in general, not just amongst queens – drugs are part of the stereotype.” Contrary to discussions of the use of illegal narcotics, the use of alcohol was promoted in the nightclub amongst both patrons and drag performers and was frequently mentioned in interviews as both an appropriate social lubricant and a “good way to relax before a performance.” The ubiquity of alcohol use within the nightclub environment translated in some cases to alcohol abuse for those performers who spent a great deal of their social lives in that environment. From intimate discussions with some of my informants, I also feel that alcohol may have been utilized as a coping mechanism for those who had difficulty dealing with the harassment, discrimination and isolation often faced by those who transgress societal sex and gender norms.

Considering that they are viewed with a mixed degree of reverence and trepidation by the patrons who attended the weekly drag shows, all the female impersonators in my sample, except one, felt a very strong bond with the gay and lesbian (queer) community. Most had participated in, and three had won a title in, the annual queer pride festival held within the community and all had participated in charity events, particularly those associated with local HIV/AIDS organizations. In the annual drag pageant held at the nightclub where I performed my field research, one of the duties of the winner is to arrange and perform in a charity fundraiser for a local organization. During my participant observation at the nightclub, I performed in two fundraisers, one for an HIV/AIDS organization and another for a sexual health organization. Such

participation was not undertaken by the one informant, whom I just mentioned, who did not feel a close connection with the queer community, did not identify as “gay,” and felt that his association with the queer community could be problematic in terms of his personal life.

Why become a Queen?

The motivations for performing in drag are as unique and diverse as the drag queens themselves. A unifying factor amongst all my participants and the primary motivation for performing in drag, as described by my informants, was for sheer entertainment (i.e. “for fun”). Many informants, including my key female impersonator informant, the drag show hostess, noted that they became interested in the prospect of performing in drag, while watching other female impersonators perform at queer-oriented nightclubs across southern Ontario. According to one informant “I was 18 when I saw my first drag show and I thought it was interesting, so I was like ‘I want to try this!’” All my informants first started performing at the nightclub where I did my field research, one impersonator stating that the first place you perform always “feels like home.” Entertaining the audience was also very important to the female impersonators I interviewed. One informant particularly relished doing shows where there were many patrons who had not seen a drag queen before because he hoped to have the opportunity to challenge and possibly change their perceptions of female impersonation. Second to entertainment, attention, whether social or sexual, was a key motivating factor for all informants. Within the queer community female impersonators were often given celebrity status and all desired to be

popular and well-known. Drag according to one well-experienced informant “makes you feel like a star or royalty.” Most performers felt that being tipped by club patrons was an important part of this process because it showed an appreciation for their “art.” One informant in particular preferred being tipped on stage, rather than off-stage, because this drew attention to the fact that people were thoroughly enjoying her performance.

Sexual attention was also a key motivating factor for many informants, although they limited this to a desire to be admired from afar. Many impersonators had experienced periodic physical and verbal harassment by patrons who made sexual advances and engaged in lewd or inappropriate behaviour. However, all performers enjoyed being admired and seen as beautiful, attractive, sexy, or desirable, within the performance context. One informant noted that he liked to be admired and know that he was attractive when presenting himself in drag, while another contended that the realm of female impersonation has “a lot to do with sexual power – it feels good to be wanted.” Attention as a motivating factor was closely related to another key motivating factor – empowerment. Many informants explained that the art of female impersonation could be very empowering. According to one informant, “When I am in drag, I am behind a mask, it is my creation...it is empowering to know that you are pulling off the illusion.” Another informant contended that wearing stiletto heels made him feel strong and sexy because they “push your chest and butt out” drawing attention to these eroticized “female” features.

Amongst my informants it was not uncommon to hear the word “fierce” being used to compliment a particular performer’s routine (i.e. “that performance was fierce, girl!”) or to refer to a state of mind or being, popular amongst my informants (“I’m a fierce queen!”). One informant described the term “fierce” as empowering, describing the concept as a “feminine version of power.” To be a “fierce queen” or to have a “fierce performance” was to be aggressive, powerful, and confident. A “fierce queen” put everything into her performances (i.e. “her heart and soul” as I had it described to me) and was admired and appreciated by female impersonators and patrons alike. Political advocacy and activism also motivated some informants to continue performing in drag. Many saw their place within the queer community as one of privilege and felt that being involved in charity events and fundraisers supporting issues of importance to the queer community was a pivotal part of their role. In fact, as mentioned above, winners of the annual drag queen pageant held at the nightclub where I did my field research had to arrange a fundraiser for a popular community charity, foundation or social organization.

On a less explicit and more implicit level, many informants were motivated to perform at the nightclub in order to express an alternate or in some cases more “authentic” version of themselves. In some cases, this dealt with issues of gender identity, in others it was purely a change in one’s social identity that was desired. Many informants noted that their drag personas were a part of who they were. One informant contended that “she [the drag persona] is me and I am her” showing an intimate connection between female

impersonators and their drag personas. Other performers expressed this sentiment as well, one stating that “it is a part of me, like being gay, it is another outlet of being me.” Many informants saw drag, and its key referent, displays of normative femininity, as a mechanism to express a hidden or repressed part of themselves. One informant stated that he was less inhibited when in drag, “I am more aggressive and more assertive when I perform.” It is undeniable that many queens utilized normative femininity as a vehicle to express a different aspect of their identity. This finding may appear to support feminist contentions regarding drag queens’ appropriation of femininity for selfish gains (i.e. power or prestige). However, questioning the degree to which we all alter our gender presentations situationally, as a means to achieve certain ends, will lead one to the conclusion that this is not an entirely unusual behaviour even for individuals outside the queer community. Also, this is not to say that these informants who utilized normative femininity to express inhibited or repressed aspects of themselves did not identify strongly with the femininity they displayed. In one particular case an informant expressed to me that only when he was in drag did he feel people viewed him as he wished to be seen.

In terms of gender identity, some informants, particularly those who began to transition or experiment with female hormones, were motivated to perform in drag to gain a deeper understanding of their lives as sexed and gendered individuals, utilizing the drag performance environment as a safe place to gender bend. Although I only interviewed one transsexual female performer, I was told that it was not uncommon for drag queens to transition to

female sex identification after performing for many years. The transsexual performer I interviewed stated that within the club she felt safe to be herself and felt that she was not judged based on her sex and gender presentation. The club for her offered a secure and supportive environment to not only test her ability to pass as female (this performer was a preoperative transsexual in the process of transitioning), but also to express and fulfill her desire to be viewed as female.

Sex and Sexual Identities

As mentioned above, all performers except one identified as homosexual. The one heterosexual informant, considered something of a rarity within the academic literature on female impersonators, felt that his sexuality was very difficult to define, but stated that he believed himself to be “mostly heterosexual.” In terms of their sex, all informants, except one identified as male, the one exception identifying as a transsexual female. Most informants were very clear in stating that outside of the performance context they lived their lives as men. This finding is consistent with much of the academic literature regarding female impersonation, particularly the tendency for drag queens to distance themselves from feminine signifiers when outside of the performance context. At one social event I attended with a couple of friends from a local university a drag performer, who was currently presenting as male, was offered lip gloss by one of my close friends upon which he politely refused stating that “I never wear makeup out of drag.” This sentiment was ubiquitous

amongst my informants who often had to deal with the assumption from outsiders that “when you are in drag you want to be a woman.”

The assumption that drag queens are transsexual (living their lives as self-identified women), was a very real concern for many of my informants who wished people would “look beyond the lashes” and want to get to know them as self-identified men. Many of my informants felt that their identification with the drag community and in particular their public enacting of a feminine gender performance contributed to difficulty finding a partner or simply dating. One informant stated “even in the gay community we’re stigmatized, it is usually more difficult to date, guys are like ‘you’re feminine, I wanna date a guy.’” In one case a younger informant recalled a past relationship where his boyfriend would not let him do drag. When I asked the performer why he felt this might be the case he stated that “I guess he just doesn’t like to see me as a woman.” Notwithstanding my transsexual female-identified informant, most drag performers felt that the men that approached them while in drag were usually seeking sexual contact with a transsexual, someone who did not wish to live outside of the performance context as a male. Amongst my informants, individuals who sexually fetishized transsexuals were referred to rather derogatorily as “tranny-chasers” and when I first started performing I was cautioned to avoid those individuals because “we are not transsexuals.” The drag show hostess, my key informant quite ostentatiously stated that he would not be intimate with any man while in drag, a comment that I felt reflected his

fear that his potential partner would prefer to sexualize him as female or as a transsexual female rather than as a male.

Most performers noted that their identification with the drag community also led to generalizations regarding their sexuality and sexual behaviour. Many performers discussed past partners who had assumed that because they performed regularly as a drag queen that they wanted to be treated like “typical women.” They frequently alluded to partners acting in aggressive, domineering, and controlling manners, assuming that they were characteristically passive, sensitive, and “feminine” even out of drag. Assumptions of a pervasive normative “femininity” even translated into sexual behaviours. Performers described intimate situations where they were assumed to desire the “passive” (insertee) position during anal intercourse and it was also assumed that they would want to be dominated and controlled during sexual contacts. These stereotypes led some participants to identify very strongly with normative masculinity outside of the drag performance context. Although many female impersonators did distance themselves from feminine signifiers outside of the performance context, a finding that seemingly supports the aforementioned feminist theorizations regarding drag, this finding is not consistent amongst all performers. Many did limit their feminine presentations to the drag show context, illustrating a certain degree of disdain for that which is considered normatively feminine within Canadian-American society; however others continued to engage in a gender ambiguous or typically feminine gender presentation outside of the performance context. One

participant in particular noted that when simply socializing at the nightclub, outside of the drag performance context, he enjoyed presenting himself rather androgynously wearing typical male attire, but donning eye-makeup, lip-gloss, and high heels.

Gender Identities

As a general finding, the drag performers I interviewed frequently perceived of themselves as male and felt no desire to make anatomical changes to align themselves more closely with a female sex identification. However, with this said, the distinction between sex and gender, which often appears deceptively clear within academia, was definitively opaque to most of my informants. Notwithstanding the one transsexual informant in my sample, all the performers I interviewed were content to identify as male in terms of what I perceived as their sexual identification, but their gender identifications were much more diverse and convoluted than I had anticipated prior to engaging in this research. What came to be pivotal to understanding their unique and varied gender identities was the degree to which they internalized or identified with the normative femininity they were performing when in drag. Most performers felt that their gender identities were an amalgamation of typically masculine and feminine traits. My key informant, the drag show hostess, believed that he was more “feminine” in drag than out and expressed a desire to be more “masculine” out of drag, seeing this gender performance as more valued within contemporary Canadian society. Limiting his femininity to the performance context, this informant expressed a sentiment that to be feminine out of drag

could be stigmatizing and therefore aspired to appear more masculine and distanced himself from feminine signifiers (i.e. makeup, dancing, etc) when out of drag. This gendered presentation is not uncommon amongst drag queens, including, but not limited to the performers that I personally interviewed. Many performers described their adoption of a feminine gender performance when performing as simply “acting”. In fact, many drag performers referred to themselves as “actors” and saw the hyperbolic femininity they performed as theatrical and therefore unrealistic and unreflective of their personal gender identification.

However, as if experiencing a degree of cognitive dissonance, many of my informants also noted that the femininity they performed could potentially be a reflection of a core gender identity. Arguing that performing in drag shows at queer-oriented nightclubs gave them a context to truly express themselves; some informants noted that they felt more “alive” and “authentic” when performing in drag. One informant in particular, who was heterosexually-identified, noted that he could possibly be transsexual, but felt that he would not be happier if he made the medical transition. This individual sought out a sense of community amongst the drag queens at the nightclub, stating that with them he had finally achieved the ability, at least within the performance context, to be viewed as he wished to be; as female. My one and only female-identified preoperative transsexual informant stated that she began performing as a male-identified drag queen, but when she realized how well she passed as female during performances, she began to feel as if she could achieve true “femininity”

and started living her life as female. This individual utilized the gender-bending atmosphere promoted at the Thursday night drag shows as a supportive environment to transition to female sex identification. As I later learned, most transsexual drag performers, in a manner familiar to my informants, had begun transitioning after performing as male-identified drag queens for a period of time. This phenomenon was therefore not limited to the one transsexual female performer I interviewed (see page 49-50). Even those informants who identified as male sexually and felt at least to some degree normatively “masculine” in their gendered presentations, noted some degree of continuity between their drag identities and their personal gender identities. One performer in particular repeatedly told me during the interview that there was no difference between himself and his drag persona, they were “representations” of each other. It was not uncommon for me to also observe drag performers referring to themselves outside the performance context by their drag names and utilizing feminine pronouns when presenting as male.

Over the 12 month period I was engaged in participant observation at the nightclub, I noticed at least two distinct types of drag being performed. When discussing my observational findings with my drag performer informants, I was informed that these two types of performances were not contemporaneous, but that one could be viewed as a “classic” drag performance whereas the other was a more “modern” variant. The “classic” drag performers tended to engage in hyperbolic displays of femininity when performing, they had big hair, extravagant makeup, and glamorous costumes. These performers tended to

focus on exaggerating feminine gestures, body language, and on appearing believable when lip-synching. Interestingly, the classic performers tended to engage in more “breaking of the illusion” when performing. They would frequently remove the stuffing from their false bosoms, revealing male chests or speak in a low tone of voice showcasing their masculinity. These performers frequently identified as relatively masculine in terms of their gender performance when out of drag and tended to avoid feminine signifiers when not performing. The “modern” drag performers, tended to focus more on passing as “real girls,” then on exaggerating an over-the-top femininity. These individuals tended to not break the illusion when in drag and tended to focus more on mastering feminine body language, gestures and dancing. These performances focused heavily on dancing and choreographed movements. When out of drag these performers tended to identify more with a feminine gender identity than those who performed a more classic drag. These performers, although presenting as male when out of drag, tended not to avoid feminine signifiers (such as lip gloss, eye makeup or a hand bag) as vehemently; one informant in fact frequently mixed “masculine” and “feminine” signifiers when out of drag, an activity he framed as becoming quite popular amongst contemporary queens, referred to as “androgyny. ”

Overall, drag performers’ gender identities were extremely difficult to frame as either normatively masculine or feminine, most arguing that they could not be classed as either. The degree to which individual drag performers identified as “feminine” tended to vary from those who saw the femininity as a

complete act, something that dissipated when the show was over, to those who have completely internalized a feminine gender identity (the female-identified transsexual drag performer). One informant, who identified as quite feminine in drag, but felt that their gender identity out of drag was relatively masculine, emailed me following his ethnographic interview stating that after thinking over what we had discussed he realized that, although he was comfortable with his male identity, if he were to ever lose his penis in some accident he did not feel he would have a difficult time adopting a feminine gender identity and living as a woman, “after all I already have the dresses.” The plethora of sexed, gendered, and sexual identities presented by my informants, seemingly contradicts much of the social scientific literature that frames drag queens as gay-identified men, who take femininity on and off, for their own personal gains (whether for power, prestige, or attention), but do not identify with it outside of the context of drag performance (see Raymond 1994 and Schacht 2002a; 2002b for example) . This is not to say that drag queens (or gay-identified men in general) are not labeled as “feminine” by those who adhere to heteronormative conceptions of masculinity and femininity, particularly in comparison to our cultural understandings of what is considered hegemonically masculine. Rather professional drag performers’ subjective understandings of their own gender identities have been classically framed as desiring of a gender-normative (i.e. cisgendered) “masculine” identity, avoiding that which could be labeled “feminine” outside the performance context. This framework for approaching

an understanding of drag queens and gender identity is not supported by my findings.

Perception of Femininity and Being Female

Female impersonators' perceptions of femininity typically tended to be homogeneous, highly stereotypical, and in some cases mildly misogynistic. When asked what they defined as "feminine," informants frequently turned to popular generalizations regarding normative femininity in the West. Adjectives such as "caring," "gentle," "sweet," and "soft" were frequently offered as characteristics of femininity by my drag informants. Most informants could draw a distinction between being feminine and female, "female" being viewed as a biological category. However, almost all participants, except one, saw the two concepts as naturally interrelated. When asked how drag shows represented women most informants noted that the shows were not designed to represent actual (i.e. biological) women, but were rather a representation of themselves or a hyperbolic display of femininity, that one might see performed in a theatrical or stage performance, by both female impersonators and woman alike. Many referred to the lavish costumes, over the top makeup, and displays of a hyper-sexualized femininity, typical of drag performances as also present in the performances of popular female music artists such as Cher, Madonna, or Britney Spears. For many, what was being created was the illusion of being female, as one informant put it "it would be silly to think that if I strap on a pair of fake breasts that I am now a woman."

In terms of the targets of female impersonators' jokes, insults, and bawdy humour, most informants noted that there was no significant difference based on sex. In fact many argued that heterosexual men, rather than women, were the targets of embarrassment and humiliation from drag queens. This finding is supported by my observational data. Unlike the authors of many other ethnographic studies on drag, which noted a clear bias towards humour directed at women, I noticed no significant difference based on sex. My findings actually tend to support the impersonators' belief that men are actually more frequently the target of jokes, as I can recall only a few situations where individual women in the audience were targeted directly. During interviews no female impersonators could recall situations at the nightclub where women were insulted, humiliated or demeaned, however some stated that this was not necessarily the case at all establishments. When asked whether impersonators every felt that "they made better women than real women" or had ever overheard another performer making a comment of this nature, most informants could not recall a single situation and stated that comments of this nature were usually offered to them by female-identified patrons, who would say things like "I wish I had your legs" or "I wish I could do makeup like you do."

When asked whether woman had played an important role in their lives, most informants noted that they had large networks of very important female friends, however some also noted experiences of rejection from close female family members upon the disclosure of their homosexual identities or their involvement in female impersonation. Most informants felt that women still

suffered from a great deal of discrimination and prejudice in our society. However, some felt that women's rights movements had overshadowed or eclipsed other important rights movements such as those for racial equality and equality based on sexual orientation. None of my female impersonator informants identified very strongly with feminism, some stating that they were loosely feminists, but did not follow feminism either politically or academically. One of the final questions asked during all interviews was meant to test the degree to which female impersonators identified with gender essentialist frameworks for understanding masculinity and femininity. When asked whether men were "naturally" better at some things than woman, almost all agreed, listing off jobs, occupation, and behaviours that are stereotypically associated with men (i.e. occupations that typically involved physical labour such as an automotive mechanic). Two informants did however challenge these stereotypical assumptions by stating that although they believed men to be more "physically capable than woman" they believed women could achieve and should have the right to achieve anything a man can.

Patrons

Perspectives on Female Impersonation

All patrons interviewed had seen at least one drag show at the nightclub where I did my field research. Their responses to my questions showed very little variation on the basis of sex, but I felt it necessary to control for this factor, so I insisted on having a balanced sex ratio. Since I was particularly interested in whether female patrons felt objectified or demeaned when watching drag

performances I gave special value to their responses throughout this study. When asked how they felt female impersonators represented women to the general public, most responded in a manner similar to my drag informants, stating that they believed most impersonators not to be representing women, as they would be seen in their daily lives, but rather a theatrical, exaggerated femininity, that was more of a representation of themselves than of woman in general. One male patron noted that the display of femininity portrayed by female impersonators was similar to that displayed by exotic dancers or woman in popular music videos, it was sexualized and hyperbolic, designed to shock and entertain.

Two female patrons noted that the hypersexual display of femininity portrayed by many female impersonators could be problematic in terms of how it represented women to the queer community or general public, but that those displays of femininity were not limited to drag queens, but were also embodied by many “biological” women. These patrons contended that what was most often performed in a drag show was a widespread representation of femininity amongst woman and men alike (whether heterosexual or homosexual), one that falsely assumed that to be a confident, powerful, dominant, and assertive woman, one must be seductive, sexy, and alluring to men. When asked whether these informants believed drag queens consciously chose those displays of femininity to feel a sense of empowerment or gain prestige or respect, both female-identified patrons stated “no”, arguing that these displays were widespread in our society, part of our popular understanding of what was

stereotypically female. All four female patrons interviewed felt no subjective feelings of oppression, dehumanization or humiliation during drag shows, some even expressing the opposite. One female-identified informant stated that during drag performances she felt empowered by the impersonators' display of femininity and that it made her feel good about being able to "naturally" achieve it.

Feelings of empowerment were far from the norm amongst female patrons, most finding the display of femininity presented by drag performers to be rather neutral (i.e. as neither empowering nor disempowering). One female patron, who was not formally interviewed for this study, felt that the performances of most drag queens were normally derogatory and highly stereotypical, but argued that the performances at the venue where I did my ethnographic research generally represented women quite positively. Overall, female patrons tended to express a diversity of opinions regarding how drag queens performances reflected on women.

No patrons could recall any situation where they felt a female patron was unfairly demeaned or humiliated by a drag queen during a show. Like my female impersonator informants, most patrons argued that heterosexual men were usually the butt of jokes or embarrassment at a drag show. When questioning female patrons as to whether they felt gay, male-identified female impersonators had certain privileges in society that they were denied, most female patrons stated that as men they did, but noted that their non-normative sexualities and gender displays also denied them privileges that a heterosexual

female would possess. One informant, who happened to be a personal friend of one of my key female impersonator informants, felt that the life of a drag queen had the potential to be very difficult, stating that these individuals were “minorities within a minority,” experiencing a great deal of discrimination.

In general, patrons felt that drag shows had the potential to be demeaning or objectifying to women, arguing that women in general were occasionally framed as sex objects during drag performances. However, most noted that this was not a problem limited to female impersonators, gay men, or the queer community in general, but rather a reflection of widespread misogynistic ideologies within our culture that each and every individual is exposed to. It is also important to note that all patrons felt that the sexual objectification of women was not something ubiquitous to all drag performers, but something enacted by select impersonators. One female impersonator informant in my sample would frequently perform in an outfit that revealed very little skin, other than the impersonator’s hands and head. This performer was brought up frequently in interviews with patrons as an example of a drag queen who represented women “positively”, by deflecting attention away from the nude female body.

Although the responses of male-identified patrons differed very little from the responses of female-identified patrons, there was one key variation. Male patrons tended to downplay or underemphasize the sexualization and stereotyping of normative femininity that was the hallmark of numerous drag performances. Female patrons were often acutely aware that the presentation of

femininity by female impersonators could potentially be derogatory, whereas male patrons often ignored this issue. Although not all performances were stereotypical of femininity, many were, with both male-identified drag queens and male-identified patrons tacitly unaware of how these performances could reflect negatively on women. This lends some credence to popular feminist conceptions of drag (see Raymond 1994 for example). However, not all performances nor all performers presented femininity in this manner. For instance, some performers were neither male-identified nor masculine-presenting when out of drag, and some performances, such as the aforementioned performance where the drag queen revealed no bare skin, tended to reflect a less stereotypical femininity.

Perceptions of Femininity

Keeping in mind, the findings discussed in the previous section, descriptions of what constituted normative femininity, from both male and female patrons alike, differed very little from those of female impersonators. Like all the drag informants, most patron informants had not been thoroughly exposed to academic discourses regarding the social construction of gender and sexuality and therefore tended to hold perspectives rooted in a certain degree of sex and gender essentialism. One female patron, who was enrolled in a university level program in human sexuality, noted the difficulty in defining femininity, describing the concept as rather ambiguous and fluid. This individual was the only person who deviated from an essentialist perspective, all others defining femininity in a rather stereotypical and generalizable manner.

As occurred with the female impersonators, adjectives such as “caring,” “compassionate,” and “motherly” were also used to describe femininity by patron informants. When asked whether men were “naturally” better at some things than women, these informants typically answered “yes”, again pointing to “biological” differences in men and women’s physical capabilities. Some female-identified patrons, one in particular, did identify strongly with feminism, although most male patrons did not. This female-identified patron who identified strongly with feminism also was the only patron to challenge essentialized notions of femininity, probably the result of her exposure to contemporary gender and feminist theory as a result of her post-secondary education. All informants felt that women still suffered from a great deal of discrimination and prejudice, in particular pointing to differences in pay rates and occupational opportunities for men and women. When asked to recall situations where they experienced discrimination on the basis of their sex, most female patrons recalled situations that had occurred at educational institutions or at their place of employment. Overall, it was my impression that sexism, misogyny and anti-feminism were not considered pivotal issues by patrons when discussing the nature of drag performances. Most patrons, whether male or female, recalled overwhelmingly positive experiences when attending a drag show.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Drag Subculture

In *Writing Women's Worlds* (1993) anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod engages in a critique of the concept of “culture” as framed by ethnographic research. Arguing that anthropologists have tended to produce cultures as “bounded, discrete entities”, characteristically homogeneous, stable and timeless, Abu-Lughod postulates that this conception of culture “risks smoothing over contradictions, conflicts of interest, doubts, and arguments, not to mention changing motivations and historical circumstances.” (9). Keeping this perspective in mind, it is pivotal not to assume the stability, pervasiveness, and immutability of a unified Canadian “gay,” “queer” or “drag” subculture. However, one need not dismiss the culture concept altogether, inasmuch as there were certain attributes specific to the community of female impersonators I worked with that could be viewed as a unique subculture within the more general queer community in the region.

In the early stages of my field observations I noted that the female impersonators I was working with tended to organize themselves within a fictive kinship model. Female impersonators who had trained novice impersonators were frequently referred to as “drag mothers.” According to many of my informants, this term was reserved for the “first person to put you in a dress” and was considered to be a role of guidance and mentorship. Any given drag mother could have one or multiple “drag daughters,” individuals whom the impersonator had trained in the art of drag. Informants who elected

to perform in drag without the aid of a “drag mother” who first dressed them up and taught them to perform, either rejected the fictive kinship system altogether (although many of these informants admitted having drag “mentors” or “influences”) or adopted “drag aunties” who were not the first person to put them in a dress, but were usually more experienced drag queens, who would offer periodic tips in performing and in generally aid a neophyte drag queen in establishing herself. Well established and experienced female impersonators, particularly those who had performed in cities throughout Canada and the United States, were viewed with a degree of reverence and respect by less experienced performers. These impersonators, who were typically popular “drag mothers” would often allow their “drag daughters” to adopt their drag family name. For example, if the famous drag queen RuPaul Charles were a “drag mother,” her “drag daughters” might adopt the last name “Charles” following their stage name to signify their relationship to the popular performer.

A drag family name could also possibly be bestowed upon a female impersonator who was not considered a “drag daughter.” This action on the part of usually an older, more experienced drag queen was considered to be a great sign of respect, for the younger, less experienced performer. One particular informant in my sample, had been bestowed numerous drag family names, but did not identify with any particular “drag mother.” Although only one informant in my sample identified with this system, a more formal and organized “court” system existed alongside the less formal fictive kinship system described. The International Imperial Court System (ICS), encompasses

a multitude of drag queens, drag kings, and cross-dressers across North America. Within Canada the court system is divided into various regional chapters that are overseen by an Empress (usually a drag queen or cross-dresser) and Emperor (sometimes a drag king, but often a gay-identified male). The International Imperial Court System was framed by my informants as largely a fundraising body that female impersonators could elect to join if they were in a financially secure position (drag expenditures, including costumes and jewelry, tended to be more costly for those involved in the court system) and desired to do so.

Notwithstanding these formal and informal organizations of female impersonators, drag queens tended to identify very strongly with the queer community as a whole. Most female impersonators were gay-identified and all had performed at queer-oriented nightclubs or pride events in the region. Most limited their charitable work to causes important to the queer community (i.e. HIV/AIDS research), and those who had performed at private functions usually limited them to the parties or social events of queer-identified individuals. This differs from female impersonation in the 1960s and 1970s, when Esther Newton was performing her foundational field research. At that time drag performers were a more popular spectacle for “straight” tourists in large metropolitan city centers such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco (1979:4). Since that time drag queens in both Canada and the United States have tended to increasingly limit their performances to queer-oriented nightclubs and bars, likely the result of an increasing association both within academia and popular

culture between drag, non-normative sex and gender identities, and the queer rights movements. Various social, political, and media trends affecting the queer community, particularly the gay male community, tended also to affect the female impersonators in my sample. At least two informants visibly struggled with body weight issues, the result of an overwhelming focus on physical attraction within queer youth culture. Others who had coped or were currently coping with drug or alcohol addictions had pointed to the oppression, discrimination and violence, queer-identified individuals face, particularly those who act in a gender non-normative manner, as a motivating factor for their addictions.

As detailed in the findings (see pages 55-56) , many informants had noted a shift between classic drag performances and more contemporary variants. Classic female impersonation typically focused on producing the illusion of a female sex, involving a display of hyperfemininity. This exaggerated femininity, which involved a lot of makeup, extravagant costumes, and enhanced female sex features (i.e. inordinately large breasts) appeared unrealistic, leaving observers with little to question in terms of the actual sex of the performer. These performances tended to focus on impersonation, for instance lip-synching and appearing to resemble a famous female performer such as Barbara Streisand, Bette Davis, or Cher. As stated in the research findings, performers of this genre would normally break the illusion of femininity, by revealing a male chest, pulling out their fake breasts, or talking in a deep voice. This behaviour was seen as essential to putting on a good show

and entertaining your audience, After all they came to “see a man in a dress” as one of my informants put it.

The more “modern”, contemporary variant of female impersonation focuses typically on presenting as passably female. These impersonators often referred to as “real girl drag” performers frequently did not break the illusion of femininity, but maintained it throughout the entire show. Their routines tended to focus less on impersonating famous female entertainers and more on impersonating women in general. Focusing intensely on choreography and dance, these performers were tacitly aware of their body language and gestures, consistently maintaining an image of femininity. As discussed above, yet another variant of contemporary drag involved the open mixing of masculine and feminine signifiers, referred to by my informants as “androgyny.” Only one informant in my sample periodically performed in this genre of drag. Although these forms of female impersonation are clearly visible within the drag show, they are not mutually exclusive with individual performers often mixing classical and contemporary elements.

The temporal shift in forms of female impersonation is a topic in need of further research within the social sciences. It is my opinion that the shift between more classic and contemporary versions of drag could be the result of changes in popular understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. For instance, the greater acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals, influenced by the efforts of women’s and queer rights advocates, have affected the cultural landscape and have paved a path for the acceptance of performers

who either do not identify as male outside of the performance context (i.e. transsexual or transgendered performers) or performers who at least wish to consistently maintain the illusion of femininity within the performance context.

Are Drag Queens Sexist?

Undoubtedly, sexism, anti-feminism, and misogyny are issues within the drag community. On numerous occasions I observed performers derogating or minimizing the role of women, frequently lowering them to the status of their physical attributes (i.e. breasts, buttocks, or genitals), while ignoring any possibilities of intellectual or creative capacities. However, while observing this phenomenon amongst female impersonators, I also noted that it occurred just as frequently amongst male-identified patrons. Often men attending the drag shows, regardless of their sexual orientation, would refer to female patrons as “sluts,” “whores,” “bitches,” or “dykes.” Some male patrons even went as far as physically or sexually harassing female patrons, upon which they would be asked to leave the premises by club security. These forms of misogyny enacted by male patrons were not just directed at female patrons, but also at drag performers. It was not uncommon to observe male patrons objectifying individual performers, reducing them to their bodily attributes, criticizing them on their capacity to pass as female, and taking extreme sexual liberties with them off stage. This finding is important to note because, if female impersonators are “appropriating” femininity from women, what they are appropriating is not always positive, but includes many of the negative aspects of female status inferiority in Euroamerican societies. During the participant

observation phase of my research, I was involved in a situation where I was approached quite aggressively by a male patron who was hoping to engage in a sexual contact with me while in drag. He approached this situation by attempting to put his hand up my skirt to touch my genitals, I responded by pulling away and telling the individual that I was not interested, but this situation became symbolic of numerous negative interactions I observed amongst female impersonators and male patrons.

Rather than assume, as many feminist theorists of drag have (see Raymond 1994 for example), that sexism or misogyny is essential to female impersonation as a result of their normative “male sex identification” and “appropriation of femininity,” I argue that the sexism observed amongst both drag performers and male patrons is the result of gender socialization and the culturally ubiquitous denigration of all displays of normative femininity. My informants were both the victims of and perpetrators of sexism directed at female-bodied or feminine appearing persons. As noted in my findings, when informants (whether female impersonators, male patrons, or female patrons) were asked to define femininity, typically their responses were highly stereotypical, emphasizing culturally hegemonic symbols and attributes associated with being “female” (i.e. the use of adjectives like soft, caring, and motherly). It was quite clear from the interviews that all my informants had a relatively fixed, stable, and pervasive definition of “femininity.” Their understanding of normative femininity was highly stereotypical and frequently corporeal, what was considered truly “feminine” was physical and believed to

be achieved through birth (those considered “biologically female”) or through anatomical and outward appearance-based alterations (i.e. transsexualism and cross-dressing respectively). My informants showed a limited understanding of the difference between sex and gender, often equating that which was socially feminine with that which is viewed as biological female. All informants within this study clearly understood that displays of normative femininity were perceived of as hierarchically inferior to displays of masculinity in a Western cultural context.

Although many of the female impersonators I interviewed identified as male outside the performance context, when they were in drag being feminine was seen as being female, with performers emphasizing not only feminine gestures, body language, and social roles, but also creating female bodies (i.e. stuffing their chests to create false breasts, tucking and taping their penis down, and shaving off all their body hair). Don Kulick notes that in his study of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes known as *travesti*, that certain physical attributes such as breasts were not considered biological female sex traits, but were rather feminine gendered, something that could be created or achieved through injections of industrial silicon or through breast implants (Kulick 1998:84) Although this was not necessarily the case with my female impersonator informants, who would have viewed permanent anatomical changes to their bodies (i.e. breast implants or sexual reassignment surgery) as affecting their sex identification, they did see the creation or illusion of

producing a female body as necessary to enacting “femininity” as gender when on stage.

The reduction of femininity to physical (biological) features is not something unknown to most anthropologists. Echoing the works of Claude Levi Strauss (1949) and Sherry (1974) regarding the cultural hegemony of the male/female and culture/nature dichotomy, it is apparent from my research that almost all informants reduced femininity to traits associated with the “biological role of women” (i.e. their reproductive capabilities). Femininity was seen as “soft, caring, sensual, and nurturing” and women were limited to their roles as mothers or otherwise reduced to their physical features (i.e. breasts, buttocks, hips) which were often sexualized. When in drag most informants noted the desire to be sexually attractive to men, in particular those that are heterosexual and normatively masculine. One informant, in a particularly self-reflexive moment, stated that it was “silly for people to think that getting up on stage and putting on makeup actually tells you what a woman is.” However, almost all informants felt that at least passing as “female” was essential to being a good drag performer and what was considered “female” or “feminine” (the distinction was never clear for them) was physical and achieved through cross-dressing and creation of an apparent anatomically female body. When asked whether they represented women, all female impersonators noted that their goal was not to represent women, but to represent an invocation of themselves, achieved through a “feminine” gender performance. Their drag identity was viewed as a

part of who they were, an aspect of their self-identity articulated through a normatively feminine gender presentation.

Issues in Appropriation: Drag and Gender Identities

Attempting to understand the unique gender identities of female impersonators is a complex task. Their gender performance changes situationally and contextually, generally stereotypically “masculine” outside of the performance context and often hyperbolically feminine within it. As detailed in my research findings, the degree to which any individual performer internalizes or identifies with normative femininity as their core gender identity varies from impersonator to impersonator. Their unique gendered presentations escape the boundaries and fixed definitions popular in academic gender studies, particularly in the realm of feminist and gay and lesbian theory. Many of my informants identified as “male” outside of the performance context, avoiding feminine signifiers of any form, stating that although they may periodically act “effeminate”, something they saw as aligned with their homosexual (gay) sexual identification, they essentially perceived of their core gender identities as masculine. Other informants identified more strongly with the normative femininity they performed, utilizing feminine signifiers even when out of drag, arguing that their gender identities escaped definition and could not be classified within a binary gender system. In the most extreme case, that of my transsexual female-identified informant, there was a complete internalization and identification with normative femininity both within and outside the performance context.

These findings problematize theories which frame female impersonation as anti-feministic or misogynistic. Proponents of this perspective, such as sociologist Stephen P. Schacht argue that drag reinforces rather than challenges ubiquitous gender norms and institutional heteronormativity (2000:175)

According to Schacht,

These female impersonators who have no subjective knowledge of being a woman nor *desire to experience the world as a woman*, utilize a very masculine (objective) view of hyper-feminine appearance and mannerisms (2002b:166 emphasis added).

Like feminist Janice Raymond (1996:175) who postulates that both female impersonation and male- to-female transsexualism depend on the “assimilation of a stereotypical femininity,” Schacht contends that female impersonators utilize a hypersexual, hyper-feminine display of a culturally normative femininity as “real estate” to “embody a dominant status within this [the drag] context” (2002b:167). The femininity enacted during most female impersonators’ performances is quite clearly normative, engaging with stereotypes that are widespread within popular American culture. Miniskirts, tight form-fitting dresses, and lavish makeup are ubiquitous within the drag performance context, but they are not limited to that context. The normative femininity enacted by female impersonators was no different from the normatively feminine displays enacted by female-identified individuals outside of both the drag and queer community. The very subjects of the impersonators’ impersonations were frequently popular female entertainers (mostly music artists) who enacted highly stereotyped and hypersexual displays of femininity within their performances (examples include but are not limited to Madonna,

Britney Spears, and Cher). Many of the female impersonators whom I interviewed were enacting a form of femininity they had been socialized to understand as being an exaggerated representation of the “norm” for women within their society. It was not only how they defined femininity, but the femininity they had defined for them by their audience.

Undoubtedly influenced by patriarchal institutions within Canadian-American society, this form of femininity is empowered through sexuality. It is a femininity that has been constructed as hierarchically inferior to masculinity and is embodied within ideologies that dictate to individuals, regardless of their sex that “good women” are “passive,” “meek,” and “sensitive” and “bad women” are “sexually-aggressive,” “seductive,” and “assertive.” These were the traits my informants associated with normative femininity. Many of my female patron informants noted that although the displays of femininity showcased by female impersonators were highly sexualized, they were no different than the displays of femininity they themselves had periodically enacted, particularly within a performance or theatrical context. One female patron in a particularly candid moment, stated that “what drag queens wear is what we might wear out to a nightclub” emphasizing that this display of femininity was attractive to heterosexual men.

These findings do not necessarily challenge feminist assertions regarding the negative stereotyping of women by male-identified female impersonators, however they reveal that this problem is not limited to the female impersonator, but is a problem within Canadian-American society as a whole. Although the

majority of male-identified female impersonators performed a very normative, stereotypic femininity, this framing of the feminine is not necessarily endemic amongst all drag queens, with some performing a non-normative femininity (i.e. performers of “androgyny” as described on pages 56 and 70). With variations in how femininity is presented during drag performances and the fact that some performers simply did not identify as “male,” it is difficult to unilaterally state with confidence that *all* drag queens, promote a *masculine* (male) conception of *normative* femininity.

Extending Schacht’s contention that female impersonators represent the “masculine embodiment of the feminine” some social theorists argue that what drag queens are really enacting is not normative femininity, but rather hegemonic masculinity (see Wright 2006 and Moore 2005). These theorists argue that femininity is hijacked by female impersonators as a vehicle to exercise masculine superiority. They argue that underneath the makeup, lashes, and lavish gowns that drag queens truly identify with normative masculinity, exercising male privilege, authority, and control over patrons, particularly those that are female-identified, within the context of a drag performance (Wright 2006:7-8). These masculinist theorizations are problematic in that not all drag performers strongly identify with masculinity as a gender or in the case of transsexual female performers, being male in general. These theories also neglect the finding that drag queens are frequently the victims of misogyny and homophobia, experiencing a degree of disempowerment within the queer community. Fixing “masculinity” to a stable and highly stereotypical

definition, these theories ignore the ambiguous and fluid nature of all gendered concepts. Amongst the female impersonators I interviewed there was a great deal of variation in terms of sex and gender identification with many choosing to frame their sex and gender identities outside of typical North American binary conceptions. The simplicity of any theory that frames female impersonation as the purview of strictly male-identified, gender-normative homosexuals ignores the diversity that exists within the drag subculture.

Contrary to Newton (1979) and Butler's (1990, 1993) appraisal of female impersonation, my analysis of the gendered performances of female impersonators does not necessarily support the model of drag as gender transgressive. Frequently my informants actively reinforced rather than challenged widespread ideologies regarding gender normativity, complementarity and compulsory heterosexuality. They did however, as Butler contends, deconstruct the seemingly natural link between "sex" and "gender," challenging the false ontological relationship between "male" and "masculine" or "female" and "feminine" (1990:175). Particularly, this research could be utilized as a direct challenge to theories that have framed female impersonators as sexist or misogynistic gay-identified men, actively appropriating femininity from women for their own personal gains, whether in the form of power, prestige or respect. Although they may find their work rewarding, female impersonators occupy a space of great ambiguity within the queer community. Both vilified and martyred, female impersonators were often valued within the performance context, but seen as an enigma outside it.

Newton's assertion that female impersonators occupy a dissonant position within the queer community is supported by my findings. According to Newton (1979),

They are evaluated positively by gay people to the extent that they have perfected a subcultural skill and to the extent that gay people are willing to oppose the heterosexual culture directly...On the other hand, they are despised because they symbolize and embody the stigma [normative femininity] (104).

During ethnographic interviews female impersonators would often speak of negative interactions with patrons, many noting the difficulty they had dating because most gay-identified men, wanted to date other "men" or at least people who pervasively presented as masculine. One informant stated that he wished potential partners would "look beyond the lashes" and see the person underneath the drag persona. Actively avoiding stereotypical assumptions based on performing in drag was the ultimate motivation for performers to distance themselves from displays of femininity outside the performance context. Statements like "I am not transsexual" and "I do not do this for sexual gratification" were promulgated at the beginning of many female impersonator interviews, as if to initially assuage any stereotypes I may hold regarding drag, as an openly gay-identified male.

The social rewards for female impersonation are not negligible and have been downplayed by numerous theorists, Newton in particular, focused on the stigmatization of drag performers rather than their empowerment within the queer community. All my female impersonator informants were motivated to perform in drag, largely through the prestige, respect and attention they received

for doing so. Many described the experience of performing as a “high” and expressed feeling greatly empowered. As described in my findings, one informant noted the contentment he received from the changes that occur to the body when wearing a pair of stiletto heels. He noted the resulting protrusion of the chest and buttocks, stating that this made him feel “sexy” and “desirable.” These comments were not uncommon from female impersonators, who would often compete aggressively to gain status within the drag community, entering numerous pageants, spending hours choreographing dance routines, and buying increasingly expensive makeup and outfits in order to out do one another. This stated, one cannot ignore the stigmatization performers endure. Like women within our society, they are frequently objectified and evaluated solely on their appearance. They are demeaned and degraded outside the drag show context, treated like pariahs and stereotyped as lower-class, uneducated, and “gender-dysphoric.”

Perceived in their most extreme form as “rapists of the female body” (see Raymond 1994:104) female impersonators and male-to-female transsexuals or transgendered persons have been framed as “appropriating femininity from women” and utilizing it to exercise their hegemonic masculinity and status superiority in comparison to “biological” women (see Schacht 2002a, 2002b; Hawkes 1995; Tyler 1991; Wright 2006). Ideas of appropriation are problematic on both a theoretical and ethnographic level. Theoretically, if we are draw on the emerging fields of queer and third-wave feminist studies, we find that concepts such as “masculinity” and “femininity” are not fixed, stable,

and pervasive cultural categories. As anthropologists, we are privileged in examining gender constructs cross-culturally, acknowledging the degree to which sex and gender categories are affected by social, culturally, historical, and political factors. What is “feminine” does not innately belong to those we consider “women” or “female,” but rather has been associated culturally with those categories of person. If female impersonators are wrongfully appropriating femininity, this implies that any self-identified female could potentially wrongfully appropriate “masculinity.”

Although a power imbalance between men and women within Canadian-American society frequently prevents women from engaging in behaviours associated with traditional “masculinity,” those that do are often the victims of informal sanctions (for doing so). Drag kings, butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals are frequently derogated, demeaned, and humiliated for their adoption of normatively masculine behaviours. This finding is supported by my observational data, where I often witnessed masculine-presenting women being derided for their gender presentation at the nightclub (i.e. being called “dykes” or “bitches”) or in some extreme cases being subjected to physical attacks because of their non-normative gender performance. An ideology which fixes femininity to biological women could limit the power of women and increase their oppression, as what has been classically deemed stereotypically “masculine”, has been traits and characteristics which are considered highly valuable and empowering within our “Western” industrialized society, such as assertiveness, creativity, and analytical capabilities.

Issues of ownership over any particular gendered performance are problematized by the very abstract and esoteric nature of gender itself. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler calls into question not only the socially constructed nature of gender, but also that of sex, arguing that sex is falsely perceived as “prediscursive” or occurring prior to culture (11). “Natural sexes” are viewed as mimetically producing specific genders (i.e. biological men must be masculine), the entire system existing outside the individual. Butler challenges this assumption by arguing that there is no essential disjuncture between the etiology of sex and gender; they are collapsible into one another, equally as socially constructed (1990:10-11). The social construction of gender itself, produces sexes as *a priori*, “natural” categories (Butler 1990:11). This in combination with the work of Michel Foucault (1978), who contended that a “genealogical” understanding of sexuality (i.e. one that framed all sexualities as the product of multiple dominant cultural discourses within society) has largely been ignored; reveals the existence of a hegemonic sex/gender system that appears to be *sui generis*, essentializing an ontological relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality in our society.

Heeding Ki Namaste’s (1996) warning to not ignore transgendered individuals’ subjective understanding of their sex and gender identities, my ethnographic analysis speaks directly to female impersonators’ framing of the normative femininity they perform and in some cases pervasively adopt as a core gender identity. Discussing drag queens specifically, Namaste contends

[They] are reduced to entertainment, coiffed bodies whose only purpose is to titillate the gay male viewer. Framed as pure spectacle, this negates a variety of reasons why people might choose to cross-dress in a club: an exploration of one's gender identity, a gesture of political intervention, a creative solution to boredom, and/or a way to pay the rent (1996:186).

All of these factors, whether implicitly or explicitly, motivated my informants to perform in drag. Unilateral theories that have framed female impersonators as "appropriating femininity" have ignored the voices of female impersonators themselves, in favour of a form of academic imperialism, which results in the subordination of any participant's understanding of their own identity. Namaste uses Butler's analysis of Venus Extravaganza in the film *Paris is Burning* as fodder for her critique of queer theory's erasure of transgendered subjectivities. Extravaganza, a transsexual female, is framed by Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) as a drag queen, who utilizes "the category woman to escape the cruel realities of her class and ethnicity (Latina) in New York City" (Namaste 1996:188). Namaste argues that Butler reduces Venus Extravaganza's transsexuality to "an allegorical state" ignoring the lived experiences of transsexual women. Venus Extravaganza, in particular, was murdered; the victim of violence directed at transsexual sex trade workers.

Although enmeshed in a queer theoretical framework, this study takes issue with cultural feminist perspectives on drag, which have largely ignored female impersonators' subjective understandings of their own identities, whether sexual or gendered. How can one say femininity is appropriated, when some informants deeply identify with the femininity they perform both within and outside the nightclub context. For some this femininity even represents a

core gender concept, with individuals choosing to live both within and outside the performance context as “female”. I have attempted within this study to let the voices of my informants direct my understanding of queer theory, rather than the alternative of letting queer theory dictate my understanding of them. Their understandings of what is normatively feminine, are distinctly stereotypical, but represent the popular understanding of femininity we are all exposed to in Canadian-American society. When discussing the degree to which they internalized normative femininity as an aspect of their core gender concept, it became clear, that their responses were as diverse as the performers themselves. If their internalization or identification with normative femininity were to be framed as a spectrum, a picture would emerge of some impersonators limiting feminine displays to a situational context (i.e. only when performing) and choosing to distance themselves from femininity outside the performance context to those who completely internalize and identify with the femininity in a pervasive and perpetual manner. Between these poles are the majority of my informants who understand their gender as an innate amalgamation of stereotypically masculine and feminine gendered behaviours.

Based on these ethnographic findings the mere suggestion of a degree of cognitive agency in appropriating a feminine gender seems asinine and unfathomable for my informants. Most had a very limited understanding of gender, feminist and queer theory, they simply were enacting, what I was told on multiple occasions was “a representation of themselves” not of the women they may encounter in their daily lives. As a key finding within this study,

female impersonators presented an array of sex and gender identities, which were difficult to categorize. Their motivations for performing were extremely diverse and included, but were not limited to, entertainment, power, gender exploration, and sexual satisfaction. Framing the behaviour of female impersonators as unilaterally misogynistic becomes particularly troubling when discussing transsexual female performers. My sole transsexual informant experienced a great deal of oppression and violence based on her status as a preoperative transsexual female.

According to popular anti-oppression discourses promoted by those spearheading the contemporary transgendered rights movement, the ideology most prominently promulgated by Janice Raymond (1994), that transsexual women are appropriating the bodies and identities of biological females, seems particularly inaccurate. How could an individual who did not present physically nor identify sexually as “male,” having relinquished that identity for a “female” sex identification, be reaping the benefits of male privilege? This seems particularly difficult to accept considering the oppression that this individual experienced for identifying as female. Based on my research findings, any theory regarding drag which ignores the unique and varied subjective understandings of impersonators’ gender performances and identities will fall drastically short of a holistic perspective. Even if we are to accept that the appropriation of femininity is occurring amongst male-identified female impersonators, then many of my informants were not appropriating femininity solely for the purposes of power, status, or prestige, but frequently as an

authentic representation of their gendered identity. This finding is not explicated within feminist literature which frames female impersonation as misogynistic.

A Drag Identity?

As a symbol drag represented a diverse array of significata for female impersonators. For many drag symbolized empowerment, whether personal, sexual or political. Many informants recalled the role drag queens played in the early gay and lesbian liberation movements in the United States, recalling in particular, the role female impersonators played as tireless rioters in the famous Stonewall Riots of 1969 in New York City. One informant, who had only been performing for approximately 2 years at the time I interviewed him, preferred not to be called a drag queen, feeling that the distinction of being a “queen” should be limited to those who battled for both their civil and human liberties. Others played on their status as “stars” within the queer community, likening themselves to “actors,” musicians, or dancers. My lead informant saw his role as drag show hostess as very important, having to keep the crowd entertained between performances and having to deliver messages to the community regarding queer positivity and safer sex practices. Sociologists Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor in their ethnography *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2003) emphasize the important role female impersonators play as political activists, promoting safer sex, and minimizing the gap between men and women and heterosexuals and homosexuals. If not an explicit motivating factor, political activism became an important aspect of many informants drag careers; many

participating in public events promoting awareness of the queer community in the region.

Sexually, impersonators often felt empowered through their display of femininity. Many noted pleasure in being sexually desired by men who attended drag shows. One in particular mentioned that he found it empowering to “seduce a man and make him do whatever you want him to do” within the context of the drag performance. Although many informants also garnered a great deal of unwanted sexual attention, sexual attention was nonetheless a definitively motivating factor for some informants to continue performing. For my one transsexual female-identified informant drag was empowering because it presented a supportive context to test sex and gender barriers. She utilized the performance environment not only to transition to female sex identification, but also to test, within a relatively safe atmosphere, her ability to pass as biological female. Through performance she was finally perceived of as she wished to be: as a woman.

As a symbol drag was also commonly associated by informants with stigmatization, discrimination, and prejudice. Recapitulating Esther Newton’s findings in her work *Mother Camp* (1972), many informants presented the drag queen as a stigmatized “other.” My lead informant preferred not to be referred as a “drag queen”, but rather as a female impersonator or gender illusionist, feeling that the term "drag queen" was demeaning. This informant contended that if “they [the general public] are going to insult you; they are going to call you a drag queen – when have you ever seen ‘drag queens’ portrayed positively

in the media?” Other informants alluded to this sentiment as well, associating the label drag queen, with stereotypes and generalizations about the community (i.e. drag queens as prostitutes, drug users, or transvestic fetishists). Some informants however, embraced the term drag queen over female impersonator, feeling that in order to be labeled a female impersonator, you must not just be impersonating any female, but rather famous female performers, actors, and musicians.

Rodney Needham in his article *Polythetic Classifications and Consequences* (1975) argues that terms like “belief” and “kinship” should be viewed by anthropologists in terms of “polythetic classifications,” a term Needham borrowed from the biological sciences (351). A polythetic category represents a concept that encompasses more than one meaning across or within any particular cultural context. As a symbol, drag can be viewed as a polythetic category representing a plethora of diverse meanings for any given informant. For some, drag was about combating heteronormativity and troubling the pervasive gender binary, for others it was about garnering attention, adoration and prestige, and still for others it was an attempt to understand a deeper level of themselves as sexual and gendered individuals. Although not all informants identified with the normatively feminine display they presented while on stage, all my female impersonator informants identified very strongly with drag. It was undoubtedly a part of their self-concept, something that I was told on many occasions would be sorely missed if they could no longer perform. According to

one informant, “you can take the boy out of drag, but not the drag out of the boy.”

Within academic gender, queer, lesbian and gay, and feminist studies commonplace categories such as “sex” and “gender” have been the subject of numerous theoretical expositions. As a product of the contributions of popular gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, we now have an understanding of sex and gender as categories collapsible into one another, each equally socially constructed. To be male does not necessarily mean you are masculine and heterosexual, but that sex, gender, and sexual identities can be found to exist in a multitude of diverse arrangements, those considered socially non-normative lumped under the umbrella term “queer.” Anthropologist David Valentine (2007) postulates that although we have critically evaluated and deconstructed terms like “female,” “gay,” and “transsexual” we have not critically evaluated the sociocultural construction and negotiation of foundational concepts like “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality” (132-33). In his ethnographic field research in New York City amongst mostly transgendered women (male-to-female), Valentine found that their understanding of the relationship between concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, in particular their division, differed from that of himself as an academic anthropologist.

This finding is consistent with my ethnographic research amongst female impersonators who often occupied multiple identity categories simultaneously, such as “transsexual”, “gay”, and “drag queen”, that we as anthropologists view as disjunctive. How can one identify as gay, but live as a

woman? How can one identify as feminine in terms of their gender, but not identify as transgendered? These were all questions I grappled with when performing this research. All participants had unique understandings of their sex, gender, and sexuality, which was not reflected in any other performer. The one unifying factor was their engagement in the drag subculture and their identification with a community of female impersonators. It is possible that their identification as “drag queens,” which they all readily or begrudgingly accepted, noting that was how they are most commonly identified by the general public, superseded their identities as gay, straight, transgendered or transsexual, uniting them as a group. As an alternative sex or gender identity the term “drag queen” escapes contemporary academic understandings of “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” within social scientific research. Uniting the female impersonators I worked with under this identity is their public performance of a normative gender, and the contextual shifting of their gender performances, whether from masculine to feminine, or from feminine to hyperbolically feminine, within the context of the drag show. This aspect of gender, as contextually mutable and situational, is neither fully understood nor articulated within contemporary gender or queer theory and is in need of further research within the social sciences.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and historians still seem to dominate the study of female impersonation. As an anthropologist, I found it difficult to locate what was unique to my discipline in furthering the already detailed studies of sexuality and gender amongst drag queens. Sociological works utilizing ethnographic field methods and a combination of macro- and micro-sociological analyses are more the norm in research on female impersonation than the exception, so what does an anthropological analysis have to offer to this research? While maintaining a tacit understanding of the postmodernist critique in anthropology, particularly when regarding important issues such as reflectivity and positionality, I reached back to anthropology's forebears, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, and undertook a project of true participant observation. Through participating to a degree that Malinowski himself would not have even imagined, becoming a female impersonator gave me access to an understanding of the drag community that few individuals are privy to. They accepted me not as a gay-identified male or a club patron, but rather as a fellow queen, someone who could understand both the pleasure and despair they felt performing each and every Thursday at the nightclub.

Reawakening the “culture” concept, but maintaining an understanding of its mutability and fluidity, I framed their community as a “subculture” in order to understand its unique attributes, patterns, and symbols. Interestingly it was this very process that led me to conclude that theorists of female impersonation in the past had tended to present an overly homogeneous and coherent picture of

the diverse and varied motivations, behaviours, and subjective understandings of self, which I found to be the hallmark of the community I was working with. Attempting to frame female impersonators as gender transgressors, queer rights activists, or sexist gay men leads to an incomplete understanding of what drives someone to cross-dress and perform “normative femininity” for an audience. Their motivations for performing in drag were on the surface very similar. They did it for attention, adoration or simply “for fun.” On a deeper level their motivations varied, some saw themselves as “actors” and “dancers,” others as activists and advocates, and still others as gender benders and seekers of a more “authentic” version of themselves. The queer nightclub environment and the atmosphere created at a drag show, allowed many of my informants to explore alternate understandings of their sex and gender identities, some outright rejecting the femininity they performed and others readily accepting it.

Attempting to form a coherent and fixed understanding of the gender identities of female impersonators is a complex task. Their unique subjective understandings of their sex, gender, and sexual identities’ escape contemporary academic frameworks, straddling the boundaries between identity categories such as “gay” and “transsexual” or “straight” and “queer.” The mere idea of a “core” gender identity is problematic for my informants, who uncovered an “authentic” gendered self, both in and out of drag. Their gendered performances and identities continually change both situationally and contextually, a finding which led me to theorize that “drag” itself could be perceived as an alternate sexual and/or gender identity. Risking the danger of

creating a new sex/gender category, that could be falsely perceived as fixed, immutable, and pervasive, I argue that “drag” as a concept encompasses a plethora of individuals who engage in the public performance of gender, marked specifically by the periodic shifting between various gendered performances, each performance seen as essential to the individuals self-concept. “Drag” as an identity, encompassed those individuals who identified with and internalized these shifting gendered performances. In this sense, the butch lesbian, drag king, effeminate gay male, and drag queen could all be placed in the category “drag”, although only two of the four (the drag queen and king) will adopt it to signify a social identity. In a sense, we are all practicing “drag,” altering our genders contextually and performing them whether for implicit or explicit means. Those who come to identity with these shifting performances, accept “drag” as an identity, which encompasses multiple false generalizations and assumptions within Canadian-American culture. Drag queens or female impersonators, mark gender as an act, they perform it loudly, hyperbolically, and publicly, emphasizing their explicit motivations for doing so. This is the hallmark of the “drag” identity that united all my informants, regardless of their sex and/or gender identification. In the words of the famous female impersonator RuPaul Charles “we are born naked, the rest is drag” (1995:VIII).

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo in his article *Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage* (1989) argues that ethnographers have ignored the subjective meaning and interpretation of culture offered to them by their research participants in favour of their seemingly “objective, neutral, and impartial” scientific analyses (21).

Rosaldo argues that these values that we strive for as anthropological researchers are no more “valid than those more engaged, yet equally perceptive, knowledgeable social actors” (1989:21). Social researchers who have utilized female impersonators as examples par excellence of their theories of gender transgression, female subordination, and political activism have tended to actively silence or ignore the voices of drag queens themselves regarding their own unique cultural attributes and in particular their understanding of concepts in human sexuality and gender. This goal of this research study was to appraise the validity of one particular theoretical model for understanding female impersonation, which contended that female impersonators appropriated femininity from women, utilizing it for their personal benefit whether in the form of power, prestige, respect or status. Further these performances were criticized for presenting women in a very objectifying and hypersexualized manner, considered to be a version of femininity as seen through self-identified men’s eyes. Female impersonators in this framework had no desire to become women, nor any “true appreciation of or admiration for women in our society” (Schacht 2002b:167). They were simply gay men cashing in on their “patriarchal dividend” through a display of “internalized misogyny and homophobia” (Schacht 2000:175).

As a self-identified queer theorist and anthropologist, I challenged these theories first on a theoretical basis arguing that concepts of “masculinity” and “femininity” were social constructions and therefore difficult to limit to bounded, fixed, and stable definitions. How can “femininity” be appropriated

from “women”, when being feminine was not necessarily ontologically related to being female? Many drag performers enacted a very stereotypical femininity, which often degraded, objectified, and further stereotyped women. This embodiment of the feminine was not the only one expressed by female impersonators, it was however the most popular. The hallmarks of female subordination and inferiority can be accessed through a study of female impersonation, however they are not the sole purview of female impersonators and point to a wider issue regarding the oppression of women in Western societies. Some drag queens are sexist, male-identified, and gender normative, caring little for how their performances reflect on women. However this model is far too oversimplistic to account for the entire drag subculture and the diverse motivations for performing. Many performers perceived of the femininity they embodied as an authentic representation of themselves, viewing drag as an opportunity to explore their sexual and gendered self-conceptions, a finding which is not substantiated within feminist literature which frames drag as misogynistic. Believing that “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” categories are all equally the creative result of dominant social, cultural, political, and historical discourses, how can one gender performance be said to be in the sole “ownership” of any sex? Ironically, feminist theories that claimed a relationship between female impersonation and misogyny, ran the risk of limiting the power of women by restricting their gender performances to that which is socially defined as “feminine.” In this framework, “masculinity” and all that is associated with it would conversely be under the sole purview of

biological men. This has the potential to further women's oppression, in terms of the greater cultural value given to traits classically associated with normative masculinity.

Ethnographically, as a participant observer, who is both gay-identified and has performed as a female impersonator, I had the opportunity to discuss issues of gender identity and perspectives on femininity with female impersonators. Noting Rosaldo's critique of classic ethnography, I gave equal value to my initial theoretical insights and to the information I garnered from ethnographic interviews with my informants. Although some informants limited their display of normative femininity to the performance context and identified as mostly masculine in terms of the gender when not in drag, they all noted a strong respect for and appreciation of that which is socially labeled "feminine." Notwithstanding these informants, other female impersonators in my sample identified more strongly with the femininity they performed as something closer to a core gender identity. These informants found it particularly offensive to be told that their genders were appropriated from "women", when they felt a strong internal connection to these performances. The existence of transsexual drag performers is particularly troubling to this framework, in that these individuals do not only identify as feminine in terms of their gender, but identify as female, making an argument for gendered appropriation particularly prejudicial.

A social scientific understanding of female impersonation cannot be limited to a single theory explaining what motivates individuals to perform in

drag. All have their strengths and weaknesses. Every new theoretical model illustrates a unique attribute of the drag community, but does not paint a holistic picture. My ethnographic research revealed a community of individuals who were united solely by their engagement in a unique drag subculture and their identification with “drag” as an aspect of their self-concept. Their complex motivations for performing, their forms of gendered embodiment, and their subjective understandings of their gender and sexual identities escape overly simple classifications. I do not claim this analysis to be exhaustive, but instead view it as a catalyst to promote further research into the phenomena of female impersonation, both within anthropology and outside it. As anthropologists we must never forget that our most valued teachers and the greatest lessons we will ever learn are those that come from the mouths of the informants with whom we have the privilege of interacting.

Questions to be Addressed in Future Research

This study is in no way an exhaustive social analysis of female impersonation in a Euroamerican cultural context. It is my belief that this study stands as a catalyst in the initiation of further research into both drag and cross-dressing practices in North America. Its goal is to trouble long-standing theories regarding what might motivate some individuals to perform as female impersonators or drag queens. In regards to future research, this work would benefit greatly from a larger sampling of informants from the various categories of drag performers detailed within this study (i.e. gay-identified male drag queens, heterosexual-identified male drag queens, and transsexual drag

performers). Due to the limited number of heterosexual-identified drag queens and transsexual drag performers (i.e. one in each category within my sample) these performers can only be compared as individuals in terms of the issues I raise within this study. A larger sampling of these informants could lead to a more nuanced and generalizable theory regarding issues of gender identity and misogyny amongst female impersonators.

The female patrons interviewed for this research study were patrons who typically attended drag shows and in most cases found them to be quite entertaining. This is in no way representative of women's interpretations of drag queens in general, as I did not interview any female patrons who did not attend a single drag performance. It is possible that those who found these performances, through exposure within the popular media, to be the most discriminating, prejudicial, and misogynistic chose to never attend a single "live" drag performance. These informants could potentially paint a very different picture of women's perceptions of drag queens. Due to a rather small sample of female-identified patrons interviewed within this study (n=4), a much larger sample would be needed in order to fully formulate a more generalizable theory regarding women's perceptions of the various forms of female impersonation and how these performances reflect on being "female" or "feminine."

A key theoretical issue within this study that can only be rectified through further research and analysis is whether the perceived intentions and meanings, on the part of drag performers or their audiences, is a sufficient

measure of the broader social meanings carried by these performances. Those drag performers who performed a rather stereotypical and normative femininity, which tended to reflect negatively on or parody the status of women within Euroamerican societies, were frequently unaware that their performances could be construed as misogynistic. Of the patrons I interviewed those who were both male- and female-identified also frequently failed to notice the occasional “othering” and objectification of femininity during certain drag performances. This raises the question as to whether these performances can be framed as misogynistic or not. Although informants may not have actively intended to discriminate against women this does not negate the possibility that their actions were, in some objective sense, sexist and/or prejudicial. Depending upon the status and/or background of the observer, performances could be read in a multitude of manners. As both an anthropologist and a self-identified feminist, there were performances that I read as misogynistic that my informants definitely did not. The question of whether the intentions of both drag performers and their audience members, is necessary in order to label any particular performance as discriminatory or sexist is a very complex issue and is in need of much further research attention within the social sciences.

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