DUCT TAPE, EYELINER, AND HIGH HEELS:
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A DRAG SHOW*

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Abstract. “Gender blending” is found on every continent; the Hijras in India, the female husbands in Navajo society, and the travestis in Brazil exemplify so-called “third genders.” The American version of a third gender may be drag queen performers, who confound, confuse, and directly challenge commonly held notions about the stability and concrete nature of both gender and sexuality. Drag queens suggest that specific gender performances are illusions that require time and effort to produce. While it is easy to dismiss drag shows as farcical entertainment, what is conveyed through comedic expression is often political, may be used as social critique, and can be indicative of social values. Drag shows present a protest against commonly held beliefs about the natural, binary nature of gender and sexuality systems, and they challenge compulsive heterosexuality. This paper presents the results of my observational study of drag queens. In it, I describe a “routine” drag show performance and some of the interactions and scripts that occur between the performers and audience members. I propose that drag performers make dichotomous American conceptions of sexuality and gender problematical, and they redefine homosexuality and transgenderism for at least some audience members.

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“Gender blending” is found on every continent. The Hijras in India, the female husbands in Navajo society, and the travestis in Brazil are just a few examples of peoples and practices that have been the subjects for “third gender” studies. Whether or not we accept gender as a spectrum, or as a variable with numerous attributes, the existence of third genders suggests that gender is not necessarily dichotomous. Gender seems to be ambiguous and to include multiple variations. Not predetermined at birth as is commonly believed, it apparently is something that is actively achieved and in some cultures actively chosen.

The American version of a third gender seems to be the drag queen. Drag queen performers can be found across the country entertaining at alternative clubs and gay venues. Drag queens are another category of people who confound, confuse, and directly challenge commonly held notions about the stability and concrete nature of both gender and sexuality.

Drag queens suggest that specific gender performances are illusions that require time and effort to produce. While it is easy to dismiss drag shows as farcical, simply forms of entertainment, we should remember that what is conveyed through comedic expression is often political, may be used as social critique, and can be indicative of social values. Drag shows present a protest against commonly held beliefs about the concrete, natural, binary nature of gender and sexuality systems, and they challenge compulsive heterosexuality.

This paper presents the results of my observational study of drag queens. In it, I describe a “routine” drag show performance and some of the interactions and scripts that occur between the performers and audience members. I propose that drag performers make dichotomous American conceptions of sexuality and gender problematical, and they redefine homosexuality and transgenderism for at least some people who attend these performances. Drag queen performances seem to suggest that gender and sexuality are cultural constructs that are malleable. A recurring theme in these shows is that gender and sexuality should be approached playfully. By implication, identities are fluid rather than fixed. The drag queens that I studied reject rigid gender distinctions. Through their performances they assert that gender is actively constructed.
Based on my observations, I suggest that drag queens complicate our assumptions about gender. One of my purposes in this paper is to point out how they do this. In addition, I address issues of social control within a deviant “gender bending” setting, the roles the drag performers play, and how drag queens expose the illusion of natural femininity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Third gender research has presented gender as a cultural construct, defined in various ways depending on the context. Since gender is not identical cross-culturally, we can view gender as a construct that refers to a variable rather than to a constant. Studies of third genders challenge Americans’ dichotomous gender system. However, much of the research on transgendered individuals argues that men who “do” women’s gender and who attempt to pass as women only reinforce a dichotomous gender structure.

Performers in drag shows are distinct because they do not try to pass as women. While some performers live as women, and many achieve the illusion of femininity as well as any woman does, audience members understand that drag performers are men.

People who attend drag shows know that the women on stage were born as anatomical males, regardless of their gender portrayals. A drag show is a kind of theater, a type of comedy. The awareness of a staged farce—open acknowledgment of a pretense—distinguishes these performers from the transgendered individuals studied by Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997). These researchers maintain that transgendered people support the dominant binary gender system by attempting to pass as a gender other than that suggested by their sex:

Those who start out challenging the dominant gender system by enacting gender in ways that are comfortable for themselves but disturbing to others may end up by redefining their identities in ways that conform to hegemonic belief systems and institutional demands (p. 479).

According to Raymond, “[t]hose who cannot or will not conform may be counseled to alter their bodies or be encouraged to perfect a new gender presentation so that they may ‘pass’ as the ‘other sex’” (quoted in Gagné et al. 1997:479). Ekins (1997) argues:
The large portion of subculture literature which seeks to educate male cross-dressers and sex-changers in the art and technology of ‘passing’—of appearing in public as a woman and being taken as one—is indicative of the way male femaling might be seen as reinforcing gender role stereotypes, thereby reproducing rather than changing the existing arrangements between the sexes (p. 40).

Other researchers have proposed that drag queen performers, on stage, are not attempting to completely “pass,” but are challenging the routine expected because of their sex category and thus the gender they are expected to perform. As West and Zimmerman (1987) state, “[i]f an individual identified as a member of one sex category engages in behavior usually associated with the other category,…[the] routinization…[of category assignment] is challenged” (p. 139).

Drag queens do not have the luxury of “passing” because the show’s explicit purpose is to highlight men performing as women; this is why people attend the shows. As researchers have found:

The vast majority of [performances] appropriate dominant gender and sexual categories and practices, neither embracing nor rejecting them, but instead using the fact that femininity and heterosexuality are being performed by gay men to make something quite different. They do this in a variety of ways, sometimes commenting directly on sexuality and gender, sometimes challenging their apparent femaleness with their actual maleness, sometimes arousing erotic responses that do not fit into the categories of heterosexuality or homosexuality, thus confusing or exploding those categories (Rupp and Taylor 2003:122).

Within sociological studies, gender has long been defined as an activity and performance; being a man or woman is not simply what we are but what we do. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe gender as

…an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society…. [Gender] is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category (pp. 126-127).
Proponents of this perspective see gender as achieved through interactions and not dependent on one’s sex or sex category. Rather it is created through our “ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (p. 130). In this formulation, gender is a social construct that guides behavior within interaction, not an identity fixed at birth. Gender is accomplished throughout our everyday interactions, and is meant to maintain a division within society. Each interaction between individuals presents an opportunity to affirm that division. How men and women “do gender” is “less a consequence of our ‘essential sexual natures’ than interactional portrayals of what we would like to convey about sexual natures, using conventionalized gestures” (p. 130). These interactions and their situational scripts affirm the taken-for-granted assumptions of social actors about their purportedly “essential sexual natures.”

One of the chief indicators of gender that facilitates gendered interaction is the achievement of a male or female appearance. One way we accomplish a male or female appearance is through what Wesely (2006) refers to as “body technologies.” These body technologies are used to change or alter our physical performance...technologies of femininity refer to those knowledges, practices, and strategies that manufacture and normalize the feminine body: those techniques, actions, and structures deployed to sculpt, fashion, and secure bodily shapes, gestures, and adornments that are recognizably female (pp. 86-87).

By means of these body technologies, a person achieves the appearance of masculinity or femininity. West and Zimmerman (1987:132) note that genitalia are not ascertained in everyday interactions; therefore, gender, and a distinctly gendered appearance, is much more significant in the assumptions that we use to guide our interactions. Other researchers have found that “[g]ender-crossing is so ubiquitous that genitalia by itself has never been a universal nor essential insignia of a lifelong gender. Gender instead is an achieved status rather than an ascribed biological characteristic and is based on tasks performed and the significance of clothing as well as anatomical and other factors” (Bullough and Bullough 1993:5).
I propose the perspective of *narratives* as a means of understanding gender as an actively constructed story that individuals use to convey information about themselves. Instead of simply defining gender as an institution that controls and limits the identities of social actors, the theory of narratives emphasizes the subjectivity of gender and it allows for the questioning of static gender categories within which individuals are required to place themselves. As Hausman (2000) theorizes, gender is a means of self-representation, one way we create our identities. This theory makes people active creators of their own gender. According to Hausman, “Narratives *convey*; they convey information…by providing a medium of self-representation” (p. 116). Hausman suggests that “[c]onsidering ‘gender’ in relation to the idea of narrative, it becomes a dynamic category of subjectivity, rather than a static referent of known categories” (p. 117). She proposes that “[a]ll of the categories—gender, gender identity, and sex (etc.)—need to be treated as ideas rather than facts” (p. 118). By conceptualizing gender as a narrative, a story we tell about ourselves, we can think of gender and sex as social ideas, not biological facts.

Our culture affects the gender stories we can tell about ourselves, such as the fact that we exist in a binary gender system. By accepting gender as a narrative we come closer to taking control over how we are allowed to represent ourselves. Using Hausman’s terms, drag queens refute gender ontologies (those narratives that accept gender as an innate, controlling force) and instead employ an epistemological approach that sees gender as a “mode of understanding” oneself and one’s society. Or, as Hausman puts it, “If a person’s gender identity is a product of story-making, then what’s to stop an individual from making himself up?” (p. 126). As a specific example, in transgendered people’s narratives this question is explicitly brought up on a daily basis. As Hausman states, “…transsexual autobiographies also demonstrate that becoming a man or a woman is a process of learning how to represent that identity publicly” (p. 125).

Drag queens present gender as a socially constructed and fluid concept; they do the same for sexuality. Rupp and Taylor (2003) provide an analysis of drag as a challenge to the categories of normal, a challenge to natural gender and sexuality. Rupp and Taylor state:
Drag…should be understood not only as a commercial performance but as a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality. The drag queens intentionally throw out this challenge, and their performances both create solidarity among gay audience members and draw straight viewers into a world they seldom experience…. Drag does, as gender scholars put it, ‘trouble’ gender and sexuality by making people question the naturalness of what it means to be a man or a woman and what it means to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Drag embodies ambiguity and ambivalence…. [Drag] may draw upon conventional gender and sexual categories, but it also expands and problematizes identity by taking bodies and practices that are culturally encoded as feminine or masculine or as heterosexual or homosexual and combining them in ways that create new gender and sexual meanings (p. 218).

Rupp and Taylor suggest that drag queens create new meanings for both gender and sexuality. Just as gender has been defined as a social construct hidden by the labels of natural and normal, so has sexuality. Drag queens challenge heterocentrism and compulsive heterosexuality. In the same way West and Zimmerman (1987) and Hausman (2000) argue that being a man or a woman is not something that comes from nature but is something we are taught to do, Rupp and Taylor argue that sexuality, and the prevalence of heterosexuality, is something we learn and not something that comes naturally. One of the main messages at these shows is that homosexuality is a variant of sexuality.

The foregoing arguments suggest that gender and sexuality are distinct categories that are not biologically determined; rather, they are social constructs that are malleable, fluid, and diverse. Whether we recognize our involvement or not, we have an active role in the creation of gendered identities. By achieving a female appearance, performers refute the notion that femaleness is something only women can accomplish; by existing as men who enjoy dressing as women they deny the notion that men naturally want to do gender as society expects. Finally, by putting sex in the spotlight and exposing its ambiguity and diversity, they refute the notion that there is anything abnormal about homosexuality. As Rupp and Taylor (2003) have stated:

“Drag queen” emerges as a kind of third-gender category in a society that insists there are only two.... In that sense, drag queens are like others who fall between or bridge or
challenge the division between masculine and feminine...[however], these are people who create their own authentic genders, and those constructions are important in helping us think in a complex way about what makes a man a man and what makes a woman a woman (p. 44).

**METHODOLOGY**

My research began as a part of a class project in 2002. I continued it through an independent study in 2004. My study focused on individuals performing professionally, or those paid for their performances. They are paid appearance fees by the clubs and receive tips from audience members. I did not include amateur queens in my research because I wanted to focus on performers who were making careers out of drag. Many amateurs perform only once or twice, or on an infrequent basis. My main focus was on performers who saw what they did as a job more than a hobby.

My research is based on field notes made while regularly attending drag shows at three gay clubs in Alabama and from interviews with performers. I made most of my notes during the shows and always typed them immediately after the shows were over. By typing my field notes directly after the shows I was able to recall from memory events and details I was unable to write down during performances. My two interviews with the performers Jacquelyn and Vicky were set up by mutual friends. I interviewed Jacquelyn once, face-to-face. I communicated with Vicky by email over the course of a few weeks. At the beginning of my study, I was interested in what types of controls operated within the drag show. I was also interested in what the drag show performances exposed about the gay community. My research interests evolved over the course of the study. Increasingly, I became interested in gender and the performance of sexuality, the interactions between performers and audience members, and the ways these interactions were controlled.

**FINDINGS**

**Setting**

The entrance “script” of the clubs was basically the same. At two of the clubs I studied the minimum age for patrons was 18; at the third it was 21. At all three clubs patrons’ IDs were always checked at the door. There was always someone at the door of
the clubs to collect money and issue armbands that indicated the patrons’ ages. The “gatekeeper” at the door decided who was allowed to enter. One of the clubs issued temporary membership cards for first-time attendees. Eventually these were replaced by permanent membership cards. Subsequently, the club began to charge for these. The two clubs that allowed underage people to enter charged more for people too young to consume alcohol. The only people exempt from this screening process were the drag queens. However, on one occasion I observed a performer bring guests into the club without paying or having their IDs checked.

The clubs had similar physical characteristics. They were always very dark with one or two bars, pool tables, bar games, neon beer signs with rainbows wrapped around them, and tables and chairs, and they had dance areas that were used as stages during the shows. The club I attended most frequently had a bathroom for males, one for females, and one for both genders and transgendered individuals. There were also dressing rooms for the performers. At one club, the two most popular performers had a dressing room separate from the other queens.

The shows I attended shared a basic format. They started between 12:00-1:30 in the morning and lasted from one to four hours. The Master of Ceremonies/DJ thanked the audience members for coming and asked if they were having fun. He (it has always been a male) usually announced who would be performing and informed the audience if the show was serving a specific purpose, e.g., when Jewel held a benefit to raise money for her next pageant, Ms. USA. At these shows, all of the tips made by the queens would go to support the benefit. During the shows, between three and six drag queens performed two or three routines with different music, costumes, and usually different hairstyles or wigs. All of the shows I attended had regular performers and one or more guest performers. The guest performers usually received less attention and fewer tips than the regular performers.

As the show started, the lights would dim or go out completely, except for the lights on the stage. Sometimes fog was released onto the stage and the performer’s music would start as she walked onto the stage, lip-synching and dancing. Music ranged from pop to rap and from country to oldies. Between performances, the hostess for the evening would perform a monologue, and interact with the audience. Audience members
were turned from passive observers to performers as the queens pulled people onstage, interacted with them, auctioned them off, “set them up” with another audience member, or placed the victim in a problematic situation; for example, once a queen made two men who claimed to be straight wrestle onstage in only their boxer shorts. Also, it was common for queens other than the hostess to use the microphone and interact with the audience members. After a performance, drag queens exited the stage and club personnel or an audience member would collect their tips (I believe normally a friend or regular club attendee performed this task, but I did see a few queens simply ask an audience member to pick up their tips for them). Once the show was over, the hostess would come out, thank people for coming, and encourage them to stay, drink, and dance. No ground rules were ever announced during the show. The point was to have fun. But it was the drag queen who controlled the events that she allowed to occur.

A wide range of people attended these shows. In one of the clubs I attended, audience members were largely heterosexual. In fact, after taking a poll of the audience Jacquelyn once humorously remarked that there were only four gay men in the entire club. The majority of the audience was made up of heterosexual males and females, homosexual men, and lesbians. There were also people who categorized themselves as bisexual and “bi-curious” (people who were unsure about their heterosexuality and were open to a homosexual experience). Other people in the audience might include other drag queens, transvestites, and transgendered individuals. Usually, there was a subgroup of “regulars.” These were gay men who attended the shows frequently and were friends with some of the performers. It was these regulars who usually picked up the performer’s tips off the stage. I saw these men enter the dressing room area on a few occasions.

**Performers**

The performers and their styles covered a wide spectrum. Drag queens, like the strippers in a study by Ronai and Ellis (1989), use “appearance, eye contact, manner and choice of music” as their “main expressive equipment” (p. 450). Jacquelyn told me that performers who lived as men were generally referred to as “she” while in drag and “he” when out of drag. However, during the show the terms seemed to be used interchangeably. All drag queens employ feminine body technologies in order to achieve
their looks. They used feminine clothing, makeup, wigs, pantyhose, girdles, pushup bras, jewelry, nail polish, and breast implants to achieve the image of “female.” As Vicky (name has been changed) explained, she “squeezed” herself into hose, a girdle, and a body shaper to achieve the appearance of breasts, smooth legs, and womanly curves—as many women do—to present an appearance consistent with cultural expectations. Although women begin with a different canvas than men, if they can both produce a similar look by using the same body technologies, we must ask how natural the feminine image of the female body really is.

Performers presented a variety of appearances. Chloe wore a red prom dress. Jewel impersonated Pink and had a fire act. Leather-clad, she played with fire onstage. This included her setting a portion of the stage on fire. Jewel also wore a bejeweled peacock costume composed of a thong, a jeweled bra, and a huge feathered peacock tail. Henrietta wore leopard print dresses and black stilettos; Jacquelyn had a black bodysuit with neon green hair and green tubes wrapped around her body. Josephine appeared in a gender-blending tuxedo and wedding dress combination. No matter what the costume, performers exposed plenty of skin and routinely stripped off a part of their outfits.

Some performers had breast and butt implants while others used temporary materials to achieve a feminine appearance. Josephine often overstated her femininity with huge blonde wigs and long bright fingernails. Performers’ displays of extravagant femininity:

…[A]re the kind of female impersonation numbers that come to most people’s minds when they think of drag. There is no critique of conventional ideas of femininity, although such numbers reveal the social basis of femininity and masculinity by showing that men can attain the feminine ideal. Despite the fact that these performances appear to pay homage to feminine beauty, the fact that straight men find the drag queens sexy complicates heterosexuality (Rupp and Taylor 2003:117).

Performers’ costumes, ranging from extremely feminine to gender-blending costumes, were often very creative. Not all costumes were meant to create an image of femininity. Some performers rejected accepted female body technologies; for example, not all attempted to achieve the illusion of breasts. Frequently, a performer would
entertain with extremely short hair or strip down to only a bottom and tape covering his nipples, making it obvious that he was male if there were no breasts.

Another very interesting performance technique was the mock performance, in which a drag queen would draw attention to the fact that he was male. Henrietta did this every time “she” spoke because “she” made no attempt to hide her deep male voice. Mock performances would also occur during the monologue portion of the show when a queen would complain about having to tape “her” genitals back or joke about the audience staring at “her” penis as she was walking away. During one show, a man in the audience dressed in very bad drag with a five o’clock shadow was pulled onstage to perform with the queens; it was obvious in this case that this person was a man and was mocking drag. Performance routines varied. Some queens danced around the stage; some stripped (an extremely common theme). Some numbers allowed performers to show off gymnastic talents, e.g., back flips, splits, and cartwheels. Impersonations of characters such as Pink and Wonder Woman were popular. Chloe did Dolly Parton.

A technique frequently used by queens was to establish physical contact with different audience members (especially generous tippers). A performer might kiss an audience member on the cheek, grope or fondle breasts or crotch, humping the “victim,” or place an audience member’s hand on the performer’s butt, crotch, or breast. Henrietta had a penchant for putting audience members’ heads between her breasts. These invasions of other people’s spaces indicate that the performers are the “authors of the situation” inside the clubs (Ronai and Ellis 1989:450).

Some performers flirted with members of the audience. The queen would approach a tipper and dance in front of him or her, but not take the tip. Then, she would walk away and perform in front of another person or in the middle of the stage, while maintaining eye contact with the original tipper. Eventually she would return and take the tip, as if to indicate that she would take the money when she was ready. The point seemed to be that the drag queen was demonstrating her control of the interaction.

In addition to variation among performance styles, queens avowed different motives for performing. According to Jacquelyn, for some performers, including herself, drag shows were an outlet for artistic expression. She explained that others are “genetic fuck-ups,” or people born in male bodies who were supposed to be women. These latter
were the true transgendered performers. Jewel once said that she was just happy to “be able to take everyone’s minds off of the bullshit happening outside.” According to Jacquelyn, some drag queens simply liked the attention and the money. Matto (1972) suggests:

The path of least resistance and often the period of greatest happiness for many a transsexual is his joining of a female impersonator show where in the company of other transsexuals...he is at last not only accepted but paid for being himself (p. 203).

The roles performed by the drag queens appear affect their personalities. Rupp and Taylor (2003) discovered, “To a different extent for the different girls, the use of drag names symbolizes the creation of a separate personality” (p. 33). Vicky echoed this when I asked her what she liked most about performing. She said:

Total Freedom! I can do anything and say anything. I’m no longer me; I am the fabulous Vicky Morgan. She can get away with anything. She is sexy, naughty, aggressive, flirtatious, and uninhibited. And best of all, she is the center of attention.

Here Vicky talks about her queen alter ego in the third person, as a separate entity. It seems that drag performers themselves are taken in by the identities and personalities they enact onstage.

Scripts

In the clubs where I observed drag queens performing, there seemed to be no tabooed topics of talk. Topics considered indelicate in other settings—e.g., sex and religion—were considered fair game. References to alcohol and comments about audience members were frequent. The most common topic of discussion was sex. Shows would begin with the hostess asking how many straight people or “breeders” and how many “fags or queers or lesbians” were in the crowd. Audience members responded enthusiastically to these labels. By using them lightheartedly, queens implied that homosexuals should be proud of these usually disparaging labels. This “taking back” of derogatory names is in keeping with the notion in queer theory of reclaiming negative
labels. For example, Rupp and Taylor (2003) suggest:

On the surface, these performances might seem to make concrete and distinct the categories of sexuality and gender, but in fact the point is just the opposite. Even when the girls call attention to the existence of conventional categories by asking audience members to situate themselves individually or collectively…the meaning of the categories is challenged…Audience members join the performance by miming sex acts that are outside their category of gender and sexual preference (p. 136).

The queens also asked if any of the straight people in the audience were willing to be gay for a night. Then the hostess usually took a sexual survey, asking who was looking to get “drunk and fucked” or how many “tops” or “bottoms” there were. This last question solidifies the club as gay territory by assuming the audience is knowledgeable of homosexual terms, and it establishes the normalcy of homosexual sex within this territory. Here, verbal scripts support a gay cognitive blueprint.

When an audience member is singled out by the hostess, his or her sexual identity is immediately established. In this setting a person’s sexual identity seems to be the most important personal attribute. Within interaction that I observed, one of the first questions queens posed to members of the audience was meant to discern if an individual was straight, gay, somewhere in between, or something else. If a man replied that he was straight, it was very common for a drag queen to retort that there was “no way” the man was straight given the way he was looking at her. This refutation of heterosexuality also occurred with women. For example, Josephine once told a woman that she was only straight if Josephine (who was wearing a huge blonde wig) was a natural blonde. During one show, Jacquelyn told a woman who claimed to be straight that she must be gay because she looked like she had just come from a Melissa Ethridge concert. The woman responded that she was married, and that her husband was home in bed. Jacquelyn replied that her husband was at home “sucking a man’s dick.”

Talk by queens was saturated with sex: sexual remarks, sexual jokes, and sexual innuendos. For example, Jacquelyn once brought a man onstage and asked him if he was gay. He responded that he was bi-curious. Jacquelyn then asked the man if he wanted her, and he said yes. She then tried auctioning him off to audience members. Jacquelyn
made him remove his shirt, claimed that she needed to see what “size” he was, and then began looking down his pants. She ordered the man to step into the light because she did not see anything, and joked about what size he might be. Finally, she let him go back to his friends, but told him to keep his shirt off for the remainder of the show. He complied for most of it.

This interaction was typical of the byplay between drag queens and audience members. The queens put sex on humorous display. Subjects and body parts normally deemed private are made into public issues. As Vicky once told me, drag queens have total freedom to discuss taboo subjects:

> I can do anything and say anything. I am no longer me....She can get away with anything...Sex is a very taboo subject. Drag Queens can just throw it right out there and talk about it. They draw attention to it. Who better than a man transformed into woman? Queens can point out the obvious and shine light on the obscure parts of sexuality, but in a humorous and entertaining way. Laugh at the Queen and her jokes and songs instead of admitting your own secrets and at the same time realize others have the same secrets and desires. [Drag] is an open forum for a frank discussion…[of] a very taboo subject with lots of uncomfortable subtopics. Queens can talk about it without being uncomfortable.

Rupp and Taylor (2003) suggest:

> In the same way that [queens] blur the boundaries of gender and sexual categories and violate traditional distinctions between public and private, they cross the line between the respectable and the vulgar. Their bawdy talk about sex acts shocks the audience, creating an opening for the introduction of ideas about gender and sexuality that are shocking in a different sense. Such talk also implicates the audience in the performance. By listening to and having to respond to vulgar talk about body parts and sex acts, and by being fondled and stripped in a public space, the distinction between the drag queens as marginal members of society and the audience as respectable is challenged. Vulgarity has a kind of leveling and normalizing effect (pp. 140-141).

Club performers frequently promoted alcohol. This suggests that the gay club is “primarily an area of recreation, pleasure, and hedonism with social relations organized accordingly” (Ridge, Minichiello, and Plummer 1997:159). Drag queens regularly asked
members of the audience if they were looking to get “drunk and fucked,” told them—if they were not loud enough—they needed to drink more, and had shots made for people who were of legal age celebrating birthdays. As Jacquelyn explained during our interview, while she did not feel comfortable promoting alcohol because she didn’t drink, she knew the club was a bar and the longer people stayed to see her perform the more they were going to drink.

Religious jokes were also very frequent. During one show Josephine told a table to settle down because the people on the other side of the room were “good Christian people.” The females at the table responded that they were Christians, too. Josephine said she would attend church with them in the morning, and that she would try to dress down a little. Religion, a source of harsh moral judgments about homosexuals, is mocked at these clubs. Queens make it clear that homosexuals, who may be targeted outside of this gay territory, will not protect religious beliefs from attack. These jokes reversed the roles of religious and gay people—in this setting it is religious people who are abnormal.

Occasionally the hostesses would reveal something about their days, perhaps a way of letting onlookers into their lives and establishing “counterfeit intimacy” (Ronai and Ellis 1989:447). In this way, hostesses stepped out of their roles as performers and became friends, sharing the mundane details of their lives with the audience. It was here that the queens seemed more human and more like those in the audience. Counterfeit intimacies may be used to solidify bonds within the gay community and to encourage audience members to identify with the performers. A bond already appears to exist between homosexuals and drag queens because “the ‘natural attitude’ toward gender assumes heterosexuality, thus all those who are not heterosexual are suspected of being gender transgressors” (Hausman 2000:125). Personal revelations may serve to strengthen existing connections between the gay and transgender communities.

The drag queens both complimented and insulted the audience members. Performers frequently told audience members—especially males—how attractive they were. The queens used stereotypes to insult individuals. One queen told a masculine woman that she looked like she had just finished building a deck. Insults were aimed at fellow performers, as well. A few times I observed queens get into mock fights by
insulting each other’s hair, clothes, makeup, and weight. These topics are connected with
female appearance. Perhaps the performers were drawing on a “catfight” stereotype
about women. Frequently, a queen would ask the audience how she looked and would
complain about how much work went into her appearance. Sometimes it would be
complaints normally associated with what every woman must go through to achieve a
look, such as applying eyeliner in the car. At other times it would be complaints about
what the performers as men had to do to look like women, such as hiding their genitals.

**Control**

The conversations between queens and audience members encouraged the
relaxation of sexual norms, which, in turn, provided entertainment for the audience. For
instance, during one show a visiting performer from Atlanta invited female friends
onstage and asked them if they wanted to kiss. They followed her suggestion. Drag
queens’ suggestions were usually followed. Only once did I observe an audience
member, brought onstage, refuse a queen’s suggestion. This may be a result of the
control performers exercise during shows. Perhaps people come prepared to act outside
social expectations; or maybe when they are onstage, audience members feel they are part
of the show, responsible for entertaining the crowd. As with strip clubs, gay clubs are
outside the normal means of social control. Like holidays and vacations (Mardi Gras or
during Spring Break), gay clubs offer people opportunities to “let loose.” Inside of gay
clubs, usual expectations and rules are not enforced. People are encouraged to act in
unorthodox ways. Their actions become part of the show. According to Montemurro
(2001), it is in these types of settings that “the norms of interaction are not by any means
established or institutionalized” (p. 275).

Within these alternative clubs, various types of formal and informal controls
emerge to direct interaction. The doorperson is the first agent of control that a club guest
will encounter. The doorperson checks for valid IDs and can deny entrance to someone
who is too intoxicated or who recently has been thrown out of the club. One of the clubs
I attended had a sign hanging on the door. It stated: “This is a gay-alternative club. If
you cannot deal with the atmosphere PLEASE DO NOT COME IN.” This sign served
two purposes: First, it indicated that the door was an entrance into gay territory. Those
uncomfortable with homosexuality were being warned that they were not welcome. Second, it brought attention to the fact that the permissive atmosphere of the club would be protected. Certain types of interactions usually considered taboo would not be restricted within club walls. Once inside the club, personnel and even police officers helped to enforce the club as a protected space. Dressing rooms provided a type of spatial control. These were areas of the club most people were not allowed to enter. Only the performers and their guests entered the dressing rooms—the places drag queens donned their costumes and identities, and then stepped out of character once the shows were over.

However, the most powerful agents of control in the clubs were the drag queens themselves. Performers determined the nature of the interactions between themselves and audience members. Onstage, they ordered people around and guided interactions, generally encouraging unrestrained actions by the audience. Drag queens were responsible for maintaining audience control. According to Jacquelyn, occasionally an audience member would get out of hand, but he felt that he could take care of himself. If he were in danger, in only a few seconds a group of people would appear to protect him. Drag queen performers are the stars of the gay community, and are treated and protected as such. In the words of Vicky, the “normal” troublemaker is usually

...someone way too drunk and security has to take care of it. Just the average heckler doesn't stand a chance against a queen in her element. Why do you think she is called a QUEEN? She rules the stage and the world for that matter when she's performing.

It seems that these alternative clubs are not only gay territories. During shows, they are the drag queen’s territory. The performers know that other forms of control exist, but these are rarely needed due to the queens’ control of the audience. The willingness of audience members to follow suggestions and orders implies that the performers are the “authors of the situation” in this setting. Those who author the situation control it (Ronai and Ellis 1989:450). In Goffman’s terms, the situation determines interaction. Since these performers create the situation and set the rules for interaction, they control the audience. I would argue they use their control to present definitions of sexuality and gender that are inconsistent with conventional beliefs. It is
within this setting that a political protest is staged against normal social definitions and these performers are allowed to, as Vicky stated, “get away with anything.”

**DISCUSSION**

Drag queens have many roles during their shows. They determine what will occur while they are on stage, instruct audience members on how to interact with others, and create the situations in which audience members are placed. As stars of the gay community, the drag queens demand respect from audience members. A couple talking during one of Jacquelyn’s performances refused to tell her what they were discussing. She told them it had better be important, since they were not attending to her. If the star of a show was endangered by an intoxicated audience member, the homosexual members of the audience would immediately respond to protect the queen. Vicky explained this by saying, “Drag shows are the center of gay culture. We are truly ‘Queens.’ We reign over gay society.”

Most alternative clubs now have drag shows. Drag queens are usually present at gay functions. While many homosexuals can pass as heterosexual, drag queens are very public about their sexual orientation and are explicit ambassadors of gay culture to the heterosexuals they encounter. Well-known drag queens are advertised weeks in advance before they perform at a club, and are received by cheering crowds when they step onstage. Queens compete for titles in pageants, and for recognition and status. The more famous queens attract people to clubs. They have followings of fans. They appear to receive “perks”—e.g., their guests enter the clubs free and receive free drinks. For some drag queens, performing is their only source of income.

In the dominant culture, there are few icons with which homosexuals can identify. The alternative club has created an entertainment venue and produced its own celebrities that reflect the values and beliefs of the homosexual community. Drag queens are the entertainers of gay clubs. They create shows designed to please the audiences, to make them laugh, and to ensure that they have a good time. Through entertainment, performers are allowed to stage a protest against normal definitions and ideas about sexuality and gender. Their accusations and their challenges to convention do not appear threatening because they are made in the guise of entertainment. They challenge the ideal female
image, promote homosexuality as a salient sexual identity, and mock heterosexuality as something less than a concrete institution. While audience members are laughing and being entertained, drag queens present the inconsistency of what some have labeled “heteronormativity…the ideological production of heterosexuality as individual, natural, universal, and monolithic” (Ingraham 1994:207).

In these alternative clubs, people may find a social environment that promotes actions and identities labeled as deviant in the larger society. Drag shows explicitly demonstrate why these clubs exist: to present sexuality and gender as created. In their conversations, drag queens sometimes claim to be attracted to all types of audience members: men, women, homosexual, heterosexual, and transgendered. Within the same monologue a queen may joke about sleeping with men and women, and then act disgusted by a breast or by sex with a female. The same performer may appear to be a woman in one act and then blend masculine and feminine body technologies and appear bigendered or ambiguously gendered in a second performance. Performers mock the normalcy of heterosexuality and legitimize homosexuality. These performers reify homosexuality and transgenderism as salient identities, and stretch gender and sexuality beyond accepted definitions. As Josephine once told a man who said he was a woman trapped in a male body, she “fits into all categories.” Elastic categories of sex and gender seem to offer homosexuals and transgendered attendees a connection to the performers. Not only are they not alone in the club setting, but their disparaged identities are recast as normal and positive. In these clubs, the boundaries of sexual identities are elastic and attitudes are relaxed.

In many performances by queens, the presented gender of the performer is intentionally ambiguous. In their study of drag, Rupp and Taylor (2003) argue:

Perhaps the most powerful numbers are the sexy ones that evoke responses in audience members that cannot be characterized as heterosexual or homosexual, because it is not clear what about the drag queens—their maleness or femaleness—is the cause of the response (p. 126).

During these sexually ambiguous numbers the image of femininity that drag queens seek to portray challenges usual ideas about femininity, and gender confusion is publicly
displayed. Audience members are reminded that they are witnessing gender explicitly on display, not in the everyday guise of the “natural.” West and Zimmerman (1987) note that gender includes “those actions undertaken so that they are specifically unremarkable” (p. 136). When it is “unremarkable,” gender passes as largely unnoticed in interaction, and thus is believed to be innate. When drag queens complain about the work that is required to look and act feminine, they contest gender as a natural phenomenon and put the work required to achieve it in the spotlight. When male audience members are told to treat the queen “like a lady” or “how they treat their mothers,” they are reminded that gender is a factor in how we interact with others.

The feminine appearance of these performers alone challenges the naturalness of gender and the supposed inherent opposition of its dichotomous categories. From a sociological perspective, the clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and mannerisms that comprise the category of female body technologies are as equally important as sex organs in defining a woman as female. Wesely (2006) states:

> The feminine ideal is performed in a large part via body technologies…although all body technologies are artificial, the technologized body passes as natural when it conforms to dominant social expectations of gendered bodies. The argument that body technologies only reinforce gender identities ignores the possibility that they can affect the negotiation of identity in an ongoing way. The concept of identity as an ongoing process helps foreground more marginalized meanings of the technologized body (pp. 644-645).

All performers are called she while in drag even if they live as men. Performers are actively involved in the creation of their narratives. This suggests that language can affect reality. The binary conception of gender provides only for a “he” and a “she.” A dichotomous gender, supposedly based on biology, makes no provisions for individuals to choose the gender categories that apply to themselves. The claim could be made that because performers adhere to the labels provided by dichotomous American definitions of gender, they are only reinforcing accepted nomenclature. Drag queens do employ dichotomous terms, but it is inaccurate to assume that performers reify current gender definitions. By deciding which pronouns apply to them, drag queens remind us that
gender is essentially a choice. It is through these types of reminders that performers exemplify Hausman’s (2000) definition of gender as a “dynamic category of subjectivity…as idea rather than fact” (pp. 117-118).

The drag queens’ emphasis on sex is similar to the cross-dressing hijras in India whose “performances contain flamboyant sexual displays and references to sexuality, which break all the rules of normal social intercourse” (Nanda 1990:149). Rupp and Taylor (2003) suggest:

The Drag Queens make sex, which is usually far more private, a very public affair…The language the drag queens use about sex and their constant talk about sex acts contribute to an environment in which anything goes and nothing is shocking (p. 138).

Perhaps one reason for the prevalence of sex in this setting is that the sex life of homosexuals is separated from the rest of their lives. Although homosexuality has become more accepted, there is still a “don’t ask, don’t tell” social policy in effect. In public, sex may still be considered a taboo topic. Homosexual sex is even more tabooed. Perhaps the reason sex is such a prominent topic within the gay club is because outside of clubs homosexuals are not recognized as full sexual beings. Kane and Schippers (1996) found that the majority of men and women believed heterosexuality to be

…“somewhat natural in origin” and in one study cited “more than 70 percent of the respondents…agreed they would be greatly distressed to find out a family member or friend was homosexual, and more than 60 percent reported that they consider homosexuality an indication of a decline in morals in the United States” (pp. 652-653).

According to Cruikshank (1992),

[Homosexuality] has been grudgingly accepted as long as…[homosexuals] kept quiet about it. If they mentioned it they were called “too blatant”….Now lesbians and gay men are demanding that they be seen as sexual beings (p. 54).

Another explanation for the frequent talk about sex in clubs could be that this is one of the few places that homosexuals can meet others with similar sexual preferences.
Heterosexuals take for granted that they can meet sexual partners almost anywhere. When homosexuals search for sexual partners, they have fewer venues.

There is still research that needs to be done on drag shows and their stars. Male-to-female drag has been the main focus of study. More recently, female-to-male drag has come into focus. It would be interesting to discover if these different forms of drag are similar. I believe more research should be conducted on audience members in order to understand how they perceive drag and possibly how drag has changed their perceptions. Lastly, more research might shed light on the complex challenges these performers offer to conventional ideas about men and women, and males and females.

REFERENCES


Vicky. Personal email correspondence.
