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# Multiple Selves, Fragmented (Un)learnings: The Pedagogical Significance of Drag Kings' Narratives

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This dissertation, *MULTIPLE SELVES, FRACTURED (UN)LEARNINGS: THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DRAG KINGS' NARRATIVES*, by LESLEE GREY, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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Leslee Grey

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## ABSTRACT

### MULTIPLE SELVES, FRACTURED (UN)LEARNINGS: THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DRAG KINGS' NARRATIVES

by  
Leslee Grey

This dissertation features the stories of drag king performers. Through life story interviews coupled with participant observations, and informed by gender performance, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic theories, this project examines the ways in which drag performers construct, take up and perform multiple subjectivities and how they benefit from multiple knowledges in their learnings and unlearnings. Through an examination of the creation and circulation of these drag king pedagogies, I suggest ways in which drag performers create and sustain gendered knowledge, while navigating difference and working with multiple discourses of identity, oppression, and power in a socially and economically diverse city.

Participants' perceptions of their gender identities point to the ways in which identity categories are insufficient. Each participant uses an existing identity label (e.g., transgender, tranny, boi) or a combination of existing labels, to understand their gender identities, even as their narratives point to the failures of fixed categories. It is my contention that the narratives of these particular performers highlight the multiplicity of all selves, and the ways in which all learnings and unlearnings are fragmented. Thus, drag

king narratives have significant pedagogical value in examining the relationships between subjectivities and knowledge.

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OF DRAG KINGS' NARRATIVES  
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Leslee Grey

A Dissertation

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in  
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In  
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in  
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2009

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2009

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## GLOSSARY

**Boi:** A young person who is biologically female and expresses gender and sexuality in a fashion that is aligned with young, heterosexual, biological males.

**Butch:** A person who embodies culturally-defined masculine qualities. In the lesbian community, this is a biologically female person who also identifies as a female and adopts masculine affectations and dress.

**Femme:** A person who embodies culturally-defined feminine qualities. In the lesbian community, this is a biologically female person who identifies as female and expresses herself in normative feminine dress and affectations.

**Gender bending:** A form of gender expression that often challenges gender stereotypes.

**Genderfuck:** An expression of gender that bends stereotypes in an ironic way.

**Genderqueer:** An inclusive term for those whose sexual and gender expressions transgress normative definitions.

**Queer:** An ambiguous and inclusive term for some, but not all, lesbian, gay, transgendered, and intersexed people.

**Gender dissonance:** Cognitive dissonance that arises from a misalignment between one's subconscious and physical sex.

**Gender discordance:** A conflict between gender identity and biological sex.

**Gender dysphoria:** A psychological term that conflates gender dissonance with the emotional distress related to the societal pressure to conform to gender norms.

**Misogyny:** Thoughts, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that embody the hatred of women and girls.

**Palimpsest:** A manuscript from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text. It can also mean an object, place, or area that reflects its history.

**Sexism:** Beliefs or attitudes that cultivate discrimination based on the notion that one sex is inferior.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction: The Scene of an Observation of a Drag King Performance**

A friend gave me a flyer for this party tonight, which reads:

*Bois' Night Out @ Judy's Y'all!! Queers, butches, gender pirates, trans ams, FTM's, trannyfags, menfolk, and gays of all shapes and colours – grrrls invited, but please ... pack to impress! Electro/soul/ punk/ metal/ disco/ new wave/ old skool/ hip hop... All pronouns and orientations welcome, especially you, yeah you, hot stuff! Hooch/ hang out/ hook up/ ho's/ hot dj's/ holla!*

Judy's, a gay bar, is located in a trendy, gentrified Atlanta neighborhood and nestled among several shopping, dining, and drinking establishments. I spot the party's organizer and host, Pat, who often goes by the name Uncle Pat, dressed in her usual denim overalls, and I compliment her on the large turnout for the event. On most nights, Judy's is fairly understated and unadorned. But for this party, Pat brought in special decorations such as garlands of reflective tinsel, which hang from the DJ booth and the stair rails. Behind the bar is a large Igloo cooler with a sign on it that reads, "Hooch \$1." Pat tells me that it is made from vodka, lemonade, and Hawaiian Punch. I make a mental note to stay away from the Hooch.

As with most gay bars in town, Judy's clientele is usually comprised of men. However, tonight is an exception. Well, *sort of*. While there are dozens of young women here (most appear to be in their early- to mid-twenties), many of them look like young men. Dressed in baggy jeans, polo shirts with the collars "popped," and baseball caps – clothes purchased from the men's section of large retail stores like Hollister or Abercrombie and Fitch – they resemble an odd amalgam of frat boys and "twinks" – young, slim, and fashionable gay men. I think back to my early experiences patronizing gay bars and recall that a decade or so ago in the South, it wasn't as hip to be a girl who looked like a boy. Back then, femme (or the femme side of androgyny) was in, and masculine-looking women sporting short haircuts and wearing men's clothing, so-called "butches," were sometimes criticized for attempting to co-opt heterosexual male privilege and power, emulating the very people that many women went to gay bars to escape – hypermasculine straight guys. From the above text of the flyer referencing such masculine-coded terms as "menfolk" and "bois," as well the sea of short, men's-style haircuts and baseball caps seen around the bar at Judy's, it appears that escapism has changed. This "boys' night" is unlike other drag king events I have observed, as "girlie girls" are few and far between.

In addition to DJ Uncle Pat spinning records, tonight's other entertainment provides further evidence of women enacting what Judith Halberstam refers to as "female masculinity," a masculinity performed and mediated through a female body. As I head to the unisex restroom, I notice two young women standing in front of the door, joking with each other and giggling excitedly. I ask, "Are you in line?" One of them answers, "We need to get in there and change clothes, but you go ahead." They are each holding a wig and a small pile of folded clothing, and I realize that these two women are part of the

evening's entertainment. There's going to be a drag king show, for which these girls will transform themselves into boys and perform a lip synced song-and-dance number for the audience.

About fifteen minutes later, Pat takes the stage area and introduces the first performers, "Johnny Cockring and the Tools," much to the delight of the smiling crowd, which laughs and cheers, gathering around the stage area in a semi-circle as the first number begins. On stage are three performers dressed in matching men's shiny gray vintage "sharkskin" suits and pompadour-style wigs. The Temptations' song "My Girl" plays over the sound system, as the leader of the group lip syncs and the other two dance behind "him" with the synchronized choreographic style associated with 1960s R&B groups. One of the backup dancers is sporting a beard, and the lead singer has a noticeable bulge in his pants. The audience laughs, hoots, and whistles, as a few people approach the stage to tip performers with dollar bills. An audience member joins the singer onstage, and they dance and grope each other suggestively. The crowd goes wild, as a few spectators reach their arms around their own dates. It's obvious that the performers aren't getting rich off of their acts; they're doing it for fun.

Even more sexy, theatrical, and downright ridiculous is the next drag king act, which stars the two women from the restroom line. Now dressed as men in cut-off denim shorts, t-shirts, mullet-style wigs, tube socks, and sneakers, they parody the iconic love scene from the movie *Ghost*, in which Demi Moore's character is visited (and kissed and fondled) by the ghost of her dead husband, played by Patrick Swayze, while working at her pottery wheel. As the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" plays over the speakers, the two drag king potters gradually appear to struggle with their sexual attraction for one

another before finally giving in to it – all while making a very large mess out of sculpting clay. One drag king designs a vase-like vessel, and the other sculpts a phallus, which he then proceeds to insert into the vessel in mock intercourse. After registering an exaggerated look of surprise and delight on their faces, the two potters simulate intercourse by grinding on one another, while the crowd enthusiastically cheers them on. The final act “climaxes” with the two pouring a bucket of muddy pottery water over themselves. Everyone’s laughing. When the song ends, someone mops up the mess, and DJ Uncle Pat resumes playing records. The sensuality in the air is palpable, as the crowd picks up where it left off – dancing, drinking, and engaging in public displays of affection. At Judy’s and other bars in Atlanta that feature drag shows, king appears to be the new queen.

### **Background: Why Study Drag Kings?**

Like many large cities across the United States and in other countries, the Atlanta, Georgia, metro area is currently witnessing an explosion of queer performance culture. Drag kings perform almost every week at various gay and lesbian clubs to diverse audiences and in various neighborhoods, from trendy urban areas to once-rural suburbs. Over the last few decades, there has been a proliferation of academic work on queer performance art culture, focusing mainly on drag *queens*: men who perform as women.<sup>1</sup> Significant contributors to queer performance art culture are drag performers, who typically dress up and perform publicly as the opposite gender (of that which they were prescribed at birth). Only more recently has attention been given to academic study of drag *kings*, that of women who perform as men.

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<sup>1</sup> For one of the classic texts, see Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

The last five years in particular have witnessed an emergence of academic and public work on the subject of drag kings, including a photography book,<sup>2</sup> an anthology,<sup>3</sup> a few scholarly articles,<sup>4</sup> and a number of documentary films,<sup>5</sup> signaling the current cultural significance of drag king performance. A considerable portion of drag king scholarship highlights “kinging” as a political act. Viewed not only as entertainment, according to drag king scholar (and performer) Donna Troka, drag kinging “can be at the forefront of social justice work.”<sup>6</sup> In her study of three Midwestern drag troupes, Troka concludes that “[Drag’s] merging of entertainment ... outreach, and critique equips it to be a leading progressive feminist movement.”<sup>7</sup>

My own research reflects slightly different narratives from drag king performers. I contend that while drag kinging is undeniably a space where performers “play with” aspects of gender that are often otherwise taken for granted, and in this way functions as a potential site of political work on gender and sexuality issues, I challenge the assertions that drag kinging necessarily fosters “community,” “democracy,” “critical thinking,” and “social justice.” I interrogate such taken-for-granted terms that circulate among drag troupes and focus on the learnings and unlearnings taking place in drag performances. This dissertation contributes to the fields of Education, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Performance Studies through its exploration of drag kings’ narratives.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, and Jean Bobby Noble, eds., *The Drag King Anthology* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> R. Best, “Drag Kings: Chicks with Dicks,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996), Steven P. Schacht, “Lesbian Drag Kings and the Feminine Embodiment of the Masculine,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3-4 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the films Gabrielle Baur, *Venus Boyz* (Clockwise Productions, 2002), Daniel Peddle, *The Aggressives*, (USA: Daniel Peddle, 2005), Sonia Slutsky, *Ladies as Gentlemen: Drag Kings on Tour* (USA: OpalEye Productions, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Donna Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2007), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Using interviews and observations, this research investigates the ways in which performers describe their experiences doing drag: What (and how) do drag kings learn from their performances? How are alternative or “queer” masculinities and femininities constructed and acted out? What is learned and taught? It is my contention that this study will help answer broad questions of how dominant and alternative gender discourses are constructed and circulated.

Based on my review of scholarly work on drag kings, my initial research questions are:

1. In terms of ideas and knowledges about genders, identities, and subjectivities, what (and how) are drag kings teaching and learning?
2. How do drag communities allow for alternative (non-hegemonic, heteronormative) masculinities/femininities to be articulated, or do they reproduce hegemonic gender representations?
3. How is the body a site of learning about gender? How do multiple bodies/communities produce and share knowledge?

I chose these particular research questions because they allow me to address the performative nature of gender, how gender is learned and unlearned, and how drag kings use their knowledges to adopt and enact identities that challenge (and/or reinscribe) traditional, normative masculine/feminine binary.<sup>8</sup> As I collected and analyzed data, my initial research questions shifted, becoming more pertinent to the particular narratives. Because the research questions became specific to each participant’s story, so did the

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<sup>8</sup> Joan Nestle, Claire Howell, and Riki Wilchins, eds., *Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002).

methods used to analyze and present each narrative, as outlined in Chapter Two in the section entitled “Writing It Up: Organization of Themes/Chapters.”

### *What This Dissertation Does*

In its broadest sense, my dissertation features the stories of drag king performers. Through life story interviews coupled with participant observations, this project examines the ways in which drag performers construct, take up and perform multiple subjectivities and how they benefit from multiple knowledges in their learnings and unlearnings. Through an examination of the creation and circulation of these drag king pedagogies in Atlanta, I suggest ways in which drag performers create and sustain gendered knowledge, while navigating difference and working with multiple discourses of identity, oppression, and power in a socially and economically diverse city.

I contend that by engaging in critical dialogue about hegemonic and/or alternative forms of gender, identity, and difference, drag king performances are sites of important culture building and pedagogical processes, both at individual levels and in collective spheres. Below, I review pertinent drag king literature inspired by Judith Halberstam’s work on female masculinity and other empirical studies. I draw connections between drag kinging and the scholarship of normative *gender identities*, as informed by Judith Butler’s thinking on performativity, and *learning and unlearning*, influenced primarily by Deborah Britzman’s psychoanalytic thinking in education. Based on my research questions, these bodies of scholarship serve as points of entry into an inquiry of the pedagogical significance of drag kinging.

## *Scholarship on Normative Gender Identities*

After the influence of postmodern thinking about gender, it is now almost taken for granted in the social sciences that femininity and masculinity are not material, biological essences but cultural, ideological creations.<sup>9</sup> In North American society, although there are many categories that oversee identity, much of identity is governed by the gender binary of masculine/feminine, where the masculine subject (at the top of the hierarchy) is defined as heterosexual and male, and the feminine, its subordinate, is defined as heterosexual and female. People who do not fit into this rigid binary (and adhere to its strict codes of behavior and expression) are often marginalized by the dominant, normative cultures. Marginalization based on the expression of non-normative gender identities affects individuals psychologically and in other material aspects of their lives such as education, citizenship, careers, and other avenues.

Bourdieu posits that through socialization into a culture, people acquire a system of dispositions, which are then reproduced through everyday discourse and practice.<sup>10</sup> According to Bourdieu, the social structures that exist today are not natural; rather, they have emerged through historical power struggles. The dominance of masculinity, which might appear perpetual in history, is actually the result of the perpetual workings of culture. Both men and women reproduce ideologies that privilege masculinity. Masculine dominance (and its naturalization) is the product of work that occurs in such interrelated institutions as the school, the family, the church, and popular media. Evidence of the workings of culture can be found in schooling with the discourse that boys are better at

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<sup>9</sup> Danielle Soulliere, *Masculinity on Display in the Squared Circle: Constructing Masculinity in Professional Wrestling* (2005, accessed November 12, 2006); available from <http://www.sociology.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991).

math than girls; in the family with the father/husband/masculine figure being the natural “pants-wearer” and head of the household; in the church through scripture that keeps wives in servitude to their husbands; and in popular media through such notions as “men are from Mars, women are from Venus.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, gender differences are understood as more than just the product of physical inequalities. They are naturalized into social and mental structures and behaviors by institutions – and institutional and social actors – who perpetuate these taken-for-granted inequalities. What it means to be *masculine* in North America is largely based on the definition and experiences of men. Nye recalls this argument: “The time-honored masculine image of rugged independence that has flourished in American literary and popular culture has put a premium ... on eliminating all traces of feminine selfhood ... as well as any suspicion of ‘sissified’ behavior,” privileging “the masculine/feminine binary over relations among different [and multiple] masculinities.”<sup>12</sup>

As postmodern scholars such as Weedon<sup>13</sup> argue, the features commonly associated with masculinity and femininity are not strictly dichotomous nor mutually exclusive, but messy and contradictory. Gender attributes are better thought of as representing *tendencies* people possess to varying degrees in various spaces and at different points in time. Gender is neither singular nor fixed; rather, it is always in progress. Weedon contends that gender is a process that not only shapes but also is shaped by language, for gender identities are constituted and reconstituted daily through institutionalized discourses, practices, and experiences, as exemplified above. Because gender expression is limited through the public,

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<sup>11</sup> John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: The Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Nye, “Locating Masculinity: Some Recent Work on Men,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 31 (2005): 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987).

community, and cultural discourses that are available to individuals,<sup>14</sup> human possibilities, knowledges, and ways of being (or doing) are also limited by prescribed, circulated, and enacted notions of gender. It is important to examine the workings of gender discourses and practices, both dominant as well as alternative discourses, which also have the potential to become hegemonic.

### **Gender Performativity and Drag**

Butler has described gender as performative and has argued that “sex,” like “gender,” is a construction constituted performatively in interaction. Contrary to the ways in which Butler’s theory is sometimes employed as voluntaristic, people do not perform gender by taking on identities at will, as if taking costumes out of a closet, but rather, gender is a construction that seems natural.<sup>15</sup> Because gender is an enforced cultural performance, Butler’s notion indeed invokes images of a actor who chooses costumes and scripts to follow. But to associate Butler’s notion of performance with theatrical performance implies a significant degree of choice that Butler does not embrace. Her point is that there is nothing “given” about gender identity.

Identity, according to Butler, is constituted by the process of a regulated repetition of boundary-inscribing acts that differentiate the “inside” from the “outside” and the “self” from the “other.” For Butler, who “seeks out the complementarity”<sup>16</sup> between Foucault’s

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Rasmussen, *Becoming Subjects: Sexualities and Secondary Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 185. Rasmussen explains that Butler combines elements from the writings of both Foucault and Freud to overcome the limitations of each. Leaning on the psychoanalytic concept of “foreclosure,” which accounts for individuals’ attachment to subjection (186), Rasmussen points out that Foucauldian scholar Stuart Hall also criticizes Foucault’s resistance to “engage with ‘the unconscious,’” leaving Foucault’s theory of the self over-reliant on “intentionality” (185). See Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996).

thinking and Freudian psychoanalytic theory,<sup>17</sup> gender is a discursive practice, where the body is the central site on which power is exercised by performance to produce gender norms. As discourse is found not only in speech and writing, but also in practices, conscious and unconscious thoughts, and bodies, Butler's framework is a useful tool for making sense of drag kinging.

Butler's notion of gender performativity highlights gender as a learned act based on cultural expectations about what it means to be feminine or masculine. She posits that gender is a regulated and repeated performance of an "original" that does not exist. Therefore, definitions of masculinity and femininity are often essentialist and circular. Butler contends that if subjects are always constituted by norms that are not of their own making, then one must try to understand the ways in which that constitution takes place.<sup>18</sup> She conducts a genealogical inquiry into the category of gender by investigating "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin."<sup>19</sup> Thus she considers the issue of identity, the division between sex and gender, and the roles of the body and sexuality in constructing gender identity.

Butler's description of gender as performative is especially pertinent to my research. She maintains that "if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way."<sup>20</sup> Gender identity, then, can be understood as a "*relation* among socially constituted subjects in

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83-105.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

specifiable contexts.”<sup>21</sup> The gendered self is “*produced* by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence [my emphasis],”<sup>22</sup> and therefore, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender.”<sup>23</sup> When individuals identify themselves, they write themselves into existing identity categories as well as the narratives that “surround and support” those identities and categories.<sup>24</sup> Butler argues that essential, unified selves are not possible, as identities are always shifting – they are constructed and reconstructed (or learned and unlearned) through performance. Butler’s writing on performativity subverts common sense “knowledge” that gender and sexuality are fundamental truths of the self.<sup>25</sup> “Repeated and reiterated over time,” writes Kopelson, “the specific *acts* of gender and sexuality become (mis)perceived as the general *facts* of gender and sexuality.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, gender can be thought of as multiple, shifting, and unfixed.

Butler argues that “identity is *performatively* constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results,”<sup>27</sup> suggesting that gender is not a fact, but an act that is determined by a process of repetition. The aim of the process of repetition is to naturalize gender identities. Butler proposes that the task for feminism is not to try and get outside the constructed identities, but “to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions [...] and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.”<sup>28</sup>

Butler contends that drag performance “imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Kopelson, “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: ‘Reconstructed Identity Politics’ For a Performative Pedagogy,” *College English* 65, no. 1 (2002): 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 188.

gender itself to be an imitation.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, drag is subversive in that it reveals that all gender is constructed performatively, through the process of regulated repetition.

Investigating what drag kings know – what they learn and unlearn – is a significant part of my research. How do discourses of gender function? Are there alternative definitions or ways of thinking that may be more productive or intelligible? How do possible alternatives relate to the hegemonic forms of gender that societies celebrate as ideal? How do individuals experience different subjectivities *within* a rigid dichotomy of gender? Humans are complex actors, capable of not only interpreting but resisting and rewriting gender meanings and practices. Humans do have a sense of agency, according to Butler. She holds that the psyche creates space for “subversive repetition.” The very need for the repetition of a category (e.g., gender) is itself a marker of its incompleteness and instability. As Butler puts it, “The compulsion to repeat is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat in the same way or to stay fully within the traumatic orbit” of that repetition.<sup>30</sup>

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which drag kings describe the strategies they use to adopt as well as undermine, contest, or resist hegemonic forms of gender to gain a sense of subjectivity, pleasure, and power – categories that arose from my fieldwork. Rigid gender roles are such an ingrained part of culture that one cannot live completely outside of them, and it is nearly impossible to ignore them. But because identity is constructed by social practices, there will always be a disconnect, or slippage, between identity labels and the lived experiences of real individuals. For example, Halberstam argues that “feminists, transgender and butch activists, and drag kings have all demanded more from masculinity in recent years, and have lovingly and creatively re-envisioned it

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 124.

without past levels of misogyny and sexism.”<sup>31</sup> While I agree that drag kinging can foreground gender practices and identities that subvert normative gender identities and highlight the potential for change, my own research challenges Halberstam’s (and other scholars’) argument that kinging is necessarily liberating.

### *Drag King Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning*

My research foregrounds pedagogies that take the instability of identity as a starting point. In her book *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*, Britzman sets out to explore what psychoanalysis can offer to theories of learning. Echoing the educational thinking of Anna Freud, Britzman highlights learning as a “psychic event.”<sup>32</sup> Britzman posits that the field of educational studies constructs learning in a manner that “proceeds by way of direct apprehension,” framing experience as “always conscious experience,” and assuming that “identity organizes political consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> Framing identity as fixed and certain encourages some sects of educational studies to “fix the learner,” and focus on such tactics as the “building of self esteem, and the offering of role models and heroes” based on stable identities.<sup>34</sup> Rather than viewing learning as made up of bits and pieces of knowledge meant to add up to progressively more and more learning, Britzman’s pedagogical thinking suggests a notion of development (learning) that is “far more unruly and fragile,”<sup>35</sup> meaning that learning is more fragmented and less stable than usually recognized.

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Halberstam, “Dumb & Dumber: Sideways, Spongebob, and the New Masculinity,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 28 (2005): 38.

<sup>32</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Following Emily Klein's lead, I define unlearning as "letting go of deeply held assumptions and learning as building new content and knowledge and creating new understandings and behaviors."<sup>36</sup> As discussed in the later chapters of my dissertation, unlearning and learning is predicated on desire. Participants' desires to learn, and their resistances to unlearning and learning, are uncovered in their narratives. Tolman suggests that unlearning is the "risk to centrism that we all desire. It is a deeper working of mind that pulls fragments into creative ambivalence and springs out again as from a lazarine rhizome."<sup>37</sup> Desire, according to Weems, "marks the potential to inaugurate new ways of thinking."<sup>38</sup> The multiplicity of selves and identities uncovered in the narratives of drag kings offer multifaceted ways of thinking about education, including: (1) Various stages of unlearning and learnings are predicated on conscious and unconscious motivations and desires; (2) all learning is citational, meaning that it is dependent upon prior learnings and unlearnings, some traces of which are never fully erased and "written over;" and (3) when<sup>39</sup> identities and selves are unstable, fragmented, and multiple, unlearnings and learnings are also unstable, fragmented, and multiple.

### *Depictions of Drag Kings*

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<sup>36</sup> Emily J. Klein, "Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning: Lessons from One School's Approach to Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2008): 80.

<sup>37</sup> Janice Tolman, "Learning, Unlearning, and the Teaching of Writing: Educational Turns in Postcoloniality," *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 3, no. 2/3 (2006): 197.

<sup>38</sup> Lisa Weems, "To Be Mindful of Otherness: Toward a Post-Psychoanalytic Problematic of Ethics and Education," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 38 (2007): 43. I use "desire" to refer to that which reveals the desiring self as that which is intrinsically "other" to itself. (See *The Judith Butler Reader* 39-89).

<sup>39</sup> I use the word "when" because although my participants' narratives identified them as straddling multiple subjectivities, I cannot generalize that *all* people outside my research also express multiple selves (although I speculate that many would and/or do).

Halberstam defines a drag king as a “female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume.”<sup>40</sup> Troka imagines drag kings as individuals – including queer women, straight women, and transgendered people – who perform some sort of masculinity in front of an audience.<sup>41</sup> In addition to theatrically performing on stage, some drag kings take on aspects of masculinity in their day-to-day lives as well. In other words, drag is sometimes part of their daily gender “performance.”

Drag kinging gained momentum in the United States in the early 1990s.<sup>42</sup> Troka suggests many connections among scholarship on drag in general (i.e., drag queens) and contemporary scholarship on drag *kings*. She also brings attention to the ways in which performances of present-day drag kings are different from the earlier performances of cross-dressing female entertainers, which include Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley from the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, Marlene Dietrich in the 1930s, and Storme DeLaverie in the 1940s.<sup>43</sup> Although drag king culture has materialized in gay or lesbian bars<sup>44</sup> and for the most part remains confined to such spaces,<sup>45</sup> recent years have witnessed drag king performances at art shows, festivals, annual LGBT<sup>46</sup> “Pride” celebrations, and college campuses as well. A number of these performances serve as fundraising events, where kings donate their tips to various charitable causes.

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<sup>40</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), 232.

<sup>41</sup> Troka, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> For more on these historic performances, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge) 1992; Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000); Lesley Ferris, ed., *Crossing the Stage: Controversies in Cross-Dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Troka, 10.

<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth examination of the practices of lesbian “public” and “private” spaces, see Gill Valentine, ed., *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered.

Unlike the iconic starlet-in-a-tuxedo exemplified by Dietrich's famous stints in drag as exemplified in the 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, most contemporary drag kings strive to "pass as a man," or at least to expose the obvious "markers" of masculinity.<sup>47</sup> The majority of drag kings bind their breasts with bandages, apply facial hair (or emphasize their natural "peach fuzz" with a swipe of dark mascara), and stuff objects in their pants (e.g., a sock or a commercially sold latex phallus such as the Mr. Softee) to create a manly bulge. They dress in traditional "masculine-coded clothing,"<sup>48</sup> such as a suit and tie or men's jeans and t-shirts, or, as in more elaborate and campy presentations, a "fat Elvis" jumpsuit, a Village People-style cop, or construction worker garb.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam describes the ways in which drag kings present themselves as wide-ranging and complex.<sup>49</sup> For instance, some kings humorously perform manhood with hyperbolic hairy chests and huge crotch bulges, while others end their performances by stripping down to their (women's) underwear and draw attention to their "female bodies."<sup>50</sup> As most drag kings lip sync and perform choreographed dance numbers, Troka suggests that the performer is forced to rely on costume, gestures, and body language, rather than verbal signifiers, to express an interpretation of masculinity. Evidencing the community engagement inherent in drag king performances, kings usually incite audience participation, as female fans ("femme" and otherwise) tip, dance with, and otherwise flirtatiously interact with performers. The highly sexualized participation of feminine audience members often serves to lend a sense of "authenticity" to the masculinities of the performers.

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<sup>47</sup> Troka, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), 246-253.

<sup>50</sup> Troka., 10.

Although it is a growing scholarly industry, academic work on drag kings is not yet as prolific as that of drag queens. In order to position recent drag king scholarship, it is helpful to start with general academic work on drag and gender performance. Below, I briefly review drag scholarship and situate the chapters of this dissertation within this academic work. Chapters Three, Four, and Five of my dissertation engage this scholarship further in the context of my fieldwork.

### *Scholarship on Drag Queens and Kings*

One of the earliest and most influential works on drag is Esther Newton's book, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Published in 1972, this book examines performances of camp, which Newton defines as outlandish, elaborate, and over-the-top "homosexual humor and taste"<sup>51</sup> in the vein of contemporary drag queens such as Dane Edna, Mink Stole, and the late Divine. Newton's study examines the ways in which drag queens mobilize camp to resist stigma and experience a sense of empowerment. Newton's anthropological work relies on interviews and participant observations, bringing the topic of drag and camp into scholarly territory. The past several decades have witnessed many scholarly works on camp, satire, and gender subversion and their importance to queer identities.<sup>52</sup> Meyer describes camp as the "total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity"<sup>53</sup> and is a "process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce visibility."<sup>54</sup> Rupp and Taylor contend that drag is a

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<sup>51</sup> Newton, 3.

<sup>52</sup> See Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Romy Sara Shiller, "A Critical Exploration of Cross-Dressing and Drag in Gender Performance and Camp in Contemporary North American Drama and Film," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Toronto, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

form of collective action, and an important part of larger LGBT “community” movements.<sup>55</sup> Schacht suggests that drag shows can be an important pedagogical tool to help students learn that there are “more than two genders in the world.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, recent scholarship on drag *kings* focuses on how kings’ satirical performances of normative gender identities can lead to visibility and consciousness raising for the performers, suggesting that kinging is liberatory for both performers and audiences.<sup>57</sup> The focus of my research is not on how useful “visibility” and “representation” of drag kings might be to individuals. However, I feel it is necessary to point out that any attempt to represent or make visible an identity, a tendency within much of education that desires to teach about difference, risks essentializing, containing, and further marginalizing it.

As drag kinging is a more recent phenomenon than drag queening, scholarly texts that directly focus on drag kings exist to a lesser extent.<sup>58</sup> With a mostly literary and cultural studies approach, Halberstam’s book *Female Masculinity* references popular culture works (films and literature) and her own observations of drag king performances in order to interrogate essentialist arguments that recognize masculinity solely as the property of male bodies.<sup>59</sup> I find Halberstam’s work especially provocative in light of recent attention lavished on the so-called “boy crisis”<sup>60</sup> in education, as well as proliferation of

<sup>55</sup> Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 212.

<sup>56</sup> Steven P. Schacht, “Beyond the Boundaries of the Classroom: Teaching About Gender and Sexuality at a Drag Show,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3-4 (2004): 236.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Eve Ilana Shapiro, “The Disposable Boy Toys: Identity Transformation in a Drag King Community” Ph.D. Dissertation (University of California, 2006); and Donna Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2007), Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, and Jean Bobby Noble, eds., *The Drag King Anthology* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> See Vicki Crowley, “Drag Kings ‘Down Under’: An Archive and Introspective of a Few Aussie Blokes,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3-4 (2002), Judith Halberstam, “Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” *Social Text* 15, no. 3 (1997), Jean Bobby Noble, “Seeing Double: Thinking Twice: The Toronto Drag Kings and (Re-)Articulations of Masculinity,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3 (2002).

<sup>59</sup> Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> Marcus Weaver-Hightower, “The ‘Boy Turn’ in Research on Gender and Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 73, no. 4 (2003).

the field of Masculinity Studies,<sup>61</sup> which focuses on masculinity as it relates to men to the exclusion of feminine masculinities.

Through her empirical research, Halberstam constructs histories of drag king communities in various large cities and focuses on the ways in which these communities communicate across geographies,<sup>62</sup> shaping each other's practices. Similarly, my fieldwork reveals ways in which the practices of kings in New York in the 1990s informed the early drag king scene in Atlanta. As I discuss in Chapter Three of this dissertation, "Being a Drag King, Becoming a 'Tranny,'" one participant, Chris, gives a brief oral history of the arrival of drag kinging in Atlanta. Because Chris was witness to the early days of kinging in Atlanta, her narrative sets the stage for my study.

From Halberstam's empirical research, she forms what she refers to as "drag king taxonomies"<sup>63</sup> to illustrate the various types of king acts that she witnessed. Halberstam's classifications of drag kings, which she catalogs from her observations of performances, describe the "various visual codes and gender systems" that kings embody when they perform their own particular masculinities.<sup>64</sup> While constructing taxonomies and categories for descriptive purposes can be helpful, they also create their own problems, as I learned from my fieldwork. As evident in the drag king narratives from Chris in Chapter Three and Sera in Chapter Four ("Being Angry, Becoming a 'Boi'"), not only do participants resist being "pigeonholed" by identity "labels," but even when they *do* embrace increasingly specific alternative identities, they find that descriptive categories often fail to capture their

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see Deevia Bhana, "I'm the Best in Maths. Boys Rule, Girls Drool." *Masculinities, Mathematics and Primary Schooling*, *Perspectives in Education* 23, no. 3 (2005); and Donald E. Hall, "The End(s) of Masculinity Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>62</sup> For an in-depth study of the workings of geography, space, and identity, see Valentine, ed. This edited volume discusses the ways in which spaces that appear to be on the margins of social discourse are in fact controlled by dominant cultures and discourses.

<sup>63</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 246-253.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

lived experience.<sup>65</sup> Paying attention to the multiplicities of gender identities is important, as one of the aims of my research is to consider how drag kings' fragmented selves have ramifications for what and how they learn from their experiences.

*The Drag King Book* supplements the work Halberstam started in *Female Masculinity*.<sup>66</sup> In this volume, which features highly stylized photographs of drag kings and is geared toward a general (rather than academic) audience, Halberstam conducts interviews with drag performers and turns her attention to the performance of race and gender. In the final chapter of the book, entitled "Class, Race and Masculinity: The Superfly, the Mackdaddy, and the Rapper," Halberstam concludes that White kings almost always parody White masculinity, while African-American drag kings were more likely to affirm or pay homage to Black masculinity. Halberstam's chapter sheds light on the narratives in Chapter Three and Chapter Four of this dissertation, which address "knowledge" about race and subsequent tensions within and among Atlanta drag king troupes as uncovered in the narratives from Chris and Sera, respectively.

More recent academic work on drag kings builds upon the foundation of Halberstam's scholarship. In her research with the California-based drag troupe of which she was a member, Shapiro explores how individuals' gender identities changed through their participation in the troupe and how the troupe served as an "identity incubator"<sup>67</sup> – a site for exploration that "often transforms the gender identity and politics of the drag performer."<sup>68</sup> She concludes that drag encourages performers to "interrogate, play with, and

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<sup>65</sup> See Jacob Anderson-Minshall, "Boy Trouble: An Interview with Jean Bobby Noble," *San Francisco Bay Times* 2007; and Jean Bobby Noble, *Sons of the Movement: FTMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* (Toronto Women's Press, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Volcano, Del LaGrace and Judith Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

<sup>67</sup> Eve Shapiro, "Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities," *Gender and Society* 21, no. 2 (2007): 250. The phrase "identity incubator" brings to my mind an institutional and instrumental "safe space" that assumes a stable, fixed identity product resulting from being incubated.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

sometimes adopt new gender identities.”<sup>69</sup> In reference to her fellow drag kings, Shapiro submits, “Regardless of identity, members described gender as a conscious act,”<sup>70</sup> a notion problematized by Butler and reflected in discourses about education that assume a unified self, governed by reason (versus desire), which intentionally chooses information and then engages in instrumental action.

In summary, a significant portion of scholarship on drag kings focuses on performers in coastal cities and the U.S. Midwest, taking a sociological lens and highlighting drag’s potential as a progressive, feminist social movement.<sup>71</sup> Much of the current scholarship is autobiographical or autoethnographic, produced by actual performers focusing on their own experiences (and that of their fellow troupe members)<sup>72</sup> and highlights a particular troupe or group dynamics/politics of the researchers’ own troupes. In fact, the majority of the available qualitative work on drag kings at the time of the completion of my own research, except for Halberstam’s, is autobiographical and/or autoethnographic. Rather than focusing on members from a collective troupe that values common political goals, as Shapiro’s and Troka’s research posits, my project highlights narratives from individual performers. Although I do not intend to enter a debate over inside versus outside status of the researcher, I will state that I am not and have never been a drag king, and none of the participants in my research is a peer or colleague. This is not to suggest that my research is in any way more “objective,” as if objectivity were a viable or even desirable goal of my research. (It is not.)

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>71</sup> Troka.

<sup>72</sup> Michelle Campbell, “My Life as Mick Mounter: Performing Genders with the Chicago Kings” (Northwestern, 2005); Julie Hanson, “Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment,” *Body & Society* 13, no. 1 (2007); and Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, and Jean Bobby Noble, eds., *The Drag King Anthology* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003).

Kinging has been described as a merging of “entertainment, education, outreach, and critique”<sup>73</sup> in a “politicized, feminist context.”<sup>74</sup> For example, the “collective mechanisms” that Shapiro highlights in drag kinging include encouraging “self-reflexivity,” “exposure to academic theorizing,” and providing a “socially supportive” place to “learn about transgender identity and community.”<sup>75</sup> Although existing drag research highlights narratives of participants learning about gender in a collective context, framing kinging as a bounded community with “common goals” hints at the ways in which identity politics collides with postmodern critiques of the unified subject, which I discuss throughout my analysis of drag king narratives.

### **Looking Ahead**

The first part of Chapter Two, “Methodology and Introduction to Participants,” outlines my research methods, which rely mostly on interview and observation data. My thinking about gender and drag kinging has been informed by numerous scholarly and cultural texts, as mentioned in the next chapter. The second part of Chapter Two introduces each participant with biographical data, a description of a drag performance, and a sampling of song lyrics from each act. The purpose of this section is to provide a introductory “sketch” of each participant and to introduce the reader to what a drag king “does.” The subsequent chapters delve more deeply into the participants’ stories, putting them into conversation with the scholarly and popular texts.

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<sup>73</sup> Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes,” 8.

<sup>74</sup> Shapiro, 250.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-263.



## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPANTS

### *What Do Drag Kings Know?*

Alcoff and other feminist theorists understand knowledge as “communal, historical, and contingent.”<sup>76</sup> The knower is not a disembodied individual, but part of a community. While researching drag kings and feminist methodologies, drag performances immediately struck me as being not only “communal,” but also pedagogical, knowledge-producing and knowledge-sharing. Troka<sup>77</sup> frames a drag king community as a collective of knowers, where individuals come together informally with common goals (e.g., to perform, educate, entertain and share knowledge). Nelson holds that communities, rather than individuals, are the producers, translators, and conduits of knowledge. She writes, “[I]t is communities that construct and acquire knowledge” and should therefore be recognized as the “agents of epistemology.”<sup>78</sup>

As important as communal/collective action has been to activism, it is Potter’s contention that scholars must “begin to view the community as comprised of epistemically *interdependent* individuals [my emphasis].”<sup>79</sup> To that end, my research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals, who of course live among and learn with others. Specifically, how does the individual drag king learn how to perform in drag, what kind of knowledge

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<sup>76</sup> Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8.

<sup>77</sup> Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes”.

<sup>78</sup> Lynn H. Nelson, “Epistemological Communities,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 123.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Potter, “Gender and Epistemic Negotiation,” in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 165.

do they share with others in the community, and how are those knowledges created and circulated?

When utilizing the idea of epistemological communities, Alcoff and other theorists are referring to the production of formal “scientific knowledge,” i.e., “hard” science such as physics and chemistry and the ways in which individuals work together in formal educational (e.g., university laboratories) environments to produce theories of physical phenomena, which are then circulated as fact. Although these scholars contend that any adequate theory of what is known and how it is known must account for knowledge in social terms,<sup>80</sup> they seem to give interpretations of informal, less institutional communities short shrift.

In scholarly research, the term “community” can be less than transparent, and indeed, entire books are devoted to the meanings of community.<sup>81</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I use the phrase “knowledge community” or “community of practice” to describe a group whose members are oriented toward certain outcomes – namely, to introduce change into a system by identifying, creating, representing, or distributing information and/or knowledge via a community context within or between populations. Knowledge communities are where ideas are exchanged on an ongoing basis, and learning in such a community is fluid, open, and public. I find this concept useful for exploring the pedagogical work of drag kings. The gender performance in drag identifies the ways in which a “system” – the rigid gender binary of male/female – is oppressive.

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<sup>80</sup> See Alcoff and Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies*.

<sup>81</sup> As pointed out in Valentine’s book, the term “community” is ambiguous and can be best thought of in the sense of an “imagined community” of individuals with shared interests. Jenny Lo and Theresa Healy, “Flagrantly Flaunting It?: Contesting Perceptions of Locational Identity Among Urban Vancouver Lesbians, in *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*, Valentine, ed., 33.

Specifically, I frame drag king performers (and their audiences) as communities of practice that produce and circulate knowledge and contribute to important learnings and unlearning on gender and social and cultural possibilities. Using drag kings' narratives, I look at what drag performers learn, unlearn, teach, and "know" through performing for and with others. Such scrutiny calls into question what each of us knows about gender, and how each of us experiences (and indeed, reinforces) the normalizing aspects of gender identities.

The ways in which individuals function within an informal community is an aspect I explore in my empirical research by investigating how drag kings produce and share knowledge about doing drag. Thinking about drag performers in terms of communities of knowers helps frame the question: What kind of knowledges and practices do drag kings generate and circulate? What do they learn, unlearn, and/or relearn? What do these knowledges do for them? As I demonstrate in the following review of my methodology, an important and viable starting point in studying the lived experiences of drag kings is through interviews that elicit life stories or narratives. In the spirit of the bricoleur, I enrich these narratives by placing them into conversation with other texts and artifacts, as well as with observations. Following the discussion of methodologies, I introduce each participant, Chris, Sera, Lucy, and Smith, with a brief biographical sketch and "scene" from each drag king's performance.

## Interviews

My research population consists of four drag king performers. I followed Cole and Knowles<sup>82</sup> description of a life story investigation as involving interviews (or a series of interviews) that typically last from about one to two hours. I prompted each participant to “tell me about performing in drag,” which solicited narratives about discovering a drag community and the thought processes that led them to participate in the community. Participants shared stories about how they became involved with drag performance, a description of a typical performance, how performing has affected the king’s everyday life, and what they have unlearned and learned from performing in drag.

In choosing my interview participants, I initially approached several drag kings after shows in various venues and invited them to participate in my study. As a “recruiting tool,” I handed out professionally printed business cards that read: *Looking for a few good men ... Wanted: kings, boiz, trannies, butches, girl fags, and other sundry genderfuckers.* My contact information was also printed on the cards. Three immediately agreed to participate, one of whom ended up not participating in the interviews due to health problems. I found two additional participants by word-of-mouth through friends and acquaintances. The participants were over twenty-one years of age. I did not choose to

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<sup>82</sup> Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2001). Cole and Knowles and other historians refer to their research as “life history.” Although I utilize the methods of life history research, mainly lengthy interviews, I did not solicit a “history” of my participants’ lives. Rather, I asked for stories of their drag kinging experiences. I acknowledge that all narratives of experiences after the fact could be considered histories, but I in no way consider myself a historian. Because the narratives my interviewees provided are specific to drag kinging, and not to their life histories writ large, I refer to participants’ stories as life stories, narratives, and/or drag king narratives. The participants revealed very little information about their backgrounds and childhoods, for example, unless it seemed to them to directly relate to their drag kinging experiences. For instance, when discussing what it was like to dress in men’s clothing for the purpose of kinging, two participants told stories about how they had always preferred boys’ or men’s clothing. Because of the historical detail that she provides, I do refer to Chris’ description of “becoming a drag king” as an oral history. However, in the interview, I did not specifically ask for a history. Rather, my goal was to solicit a story: “Tell me about your experience doing drag.” Although I found Cole and Knowles’ scholarship to be most useful to my project, doing a “proper” life history of four individuals was not the goal of my research. In the spirit of bricolage, I used “fragments” of life history methods, blending them with others.

study people under twenty-one years of age because my observational research took place in establishments that by law can only serve patrons over twenty-one. I explained to participants the purpose of my research and what participation entailed. Participants signed appropriate consent forms.

I digitally recorded and transcribed each interview word for word, and I took notes during the interviews to record nonverbal communication and other aspects of the interview that could not be captured in the audio recording. I coded the interviews thematically to interpret the data, find similarities and differences, discover links across the data, and then shape the organization of sections or chapters.<sup>83</sup> I use pseudonyms for each drag performer, troupe, and venue (bars and clubs), and other significant identifiers (biographical details). The only names that I did not change were the celebrity drag kings Mo B. Dick and Murray Hill, and their drag venues, as mentioned in Chris' narrative.

### **Storytelling**

I chose a storytelling approach in order to understand how participants describe, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences as drag kings. Stories can be an important source of information about the contexts that people find significant in their daily and special activities, in the framing of their lives, and in the ways in which they make sense of their experiences. Naples points out that researchers frequently draw on biographical narrative or life story approaches to gain “understanding of the historical and cultural experiences that shape personal and interpersonal relationships.”<sup>84</sup> She contends that in-

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<sup>83</sup> The digitally recorded files and transcriptions are kept on my personal computer and secured via passwords to which I have sole access. I created pseudonyms for each participant the key to which was kept on my personal computer and secured via a password.

<sup>84</sup> Nancy A. Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 42.

depth interviews can generate focused narratives of key events in a person's life through a reconstruction of experiences.

However, Naples and other life story scholars point out that narratives should not be taken up unproblematically. A story or narrative tells something about the relationship between the individual and society, and individuals have multiple subject positions from which they make sense of the world.<sup>85</sup> In other words, because the participants are positioned in a number of different discourses, they are likely to construct a number of narratives. Furthermore, during an interview a person constructs her or his experiences into a story that is meaningful, and the construction is influenced by her interaction with the interviewer. As Biott puts it, each story is positioned and presented from the perspective of someone with certain intentions at a specific moment in historical time.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, in line with Clandinin and Connelly, I am aware that the way an interviewer “acts, questions, and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the ways participants respond”<sup>87</sup> and tell their stories.

Kvale states that the function of conversational interview is a basic mode of knowing and understanding human reality. He describes the conversational interview as a “technique in which knowledge is constructed through the interaction [between] interviewer and interviewee.”<sup>88</sup> According to Kvale, the main focus of the interview is “to understand the themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspective.”<sup>89</sup>

Hammersley and Atkinson describe interviews as close in character to conversations;

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<sup>85</sup> Colin Biott, Lejf Moos, and Jorunn Moller, “Studying Headteachers' Professional Lives: Getting the Life History,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 45, no. 4 (2001).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 110.

<sup>88</sup> Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 36.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 27.

however, they are never simply conversations, because the researcher has an “agenda and must retain some control over the proceedings.”<sup>90</sup> I was guided by their suggestion that the researcher must “listen to what is being said in order to assess how it relates to the research focus and how it may reflect the circumstances of the interview. Moreover, this is done with a view to how the future course of the interview might be shaped.”<sup>91</sup>

Kvale suggests several indicators of quality for an interview, including: spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee; short interviewer questions and long participant answers; and follow-up and clarification of the meanings of the relevant aspects by the interviewer. Furthermore, he concludes that the ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview; the interviewer attempts to verify her interpretations of the participants’ answers throughout the course of the interview. I found that it takes a high level of experience to learn to clarify participants’ meanings during an interview without asking leading questions. I aimed to clarify participants’ responses by asking them to “Tell me more about \_\_\_\_.”

As discussed in the following section, I chose to put these stories into play with other texts, such as popular cultural artifacts and solicited objects. Throughout the research process, I asked questions, gathered data, and posed further questions. An ongoing analysis of interviews, data, and literature allowed deep reflection and meaning-making during the research process, reflecting my views that knowledge and research are an ongoing process, rather than culminating in some final “truth.”

A storytelling approach to research attempts to make sense of how the storyteller remembers events and how she relates to those events (and relates events to one another).

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<sup>90</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 152.

<sup>91</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, 153.

In a study of drag king communities, stories are a springboard to understanding how participants construct, understand, and interpret their performances and practices, both onstage and off. Using storytelling as a method is congruent with my views of knowledge and research. According to Creswell, when deciding which research methods are most useful to one's research questions, one must consider the following: what knowledge claims are being made; what strategies of inquiry will inform the procedures; and what methods of data collection and analysis will be used.<sup>92</sup> I utilized a feminist and postmodern framework for this study that matches my views of knowledge and research — namely, that human experiences and knowledges are subjective and multiple,<sup>93</sup> that “truth” is constructed in relations of power between the researcher and participant, and that the relationship between the researcher and participants is collaborative. I am interested in the subjective meanings that individuals make of their experiences, the understandings they seek, and the ways they “story” the worlds in which they live. It is my contention that this theoretical framework is useful to a study with a drag king community, a population that I perceive as self-consciously resisting a stable notion of gender identity and practice.<sup>94</sup>

A postmodernist framework places under scrutiny taken-for-granted assumptions of truth and knowledge: for example, whose knowledge is being recognized, and for what purposes?<sup>95</sup> Human identities are of course not monolithic, even within certain communities or subgroups. Therefore, in the context of my research questions, participants'

<sup>92</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Second ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 5.

<sup>93</sup> Margaret Eisenhart, “Educational Ethnography Past, Present, and Future: Ideas to Think With,” *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 8 (2001), 17.

<sup>94</sup> A number of drag scholars, including Halberstam, argue this point. See, for instance, Halberstam, “Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam, “Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings,” Halberstam and Roseneil, “Speaking of Sexuality and Subcultures: A Conversation with Judith Halberstam.”

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, St. Pierre, “‘Science’ Rejects Postmodernism,” Elizabeth A. and Pillow St. Pierre, Wanda S., ed., *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

experiences and practices are best explored through methods that allow for the investigation of multiplicities and complexities of human lives. Although I elicit personal narratives and stories as a main source of data, I am sensitive to Olesen's contention that "personal experience is not a self-authenticating claim to knowledge."<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, I am also sympathetic to the poststructural notion that all research is fiction. As Talburt puts it, qualitative inquiry

is fiction, in the sense that it is made or constructed, but not in the sense that it is pure invention, lies, or imaginings. In other words, qualitative inquiry has a grounding in "real" events and "real" lives, but learning about and representing events and lives is a process of constructing others' constructions of the constructions of the world.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Olesen suggests that postmodern feminist researchers regard truth as a destructive illusion, "destabilizing the feminist researcher as an all-knowing, unified, distanced, and context-free seeker of objectified knowledge whose very gender guarantees access to women's lives and knowledges."<sup>98</sup> In other words, researchers should recognize that their knowledges (and the knowledges of their participants) are multiple, fragmented, and constructed. As Haraway points out, a feminist, postmodern methodology opens up possibilities to recognize contingent (local, situated, and partial) ways of knowing.<sup>99</sup> A partial perspective of knowing and learning concerns "limited location[s] and situated knowledge[s]."<sup>100</sup> This way of thinking recognizes a non-unified, multiple self that is able to interrogate its "positionings."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Virginia Olesen, "Early Millennial Feminist Qualitative Research," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London: Sage Publication, 2005).

<sup>97</sup> Susan Talburt, "Ethnographic Responsibility without The 'Real,'" *Journal of Higher Education* 75, no. January/February (2004), 81.

<sup>98</sup> Olesen, 248.

<sup>99</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 583.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 586.

### **Positionality of the Researcher/Ethics**

Another aspect of postmodern research asks the researcher to consider questions of authority and the relationship of knowledge and power, to “tackle the fundamental questions of how and where knowledge is produced and by whom, and of what counts as knowledge.”<sup>102</sup> In line with much feminist research, I viewed my participants as co-researchers, which to me means that research is a conversation, a dialogue, in which researcher and participant can and should learn and unlearn from one another. I wanted for my participants to learn about their own subject positions, identities, and performances through participating in the interview process because storytelling provides a space for their own self-identification and exploration of their lives and practices. Following Lather’s suggestion, researchers should position themselves not as masters of truth and justice but as creators of a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf,<sup>103</sup> making meaning of their everyday struggles.

I recognize that my research led participants to reveal personal information about themselves. Although all research has the potential to subjugate participants, and especially research that might generate data dealing with gender identities and sexualities, I took care not to reveal data that might seem exploitative. For example, from my informal talks with drag performers, I learned that competition and criticism (i.e., gossip) flows among the various local performers, and I was careful not to repeat participants’ comments to one another. I strove to approach each interview as individually as possible. The purpose of my research is not to expose a subculture. However, as Leach posits, storytellers “do much of the same work as gossips,” as both are “fundamental interpretive activities often possessing

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<sup>102</sup> Weedon, 33.

<sup>103</sup> Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

the forms of certainty.”<sup>104</sup> I did learn quite a bit about historical racial tensions among drag king troupes from performers “talking trash” about one another, as addressed in Chapter Three.

### *Participant Observation*

In addition to recorded interviews, over a six-month period I conducted observations of drag performances, practices, and performers getting ready (i.e., dressing up backstage) for practices and performances. Observations allowed me to informally talk with performers. I talked with drag kings after their acts and asked questions such as “What did you think about your last performance? What was your audience like?” These questions offered an opportunity for performers to reflect on the content and meaning of the performances. Questions that guided my observations included: In what type of venue is this performance being held? What is the atmosphere like? What type of “character” is this king attempting to portray? How is the audience reacting (e.g., are they tipping abundantly, or not at all; does the audience seem to be enjoying themselves, or do they seem bored)? How do the drag kings act around one another? Do they stay in “character” when their acts are over?

Guba and Lincoln summarize the methodological arguments for observation and argue that observations maximize the inquirer’s ability to make sense of motives, beliefs, concerns, interests, and behaviors.<sup>105</sup> One advantage to combining participant observation with interviews is that the data from one might illuminate the other. In other words, what

<sup>104</sup> Mary Leach, “Feminist Figurations: Gossip as a Counterdiscourse,” in *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow (Routledge: New York, 2000), 234.

<sup>105</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985).

people say or do during observations can offer the researcher a different perspective on what is said during interviews or impromptu conversations, and vice versa. For example, the first time I observed Smith's drag performance, I came away thinking that she appeared uncomfortable and that she didn't seem to be enjoying herself. Her movements seemed strained and her body rigid. When I interviewed her soon after, I discovered that the particular performance I observed was the first one for which Smith "packed" her pants with a sock to resemble a bulging male crotch. During our conversation, Smith described the experience of putting "something down there" as "very weird." Thus, by allowing the interview to inform my earlier observation, I was able to interpret her strained performance as an effect of her newly adopted sock penis.

Due to difficulties recording inside noisy clubs, I did not attempt to digitally record the informal conversations at the drag shows. Rather, I took notes during and after. Drag shows usually took place on Wednesday through Sunday evenings, beginning at around 10:00 or 11:00 PM and lasting for approximately one and a half to two hours. I wrote fieldnotes on a small pad of paper during and immediately after these observations and transcribed them as soon as possible. As evidenced in the "Introduction to Participants" section in Chapter Two, I rewrote several of these fieldnotes as "scenes," describing what it is like to attend a drag king show.

### *Other Texts/Artifacts*

A number of scholars such as Atkinson and Delmont argue that fieldwork is "oddly lacking in material content and physical goods, whereas informants' 'voices' are

transcribed from an apparent physical void.”<sup>106</sup> They suggest that field researchers need to pay close attention to cultural texts, artifacts, objects, and other physical embodiments that reflect cultural practices and values. As mentioned above, I place participants’ stories into conversation with other texts or artifacts. In my study, I make use of two main types of artifacts: artifacts that I solicited from the interview participants, and artifacts that I sought out independently (or found serendipitously).

In the first “solicited” type, I asked participants to bring to the interviews any “objects that represent drag kinging” for them. The artifacts they brought included photographs, props used in performances (clothing and signs used for a show), and videos (both videotaped recordings and videos located online on YouTube). As Clandinin and Connelly put it, such artifacts can be “triggers to memories” around which participants tell and retell stories.<sup>107</sup> “It is these artifacts, collective in our lives,” they write, “that provide a rich source of memories,” constituting “something that might be called an archaeology of memory and meaning.”<sup>108</sup> This use of artifacts acts as a catalyst, encouraging the interviewee to describe themselves, their performances, and what they feel they are learning, accomplishing, or representing. In addition, such objects are significant in that they suggest a level of personal importance to the participant and her experiences.

The solicited artifacts allowed me to explore the participants’ subjectivities and interpretations, not only how they describe their practices and performances, but also how they structure and tell their stories, relating past experiences to the present by way of the artifacts. For example, as one interviewee and I watched an older videotaped performance of one of her drag acts, she recognized that her performance contained certain content that

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 827.

<sup>107</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 114.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

she later came to understand as racist; however, she came to this understanding only after some time had passed and after she had learned more about social issues. According to Atkinson and Delamont, artifacts are “understood, used, and interpreted by everyday social actors. They are used to document and record the past – and indeed to construct the past.”<sup>109</sup> There is much to be learned from artifacts, as they helped me understand participants’ experiences and practices – what Atkinson and Delamont refer to as “domains of signification.”<sup>110</sup>

For the second “found” type of artifact, I include various cultural texts: books and magazine articles and interviews,<sup>111</sup> narrative and documentary films,<sup>112</sup> television programs,<sup>113</sup> song lyrics,<sup>114</sup> party invitations, websites (including text and images), and informal conversations. Taken together, these texts and artifacts allowed me to put the publicly available discourses into dialogue with the drag kings and their cultures.

### *Enriching Oral History: Bricolage and Nontraditional Data*

Atkinson and Delamont warn that “it is important to avoid reductionist views that treat one type of data or one approach to analysis as being the prime source of social and

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont, “Analytic Perspectives,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 827.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 827.

<sup>111</sup> Besides “scholarly” works, other written works influenced my thinking and interpretation of my fieldwork. Examples include Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2003); Judith Halberstam, “Dumb & Getting Dumber: Sideways, Spongebob, and the New Masculinity,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 28 (2005); Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999), Anderson-Minshall, Ariel Levy, “Where the Bois Are,” *New York* January 4, 2004.

<sup>112</sup> Documentaries include, Gabrielle Baur, “Venus Boyz,” (Clockwise Productions, 2002) and Daniel Peddle, “The Aggressives,” (USA: Daniel Peddle, 2005). Fictional television programs and narrative films include Irene Chaiken, et al., “The L Word,” (2002-2008), Lucia Puenzo, “XXY,” (Argentina: 2007).

<sup>113</sup> For instance, Elaine Epstein, “Gender Rebel,” (USA: Logo, 2006).

<sup>114</sup> I consider the actual songs used in performances as texts to be analyzed, as lyrical content can shed light on the intentions or meanings of the performances.

cultural interpretation.”<sup>115</sup> My choice to enrich stories with other data such as artifacts and participant observation has much in common with the concept of bricolage in qualitative research. Levi-Strauss coined the term bricolage as a process of involving “continual reconstruction from the same materials.”<sup>116</sup> It is “always earlier ends,” he writes, “which are called upon to play the part of the means.”<sup>117</sup> One who engages in bricolage, known as the bricoleur, “make[s] do with ‘whatever is at hand.’”<sup>118</sup> As opposed to an “expert” in a technique or method, the bricoleur combines methods as she finds useful to her project. As Lather points out, bricolage, “the deliberate conglomerizing of purposes,”<sup>119</sup> is a defining characteristic of some postmodern qualitative research. Used in this manner, a bricolage of multiple data sources and methods resists “putting forth a singular ‘authoritative’ voice,”<sup>120</sup> which is a frequent concern of research that relies on stories. Denzin and Lincoln describe the bricolage as a “pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation.”<sup>121</sup> Rather than utilizing one mode of gathering, interpreting, and representing data, these scholars explain that the use of bricolage can enrich qualitative research by adding “different tools, methods, and techniques of representation,”<sup>122</sup> what Kincheloe and McLaren refer to as “alternative ways of analyzing and producing knowledge.”<sup>123</sup> A purposely and purposefully pieced-together way of conducting research

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<sup>115</sup> Atkinson and Delamont, “Analytic Perspectives,” 823. See also R Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

<sup>116</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1966), 21.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>119</sup> Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 10.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>121</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, “The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 4.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, “Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage 2005), 319.

moves beyond mere triangulation via multiple data sources, which is traditionally thought of as “validating” research findings. As Richardson and St. Pierre put it, “there are far more than ‘three sides’ by which to approach the world.”<sup>124</sup>

Researchers who utilize bricolage do so because they recognize the complexity of the objects of inquiry, suggesting that research is not an “encapsulated entity” or process but rather “a part of many contexts and processes.”<sup>125</sup> One task of the researcher working with narratives is to ask, “from what bricolages and fragments does a person come to assemble their stories?”<sup>126</sup> Kincheloe explains that “the bricoleur’s knowledge of the frequently unconscious narrative formula at work” allows “insight into the forces that shape the nature of knowledge production.” He suggests that “complex and sophisticated research *emerges* from the bricolage [my emphasis].”<sup>127</sup>

This weaving of interview data, participant observation, and artifacts did not produce a haphazard hodge-podge of data. In line with Atkinson and Delamont, I do not promote deploying “every conceivable analytic procedure and examine every possible data type in the interests of a spurious kind of comprehensiveness or ‘holism.’”<sup>128</sup> Rather, I suggest that a blending of methods encourages reflection, interpretation, and detailed description of participants’ multiple subjectivities, practices, and learning experiences.

## Data Analysis

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<sup>124</sup> Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005), 963.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>126</sup> Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research,” 399.

<sup>127</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe, “On to the Next Level: Continuing the Conceptualization of the Bricolage,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 11 (2005), 336. Kincheloe outlines five “dimensions” of bricolage (methodological, theoretical, interpretive, political, and narrative), which he describes as taking ontological and epistemological multiplicity into account.

<sup>128</sup> Atkinson and Delamont, “Analytic Perspectives,” 824.

As previously discussed, my sources of data include life story interviews, artifacts, and participant observation, and I view all of these sources as research materials or texts to be analyzed. Cole and Knowles suggest that when analyzing research materials, a workable system emerges only by coming to know the particular lives being studied. Other scholars put it this way: “There are no ready-made templates,”<sup>129</sup> “no formulae or recipes”<sup>130</sup> for analysis, and no “series of steps.”<sup>131</sup> Clandinin and Connelly point out that when analyzing story data, “Negotiation occurs from beginning to end.”<sup>132</sup> That said, the researcher must begin somewhere, and so I began by organizing my research texts chronologically by the date they were gathered and reading and reflecting on the data, looking for key emergent themes and ideas.<sup>133</sup>

I used Bogdan and Biklen’s suggestions as a loose guide for analyzing and interpreting data, which they point out is an ongoing part of data collection: In addition to using emergent strategies, I developed analytic questions and planned data-collecting sessions in light of what I found in previous observations, reviewed fieldnotes, and made “observer comments” about ideas that the data generated.<sup>134</sup> The use of multiple data sources encouraged me to look at the data from many different angles and to begin to make meaning from them. Ultimately I found several binary oppositions repeated in the narratives, such as male/female, masculinity/femininity, man/woman, etc. Such dichotomies, when added to the fact that the mere *existence* of drag kings demonstrates

<sup>129</sup> Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2001), 95.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>131</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 132.

<sup>132</sup> D.J. Clandinin and F.M. Connelly, “Stories to Live By: Narrative Understandings of School Reform,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (1998), 132.

<sup>133</sup> Rubin and Rubin describe this process as listening for “concepts,” asking questions, and gradually weaving concepts into themes. Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 57.

<sup>134</sup> Robert C. Bogdan and Sari K. Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (Boston: Pearson Education Group, Inc., 2003), 148-153.

how these binaries fail to represent the lived experiences of individuals, provide strong evidence that gender binaries should be interrogated. In addition, the binaries reflected in the data of knowledge/ignorance, educated/uneducated, and learning/unlearning provided a starting point for further investigating into the pedagogical benefits of these communities of practice.

I also considered what form each of the stories took and the ways in which the stories were told. Lieblich highlights the significance of the forms of narratives in studies concerning identities and subjectivities because “the structural aspects of a narrative are more attuned” to the deep “levels of personality,”<sup>135</sup> which can reveal dimensions of identity that are not apparent to the participant. Such dimensions as motivation, affect, and intensity reflected in the participants’ stories can illuminate psychological or intrinsic motivations of the narratives that might remain concealed in a strict content analysis.

### **Writing It Up: Organization of Themes/Chapters**

Clandinin and Connelly describe the process of analysis as a “search for patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes”<sup>136</sup> that shape texts. While the process of analysis requires systematic and keen attention to the data while searching and coding for emergent themes, metaphors, and similarities across data sources, I did not treat analysis as a strict reductionist activity. In other words, I strove not to simplify complexity, difference, or multiplicity in order to create neatly defined unified categories. In line with the aforementioned bricoleur, I recognize that categorization and analysis are fluid. As Cole and Knowles warn, analysis is done “not by taking information and slicing it into discrete

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<sup>135</sup> Amia Lieblich, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), 168.

<sup>136</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, “Stories to Live By: Narrative Understandings of School Reform,” 133.

bits and storing the pieces in separate containers, but by trying to understand, in a holistic way, the connectedness and interrelatedness of human experience within complex social systems.”<sup>137</sup> This process came about from immersion in the data and seeing them as a whole. Immersing myself in the data and reading with an open mind revealed insights upon each evaluation, which did not result in rigid themes.

I was conscious of not getting “stuck” in patterns, and I tried to look beyond patterns and themes by analyzing the data from different points of view, and noting incoherencies and contradictions. Insights emerged not only from the stories that participants told, but also from putting the interview data into play with my observations and other data. Cole and Knowles contend that researchers should “listen *for* a story rather than *to* a story.”<sup>138</sup> I paid attention not only to what is stated in an interview text (the story told), but also the way it is said and which words are used, reading between the lines for the parts of story that might be left untold. Britzman refers to this process as “read[ing] the absent against the present.”<sup>139</sup>

One pattern that did leave me feeling particularly “stuck” was organizing the chapters thematically, as one “theme” tended to flow into the next, with no natural-feeling break. This type of organization felt too contrived. As with Britzman’s dilemma, what troubled me was “how to order but not normalize the stories.”<sup>140</sup> And like Britzman, I wanted to keep my participants’ narratives as intact as possible and not “mix up” their chronologies for the sole purpose of making them fit into themes. In particular, throughout

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<sup>137</sup> Cole and Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, 101.

<sup>138</sup> Cole and Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, 120.

<sup>139</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, “The Question of Belief,” in *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Elizabeth A. St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow (New York: Routledge, 2000), 28.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

their narratives, Chris, Sera, and Lucy “built and rebuilt their identities,”<sup>141</sup> reflecting learning and unlearning in ways that were significant to them. The contradictory and partial forms of their stories sometimes parallel the contradictory, partialness of attempting to capture *any* experience, identity, or subjectivity. Keeping their stories intact, rather than forcing them into contrived themes, I follow Britzman’s method of presenting *stories from* drag kings, rather than striving to tell *the story of* drag kings, in order to “reposition the site of struggle from the individual to their narratives and to pluralize their retellings” of their experiences.<sup>142</sup> Said differently, I do not intend to generalize their experiences to all drag kings (which “the story *of*” implies). Rather, I am interested in looking at how and why particular performers construct particular stories and reject other possible narratives. Although the performers initially express that they got into drag “for fun,” their narratives hint toward various other ways in which doing drag affects their lives, which will be explored and theorized in the remaining chapters.

There are common themes across the participants’ narratives, such as how they feel empowered by their performances; however, the ways in which each drag king narrates this empowerment is unique to her. Furthermore, each of the participants comes from multiple social, economic, gendered, and “embodied” experiences. I wanted to honor those individual narratives instead of collapsing them into overly contrived categories. Hanson aptly describes drag kinging as a process of “becoming,” where “previous becomings are incompletely erased but still visible.”<sup>143</sup> Here I find a metaphor of a palimpsest useful for understanding the learnings and unlearnings of drag kings. A palimpsest is a parchment or

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, “The Question of Belief,” in *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Elizabeth A. St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow (New York: Routledge, 2000), 35.

<sup>143</sup> Hanson, 76.

tablet manuscript that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and often legible beneath the new. When applied to learning, the palimpsest is a way of understanding previous learnings and unlearnings as “still visible” beneath the new learnings. These previous learnings and unlearnings are never completely erased and therefore continue to inform newer learnings and unlearnings. I will return to this metaphor in the chapters that follow.

Because each participant structures her story in terms of what drag does for her, helping her to “become” something that she was not previously (i.e., experience a different subjectivity), I titled each chapter in a way that reflects each kings’ “becoming.” For example, Lucy constructs a narrative of herself as a disempowered Other. Because her peers tell her that she makes a “hot guy” in drag, and this makes her feel empowered, I titled her narrative “Being an ‘Other,’ Becoming a ‘Hot Guy,’” as this aptly reflects her experience as she structures it. Lucy structures her narrative in a way that reflects a significant “before-and-after” binary of drag kinging. As discussed in Chapter Five, she sets up several such dichotomies and thematic storylines. Therefore, rather than shelving the themes that Lucy presents solely for the sake of avoiding structure, I foreground and weave my analysis around them. Lucy’s story is undoubtedly more structural than the others; thus it follows that my analysis of her data is as well.

The one unfortunate exception to the way I present the data is with Smith’s narrative. In addition to being the youngest and newest participant to come to drag kinging, Smith was also quite reserved. We conducted our interview in a dog park, and when she wasn’t attending to their dog, Smith’s girlfriend, Julie, joined us from time to time but did not participate in the conversation. Smith nervously answered questions about her

experiences as a drag king in terms of “we,” referring to herself and Ann. For example, when I asked her if or how drag kinging has changed her, she answered, “*We’ve* made a lot of new friends” and “*We’re* a lot busier now.” I cannot speculate to what extent the presence of Smith’s girlfriend shaped her responses, but I have little doubt that they did. I never specified that I wanted to interview Smith alone, and the fact that she brought Ann to the interview said something about Ann’s importance to Smith’s drag performances.

The most interesting aspect of Smith’s story is the diverse selections of music she uses in her acts, which vary from romantic country songs to aggressive and misogynistic Reggaeton and hip-hop. Considering that she spent her childhood lip syncing Christian rock music for her mom in the family’s Miami living room, a narrative could have perhaps been traced in the trajectory from Christian music to songs containing lyrics referring to “slapping hos on their ass.” However, a study of the music used in drag king performance seems better suited to a research project all its own, and to a researcher better versed in popular music than myself. In sum, I admit that Smith gets short shrift here. I feel that if I had interviewed her later in my research – after I had developed a relationship with her through observations and after honing my interviewing skills, I might have been able to get her to open up and/or think about her experiences more critically. Furthermore, I regret that she moved shortly after our interview and I was unable to contact her for subsequent interviews, as I only had her former work email address.

I struggled between giving Smith her own chapter, which would have been a fraction of the length of the other three, and taking her out of the project altogether. However, as much as she is a “woman of few words,” she makes significant observations, such as how drag kings struggle over pronouns, which other participants also describe.

Thus, passages from Smith’s story are lightly peppered throughout Chapters Three, Four, and Five – not to provide “validity” to others’ stories, but because I also wanted to highlight Smith’s words as well, however brief they may be. Following the “Introduction to Participants,” Chapters Three, Four, and Five feature stories and narratives from Chris, Sera, and Lucy, respectively. In these chapters, I place their narratives into conversation with the drag king literature, gender scholarship, and ways of thinking about education, learning, and unlearning reviewed earlier. The final chapter, Chapter Six, synthesizes the former chapters and addresses questions that continue to linger.

### **Introduction to Participants**

In this section, I introduce the four performers who participated in the life story interviews: Lucy, Smith, Chris, and Sera. I include some brief biographical information, a description of a typical performance from my observation notes, and a sample of lyrics<sup>144</sup> (in italics) from a song used by each drag king that is representative of the style and content of each one’s performance. Combined, these data sources provide an entrance into understanding each king’s act.

A word about pronouns: Because two of the participants said they preferred to be referred to by the feminine pronoun “she,” and the other two said that they answered to either “he” or “she,” I use “she” when referring to the participant when she is not in drag. As I will discuss in a later section, drag kings are often referred to as “he” when in drag and onstage, and “she” when out of drag, unless the person is transgendered and prefers to be referred to exclusively by the masculine pronoun.

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<sup>144</sup> I accessed song lyrics via Google.com. I typed in the name of the song and the artist, using the lyrics from the first web site generated by the search engine. To reserve space and avoid redundancy, I condensed some of the lyrics in a way that highlights the central themes or content of the songs.



**Lucy: “It’s just too funny!”**

In her early twenties, Lucy was born and raised in the South and attends a small liberal arts college. She is a member of a student organization at Liberal Arts College that puts on an annual drag show as a fundraising event to benefit a local cause. Students perform as drag kings and donate tips collected from audience members. As a graduate of a performing arts high school, Lucy is accustomed to being on stage, even in a “masculine” role. “Performing wasn’t scary for me,” she says. “I actually really liked it. I was always taller than everyone else [laughs], so if they were missing a guy, I was always put in the guys’ parts. I’d always dance the guy’s part or whatever because I was huge compared to everyone else.”

Lucy is quick to laugh and make jokes, and her self-deprecating sense of humor is evident in her drag king act. She explains, “My friend and I are both seen as really feminine, and we decided that it would be really funny if we did a song that was really hilarious, kind of like making fun of ourselves in a way, so we chose to do ‘Dick in a Box.’” This song was originally featured in a 2006 Emmy award-winning musical video on Saturday Night Live. Still wildly popular on the video-sharing internet site YouTube, the “Dick in a Box” video parodies a certain genre of late-1990s pop vocal harmony R&B songs made famous by White “boy bands” such as Justin Timberlake’s group ‘N Sync.

**Observation**

I’m in an auditorium at Liberal Arts College at 5:30 on a Wednesday evening for the college’s annual drag king fundraising show. Women dressed as men seem slightly out of place with the sun still shining and without the liquid courage that alcohol usually

provides drag performers in bars and clubs. The first drag king is introduced as Slim Johnson, who performs to a twangy country music song. Dressed as a guns-blazing cowboy and riding a broomstick horse, Slim ropes a giggly audience member and throws his cowboy hat into the audience. Several students clamor and grab the hat like it's a bouquet being thrown at a wedding. The performer's sidekick, another drag king dressed as a cowboy, carries a bucket with a sign reading "You can spank me if you put money in here." The audience hollers in approval, as spectators approach the stage area to place dollar bills into the tip bucket and give the buckaroo a slap on the rear. This flirtatious romp foreshadows the even bawdier display to come.

Next, Lucy and her friend Beth, both White students, perform the song from NBC's "Saturday Night Live" (SNL) skit, "Dick in a Box," starring Lucy in the Justin Timberlake role, and Beth playing the part of SNL cast member Andy Samberg. Both are dressed in men's suits with thick gold chains, dark sunglasses, and matching sideburns and goatees. Lucy has her long hair pulled back into a low ponytail, and Beth wears a short, dark pompadour-style wig. The act begins with Beth sitting in the audience at a table, receiving a neck massage from a "planted" audience member who is in on the act. When the music starts and Beth stands up, the joke becomes visible: She has a large square gift box, wrapped in shiny paper and a big bow, attached to the front of her pants. With a slit cut in the top of the box, her crotch prop doubles as a tip container.

Beth kicks off the song by lip syncing the suggestive lyrics: "Hey girl, I got somethin' real important to give you ..." Then Lucy, sporting a similar gift box, leaps onto the stage. Beth runs up to meet Lucy in the center of the stage and they begin a slow, sexy choreographed dance routine, stroking their own chests in pseudo-heartfelt gestures and

pursing their lips. As their hips gyrate, the gift boxes bob up and down suggestively and at times even appear to move on their own accord. The crowd goes wild, as Lucy and Beth barely contain their own laughter. It is obvious from the enthusiastic hoots from the audience, as well their eagerness to place tips in Lucy's box, that she is one of the more well-liked drag kings performing in this show.

A sampling of Lyrics from "Dick in a Box"<sup>145</sup> by Justin Timberlake and Andy Samberg:

*Hey girl I got somethin' real important to give you  
A gift real special, so take off the top  
Take a look inside -- it's my dick in a box*

*To all the fellas out there with ladies to impress  
It's easy to do just follow these steps  
One: Cut a hole in a box  
Two: Put your junk in that box  
Three: Make her open the box  
And that's the way you do it*

*It's my dick in a box, my dick in a box girl  
Christmas -- dick in a box  
Hanukkah -- dick in a box  
Kwanzaa -- a dick in a box  
Every single holiday -- a dick in a box*

Everyone seems to take pleasure in Lucy and Beth's version of this parody of over-the-top sexy, masculine pop stars. Lucy delightedly describes the performance: "I had a blast doing it. It was crazy, everybody just went nuts. Everybody was talking about how funny it was because they said, 'Both of y'all are just so feminine.' It was awesome. I really liked it. It was just funny in general because everyone sees me as very femme."

<sup>145</sup> <http://www.metrolyrics.com/dick-in-a-box-lyrics-justin-timberlake.html>. Accessed January 2, 2009.

**Smith: “I just got into it for fun.”**

Smith is a White computer programmer in her early twenties. Originally from Miami, Florida, she has lived in the Atlanta area for four years. Before she decided to perform in drag, Smith and her girlfriend, Julie, attended several drag king shows at bars and clubs around town. Smith says, “When we’d go watch, we would just be like, ‘This is so fun!’” Smith is no stranger to lip syncing to recorded music. “Ever since I was a kid,” she explains, “my mom used to video tape me and my brother lip syncing to music videos and stuff, being silly, putting on costumes and stuff. Back then, we were a Christian household, so it was all Christian music and stuff. When saw my first drag king show in Atlanta, I just thought, hey that would be kind of fun to do that, never thinking that it would actually happen. But from the moment I got up on stage last year, it was such an adrenaline rush and so exciting. And last spring, they had their annual drag king contest, and Julie encouraged me. She said, ‘Just do it!’ And so I was like ‘Ok, ok!’ And so I did it, just for the fun of it really, not expecting anything to come of it, just to have the experience. And I ended up winning second place, and so they asked me to come back and do guest appearances and stuff, and so it kind of went from there. And then last fall, they asked me if I wanted to be a member, and I was like, ‘Yeah!’ So it’s a lot of fun. They told me I’d get addicted to it, and they were right.”

Smith’s performances are heavily influenced by the music she enjoys listening to, and she crafts her onstage personas according to each particular song. She says, “Probably my favorite music is reggaeton<sup>146</sup> and hip hop kind of stuff. But I’ve done a country song or two, and last night I did a rock song. Mostly those four different genres. I like to see where I’m most comfortable . . . and I try not to limit myself.” I ask her how she creates her

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<sup>146</sup> Latin American-inspired urban hip-hop.

characters' appearances, and she explains, "Whatever song I end up picking, that's when the outfit or the costume comes along. You get ideas for what you're gonna wear. And fortunately for me, Julie has just gotten into sewing and stuff like that so she's been making some kick ass costumes. Like for last night she made me this really kick ass punk rock kind of costume with sequins all over the place, and she made me some vinyl pants and put chains on them. They [other troupe members] want us to be more kind of flashy, Las Vegas-y type. Um, but when I was doing the country songs, it was just jeans and a cowboy hat – just a country boy look. For hip hop, you know, usually the baggy jeans, chains, you know, just whatever clothes they're wearing."

As for her favorite drag king performances, Smith says, "I lean more toward the hip hop and the reggaeton. I love [Cuban-American rapper] Pit Bull. I would probably always do Pit Bull, but people would probably get sick of that [laughs]. I guess my being from Miami and Pit Bull being Cuban, a lot of my best friends are Cuban, and that's kind of the music I was raised into, that and Christian. But when I was around my friends I got to listen to the music that I wanted to listen to. And that's the kind of music that people like to listen to now in clubs, the reggaeton."

### **Observation**

It's 11:53 PM on a muggy summer night in Atlanta. I'm at Amazon, a gay dance club located in an older suburban neighborhood, on a street littered with low-rent strip clubs, "lingerie modeling" shops, and adult video stores. A local drag troupe, the Dixie Kings, is performing tonight, interspersed with a drag queen performing here and there.

The audience, made up of mostly White women in their twenties dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers, stands around in small groups, waiting for the next act.

A hip-hop duo takes the stage. One performer is African American and the other, Smith, is White. As the bass booms from the sound system, the two kings trade off lip-syncing parts of the song “Make It Rain,” recorded by Fat Joe, Lil Wayne, and R. Kelly, engaging in the call and response style typical of hip hop. Both drag kings are wearing sunglasses, baggy button-down shirts, and loose jeans. Stalking the stage, crisscrossing in menacing hip-hop poses, throwing gang signs and grabbing their crotches, the duo theatrically yet earnestly interprets the song lyrics as they open and shove umbrellas off the stage and toss fake money with their own pictures printed on it to the audience. By the end of the song, the audience hollers in approval as confetti rains from the ceiling onto the performers.

A sampling of the lyrics from “Let It Rain”<sup>147</sup> by Fat Joe:

*Oww Scottie let's make it rain on these niggas  
Yeah I'm in this bitch with the terror  
Got a handful of stacks better grab an umbrella  
I make it rain, I make it rain on them hos*

*Clap Clap Clap Gotta make that ass clap  
Owwwww Mami's body is bangin', she got it man she does it all  
She gets it poppin' with no hands, I'll make it pour  
I'll make it rain on 'em, I'm layin' game on 'em  
I'm gassin' misses to tattoo my name on 'em*

I ask Smith how she came up with the character and presentation for this particular number. Smith describes her character as “just what my mind creates, in my own little world. I take some of the lyrics and put them together. Act it out a little bit. You know, it

<sup>147</sup> <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/fatjoe/makeitrain.html>. Accessed January 2, 2009.

just depends on what the song's about. And then my mind just sort of takes over. And my friends, when we get together with a couple of our friends, like, the ideas keep rollin'. The four of us will sit, we have another couple that's into it, and we'll just be sitting there, just talkin', just brainstormin', and ideas just keep flowin'. So it helps when you have friends who are creative; like they've helped me out a lot," she says.

For "Make It Rain," Smith explains that she and her friends "were just all sittin' there and thinking, 'Oh, let's make money, and get the umbrellas that we're gonna need to make it rain, and let's put dollar signs on the umbrellas!' Just stuff like that." Smith made no reference to the ways in which women were referred to as "bitches" and "hos," or that the phrase "make it rain" refers to the way in which patrons at a strip club shower strippers with "handfuls of stacks" of cash. Compared with Lucy's outrageously parodic drag performance, Smith's seems a more earnest interpretation, an homage to her favorite recording artists, rather than a critique of masculinity. Furthermore, Smith is the only White drag king I observed who performed the songs of Black or Latino artists.

**Chris: "I need to at least make 'em laugh."**

Chris, a White restaurant manager in her early thirties, describes how she "discovered" drag kinging at a bar one night: "Most of my friends when I first came out were gay guys, and we would go to drag queen shows and I was always like, 'This is really cool.' You know, I thought I was the first person in the whole world who ever thought about being a drag *king* [laughs]. I was like eighteen. I said, 'Nobody's ever done it before!' You know [laughs], just so silly. I don't know if anybody had really done it here before I did it at the Metro Bar when it was on Cypress Street, so that was a long time ago.

[The audience] was all gay boys, and they loved it. I mean they wanted the drag queens to come back too, but they liked it for a little break in the show.”

Later, Chris got word of a drag king troupe forming in Atlanta. She says, “I overheard a conversation while I was bartending and I was like, ‘I want in!’” Chris says that Atlanta got its earlier exposure to the conventions of elaborate drag kinging from the New York Club Casanova, which is described in Halberstam’s book *Female Masculinity*<sup>148</sup> as a pioneering drag king club catering to a mostly White crowd. “In those days, we did a quarterly show,” she recalls. “And it was like a huge production. It would be like an hour and a half long, and it was more theater than some of the drag king performances I’m seeing in Atlanta now. Ours were more like props and elaborate costume changes. It was more like amateur theater.”

As for the types of characters she and her troupe performed on stage, Chris says, “We did it all. Mostly we did straight guys. I definitely had three or four numbers where I had some gay man love [laughs]. We did a Pet Shop Boys song once, and it was, you know, ‘You’ve got the brains, I’ve got the brawn,’ you know that one. And my friend was kind of the smarmy used car salesman, and I was this sort of young redneck boy, with a mullet, and I cut my hair on stage, and he dressed me prettier than I was before. You know, I started out kind of frumpy and then he kind of made me into this pretty boy, and we go off together. So there’s a lot of that.”

Chris’ performances aren’t always erotically charged, she says: “It wasn’t always sexual. I also did some Dean Martin stuff. Like I was drunk on stage, with a martini glass and that kind of stuff. But Tom Waits’ song ‘Ice cream Man’ was like my signature. It was definitely sexual.”

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<sup>148</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

Sampling of lyrics from “Ice Cream Man”<sup>149</sup> by Tom Waits:

*I'll be clickin' by your house about two forty-five  
Sidewalk sundae strawberry surprise,  
I got a cherry popsicle right on time  
A big stick, mamma, that'll blow your mind  
'Cause I'm the ice cream man, I'm a one-man band (yeah)  
I'm the ice cream man, honey, I'll be good to you.*

*See me coming, you ain't got no change  
Don't worry baby, it can be arranged:  
Show me you can smile, baby just for me  
Fix you with a drumstick, I'll do it for free*

### **Observation**

Chris takes the stage dressed in white pants and a white button down shirt with a little red bow tie. She’s an ice cream man, with a courier bag, and she wears a sly smile that belies her nerdy black horned-rimmed glasses as if she’s hiding something. And she is. She lip syncs and dances in an exaggerated upbeat manner, as if parodying a number from an old Broadway musical. The crowd is enthusiastic, and they gather around the stage. When the song comes to the line, “Fix you with a drumstick, I’ll do it for free,” Chris reaches suggestively into her bag and pulls out and unwraps a Popsicle, holding it in front of her crotch. An audience member approaches the now-phallic Popsicle and inserts it into her mouth.

As Chris later describes it, “There’s always a willing participant who would, you know, *go there* [laughs] ... It was like wow! You never even had to plant anyone to get in on the act there. Then I throw Popsicles out into the crowd, and pretty much everyone ends up with a Popsicle.” By the cheering and laughing heard from the crowd, it’s evident that

<sup>149</sup> [http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/tom\\_waits/ice\\_cream\\_man.html](http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/tom_waits/ice_cream_man.html). Accessed January 2, 2009.

the audience delights in witnessing the transformation of an innocent childhood icon, the Popsicle, into an object of eroticism.

**Sera: “I’m a sociologist.”**

Sera is a lab technician in her late twenties who is about to begin a Ph.D. program in Sociology at a large state university in the Midwest. When we email back and forth about meeting for the interview, she describes herself as “African American female, tomboy, about 5’5” with long dreadlocks in a ponytail.” Sera (whose drag king name is Anthony) came to drag kinging through a colleague at her part-time restaurant job. She explains, “[My coworker] had this dream and this passion that she always wanted to start a drag troupe, and she called me and said, ‘I want you to be involved.’ And I was thinking she needed a stagehand or something, but she was like, ‘No, I want you to perform on stage!’ She was like, ‘Yeah, you dramatic. You can do it.’”

Sera describes her onstage persona and how Anthony came about: “He got a name. At first I was Sepia Soul, but it sounded a little feminine, sepia being that hue of brown in old pictures, and I was like ‘No, I’m gonna find me another name.’ And so me and my friend came up with Anthony. Anthony is different [from other performers in the troupe] because whereas like some people get up and take they clothes off, Anthony does social commentary.” Sera’s first “piece,” as she refers to her drag act, was Elizabeth Withers’ song, “The World Ain’t Ready.”

Lyrics from Elizabeth Withers “The World Ain’t Ready”<sup>150</sup>

*She had the mind of a woman, and a body of a man  
No one she talked to would wanna understand*

<sup>150</sup> <http://www.lyricsreg.com/lyrics/elisabeth+withers/The+World+Aint+Ready/>. Accessed January 2, 2009.

*Spent her lonely days pretending  
 Somehow fitting in  
 But at night she put her high heels on  
 Showing her sexy skin  
 She'd tear up the dance floor  
 Breaking every rule  
 Driving every guy crazy  
 No one really knew  
 The struggle she was goin' through  
 Playing different roles  
 Wouldn't let you get you close  
 Afraid to be exposed*

*Be you the real you  
 Love who you are  
 Don't let nobody confuse your precious heart  
 Somebody's right might be a wrong  
 Girl, you know where you belong  
 Do what you gotta do  
 Even if the world ain't ready for you*

*Guy at the corner store  
 Got a daughter who likes girls  
 No matter how he tries  
 Daddy can't change her morals  
 So he buys her pretty dresses  
 Instead of baseball caps*

*The girl loves her daddy  
 And wants to see him happy  
 Says "I do" to a man  
 Hugs her family at the wedding  
 But underneath the veil  
 She feels she deceived  
 Herself  
 Her man  
 Her lover  
 And the daddy she wanted to please*

At first I found it odd that Sera, as the male Anthony, would perform to a song by a female recording artist. But after observing her performance and listening to Sera explain what the song meant to her, it made more sense. Anthony, dressed in all white, acts as what

Sera describes as the “god conscious” of the performance, telling a story about gender, sexuality, and oppression. On one side of the stage is a man dressed as a woman.

“Basically it’s about a biological male who must change clothes after he leaves home, like into his dresses, and the first verse is about him, how he goes to school and changes clothes,” she says. “The message is ‘Do what you want to do, basically, even if the world not ready for you.’”

The second verse features a woman dressed like a boy, in a baseball cap and jeans. Sera describes the second “act” of this play: “So the second verse is about a girl who is gay and whose dad owns the corner store, and he doesn’t want her to be gay. And he wants her to wear dresses, and she winds up marrying a man. But the whole while she goes with women. And then the dad comes, well, I made the piece where the dad comes and says, ‘Be you. Do you. Even if the world not ready for you.’ So in the piece, the dress is symbolic, we have a dress on a hanger, and there’s a baseball cap. The baseball cap is symbolic of the masculine side and the dress is symbolic of the feminine side so that at the end, the dad comes and takes the dress and gives the baseball cap back to the daughter. Me and the dad come together because then he’s releasing his daughter to be who she is. And it’s like a reconciliation, and the drag queen goes with her boyfriend, and the drag king with her girlfriend. So, basically, even if the world ain’t ready for you, do what the hell you want to do anyway.”

The chapters that follow will delve more deeply into the narratives and experiences of the participants, their relationships to drag kinging, and the ways in which their performances illuminate the concepts of multiple unlearnings and learnings, and multiple selves and identities.

CHAPTER 3  
CHRIS: BEING A DRAG KING, BECOMING A “TRANNNY”

**Introduction**

As Chris has been performing in drag for more than ten years, she witnessed the arrival of drag kinging in Atlanta in the mid-1990s. Taken as a brief oral history, her story about “coming to do drag” provides a backdrop and orients the reader to drag king performances. Chris’ subsequent narratives serve as sites of entry in teasing out important learnings and unlearnings from her drag king experiences and the ways in which these un/learnings intersect with gender identification, issues of race and class, and her multiple subjectivities. I suggest the metaphor of a palimpsest as a way of understanding how traces of Chris’ previous learnings and unlearnings intersect with her new learnings. As with a palimpsest, these previous learnings and unlearnings are never entirely erased and therefore continue to inform Chris’ newer learnings and unlearnings. Chris’ various, fragmented, and multiple unlearnings and learnings illustrate the ways in which drag both subverts and reinscribes hierarchical identities. Chris’ narrative reflects fragmented learnings that are predicated on her multiple subject positions, and her story illuminates the psychic or inner factors, such as comfort or discomfort, desire, and resistance, which come to bear on the education of all individuals negotiating multiple subjectivities. In the first section, Chris describes her early days of drag kinging and chronicles how she established herself as a performer in Atlanta. In the second section, Chris discusses how drag kinging has been an important “outlet” for what she deems her “gender issues.” She highlights the ways in

which drag has helped her negotiate her self-identification as a “tranny.” The third section focuses on how Chris describes learning to perform as a drag king, centering how she buttresses her performance of her so-called “natural” masculinity with empirical learnings. The fourth and last section is centered around approximately six hours of videotaped drag king performances of Chris and her Atlanta peers (spanning a period of two years) that she and I watched together and discussed at her home. Our observations generated critical conversations on the social learnings of drag kinging. Topics covered here include negotiating gender, race, and class; how knowledge circulates among different drag troupes; and how gender and sexual politics play out in drag king performances.

Chris proved to be a good storyteller, and I choose to present her narratives in as intact a manner as possible to preserve the flow of our conversations. In fact, this chapter could be thought of as a kind of dialogue that introduces the reader to drag kinging. Throughout her narrative, I comment with a number of “interruptions” (in *Courier* font) that put her story into play with other drag king texts, including scholarship as well as commentary gleaned from popular culture (magazine articles, online interviews, etc.). Like Lather and Smithies,<sup>151</sup> I chose to separate my running commentary in this way in order to preserve the flow of her story. Chris’ oral history and our conversations about the performances set the stage to examine critical aspects of drag kinging more thoroughly in the subsequent chapters. The questions guiding this chapter are: How does Chris come to identify as a drag king and as transgendered? How do drag performers/performances negotiate the politics of race, class, and gender? What is learned and unlearned and how do educational discourses (formal and informal) circulate among drag performers?

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<sup>151</sup> Patti Lather and Chris Smithies, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/Aids* (Boulder: Westview, 1997).

## **I. Bringing Kinging to Atlanta**

Of the four research participants in this project, Chris has been involved with drag kinging the longest. She was an early witness not only to the arrival of kings in Atlanta, but also to the general rising popularity of drag kinging in large North American cities throughout the 1990s. As she associated with (and to some extent learned drag from) several drag king pioneers, her story serves as a brief, although significant, oral history that introduces the reader to drag king culture. Again, Chris' words are in Times New Roman font.

My band played Club Casanova, this was 1999, and I was friends with Mo B. Dick. We had mutual friends, and every time they would come to [Atlanta], Mo B. stayed with us. So at Club Casanova, when I was in my band, we would open for [the New York drag troupe], or they would open for us. And we played at [an Atlanta club] a couple of times together. So I knew Mo B., and what's the mayor guy, what's his name, Murray Hill, and those kids were all doing their thing, kinda at the height of their thing. So they invited us in the band to come up and play at their shows.

Mo B. Dick (a.k.a. Maureen Fischer) and Murray Hill were at the forefront of the early drag king phenomenon. Mo B. Dick (not to be confused with the rap and R&B music producer of the same name) started the weekly drag king event called Club Casanova in New York City's East Village in 1996. Several drag king

researchers, including Browne<sup>152</sup> and Halberstam,<sup>153</sup> have featured Mo B. in their writings. In 1998, Mo B. Dick made a television appearance on Maury Povich's special drag king episode and starred in the John Waters film, *Pecker*. Drag king Murray Hill made a splash when he ran against Rudy Guiliani in the 1997 mayoral race and, according to his website (www.mistershowbiz.com), has since become "The Hardest Working Middle-Aged Man in Show Business." Chris continues:

Mo B. Dick is actually the first person to ever glue sideburns on my face. It happened in the bathroom at the Velvet Club in the Lower East Side. So I'm like sitting on a dirty toilet, and she's like, 'Oh my god, I'm going to make it great,' and she's drawing in my eyebrows all dark [laughs]. That night there was a photographer from [a British publication], and I ended up having two photos of myself in that spread that they did on drag kings at that time. So that night she put the facial hair on me and we went and did our show, and that was the first time we did our show. I didn't bind or anything, but I was already wearing a suit and the jacket covered up my chest. I mean I've always sort of bound since I've got 'em, like I wear a sports bra, sometimes two, and that kind of thing. And now, you know, I'm bigger than I ever have been, and I have to buy these compression shirts and all this stuff. I mean, I would bind every day if I could. But it's uncomfortable. I mean, I don't want to break a rib or anything, and I work long shifts. It depends on how big you are. My girlfriend wouldn't need anything, she's very, very flat-chested. I've got D's. So I'm like, where does it go? Kinda creepy [laughs].

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<sup>152</sup> Kath Browne, "Stages and Streets: Reading and (Mis)Reading Female Masculinities," in *Spaces of Masculinities* ed. Bettina Van Hoven (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>153</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

So there were no drag king troupes [in Atlanta] at this time, but people would have like a variety show, or something like that to raise money or whatever, and there would be performances, and you could do like a drag number here and a drag number there. People were doing their own things. Kay put together a show for [a fundraiser for the homeless]. We put together an art auction and live music and a DJ, and some drag. There I overheard someone say, “We’re gonna do this troupe, we’re gonna get together and rehearse, and we’re gonna try and figure out where we’re gonna have a show.” And I said that I’d like to be involved. So I kind of invited myself in and ended up being part of the Atlanta troupe for two years. And I think we had maybe eight shows during that time. We did Pride a couple of times, we had a float. That was about six years ago. So after that, I just kind of started working kind of freelance, and I did some stuff with [two other Atlanta troupes]. They’d ask me to do more, but I’m busy at work and can’t. And [some troupes] dance, and I can’t dance. I can do a little bit of grapevining, anyone can do it, it’s the easiest dance in history. But there’s also some really stupid, and I do mean stupid moves, but people laugh and it’s fun. It’s almost like interpretive dancing stuff. There’s one we did, we dressed as boys with sparkly headbands and streamers on sticks and stuff.

As Chris points out, many drag king performances serve as fundraising events for local community causes. In fact, in their research, scholars such as Troka<sup>154</sup> and Shapiro<sup>155</sup> emphasize the community building aspects of drag kinging and conclude that, for the most part, drag king troupes foster community, social support, and educational opportunities for consciousness raising. When considering drag kinging in such a way, it is important to

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<sup>154</sup> Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes.”

<sup>155</sup> Shapiro.

note Kumashiro's contention that "the goals of 'consciousness-raising,' and 'empowerment' assume that knowledge, understanding, and critique led to personal action and social transformation."<sup>156</sup> I question the taken-for-granted notion that drag kinging is a panacea for gender injustice and the generalization that it is responsible for building a cohesive queer community, which I will discuss later.

So my band would perform a little bit, every now and then we'd do drag, go to the bar in drag or whatever, and just really gender-bending, kind of when nobody was. In Georgia that can be kind of scary sometimes. Even when going to the gay bars, there's always that whole thing of even putting on the facial hair before the show and stopping off to buy a pack of smokes along the way. You know [dramatic Southern accent] "What the hell is going on over there?" And then you know, now, well not now, but a couple of years ago, you'd walk into [an Atlanta lesbian club] on any given Saturday night, and there would be at least two folks in there like queering the gender line in some way. It was like, 'What's goin' on with that person?' you know [laughs].

Chris' joking tone belies real danger in performing what Butler would describe as an "unintelligible" gender identification. She writes, "It won't do to call this merely play or fun, even if those constitute significant moments... [W]e continue to live in a world in which one can risk serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure one seeks, the fantasy one embodies, the gender one performs."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Kevin K. Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 1 (2000): 38.

<sup>157</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 214.

So, I just kind of watched the kings in New York and all that stuff. That's how I learned. Back before everyone in the world had Internet ... you relied upon when people came through on their tours and stuff. If you went to San Francisco or you went to New York or Chicago on any kind of trip, you tried to see drag stuff, you know. So I went to Chicago and saw the [troupe there].

Chris gives an example of a detail she learned about drag kinging, which she brought from these other cities back to Atlanta:

I was with the Atlanta troupe from the very beginning. At our first show everyone used a fake microphone. Except for me, I didn't do it because I had never seen that done before [in other cities]. Because it's not about actually making people think that you're singing, they know it's not you singing. They know that it's not Linkin Park or whoever the hell you're doing. So I brought that to the Atlanta troupe. And [at first] we used socks to pack. We got Mr. Softees in like our third show.

Chris highlights an aspect of drag kinging that sets it apart from drag *queening*. At a drag king show, audiences are aware that all songs are lip synced, so there is no need to feign authenticity with a fake microphone. Drag *queens*, however, are more likely to strive for an appearance of authenticity, making use of microphones to make their lip synced performances seem like real "live" performances.

In the next section, Chris explains how she came to learn to identify herself as transgendered ("tranny") and how she negotiates her identity in her workplace and among her peers and family.

## II. "I'm definitely a tranny"

I've always been a performer. I mean even when I was a bartender, you're on a stage for whoever is sitting at the bar. Now I'm a manager, and you know I have to go and "act" at tables, that kind of stuff. And, of course, I performed in a band before I did all this stuff.

In the above passage, Chris acknowledges how she self-consciously "acts" or "performs" every day at her job as a restaurant manager, connecting her everyday performances to her stage performances. I ask her how her everyday life was affected by drag kinging. She replies:

[Drag] changed my gender identity. It allowed it to have an outlet, a place for me where, wow, I feel 100 percent cool. I'm definitely a tranny. So drag for me is just an outlet for that. Seriously, it's a serious outlet and it always has been. It's sort of helped me through my twenties, when kind of coming to terms with my own gender issues. And figuring out what it means, and what I'm gonna do with it.

Chris uses the phrase "gender issues" throughout our conversation, signaling that she frames her gender as somehow not "normal" and perhaps a site of inner struggle. Kumashiro offers an explanation of Chris' conflict: When there are two genders/sexes recognized, he suggests, "members of each gender exhibit only certain behaviors, appearances, feelings ... meaning anyone who deviates has an unnatural or inappropriate gender."<sup>158</sup> Chris experiences herself as not fitting into the normalized

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<sup>158</sup> Kumashiro: 32.

gender binary, which has contributed to a sense of marginalization, pathology, or abnormality. Framing drag kinging as helping one work out one's so-called gender issues is also reflected in Shapiro's research. From her study of her own troupe in California, Shapiro's findings suggest that drag allows performers to "try on a variety of genders."<sup>159</sup> Another drag king participant, Smith, constructs a similar story of discomfort:

I've never really been comfortable wearing girls' clothes. And since I've been doing this, and since I've been with Julie, I've bought more male clothes and stuff like that, and it's finally made me feel like, you know, I'm comfortable in these clothes, why can't I wear them in my everyday life, like to work and stuff like that? You know, guy's shoes, like these. Just stuff like that, it's made me more comfortable with myself. And, yeah, I've never been comfortable in girls' clothes. It's just not the way ... it felt like it was burning my skin or something.

Like Chris, Smith says that drag has helped her to be more comfortable with her gender identity. Smith unlearns the cultural requirement that girls wear girls' clothes, and she learns that it is acceptable for her to wear men's clothes everyday. Furthermore, Chris explains that drag kinging has helped her find her "true" self or identity:

Performing has changed me, totally. It's brought out who I was really. It's made me more comfortable with myself.

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<sup>159</sup> Shapiro: 263.

'Cause I used to have such low self esteem and just didn't think much of myself. So it's definitely made me more, a little more confident with my gender identity. And it's encouraged me a lot in good ways to be more confident in myself. I've become more friendly. Every night it's something. It's supporting a brother, if they have their own show somewhere, it's going to a show every other night. We'll do our best to go out and support him. [I've] met a lot of great people.

Similarly, Chris says:

Drag was just a great, great outlet for that. It gave me a place to express that side.

Here Chris acknowledges the multiple experiences that a self has. She frames her drag persona as a significantly separate side of herself, as opposed to how Smith views drag as bringing out a singular identity: "who I was really."

And that's just my particular experience. There are people out there that are not like that, like Mo B. Dick. She's kind of a femme in real life. She's a girly girl. A high maintenance girl too. Makeup and hair, that kind of thing.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam cites a 1997 *New York Post* article that highlights Mo B. Dick's safe, normalized femininity out of drag, quipping that she "happens to love lipstick as much as any girl." In juxtaposing herself as a tranny with Mo as a "girlie girl," Chris contends that not all drag kings consider themselves transgendered and that kinging can be a way that performers express multiple subjectivities.

Absolutely I feel more comfortable in the character than I do in my own skin sometimes. I'm fairly easy going and fairly comfortable in my own skin to kind of be where I am with my gender issues. I mean I do alright, I might have one week out of the month where it just sucks, but whatever, and that's more than it's been in my whole life. I have days where it sucks.

Where Chris "is" with her gender is significant. She is transgendered with no plans to have reassignment surgeries. She uses drag kinging as a way to work through her feelings that her gender is misaligned with her body. She explains:

Just, you know [points to breasts], this isn't right, what's up here. And I don't need a dick, that's not the deal; it just doesn't fit. I would have top surgery like that [snaps]. Yeah, if I could take the time off work, if I could afford it, consider it done. I would have it done immediately. Because that's something that I can do, and it doesn't change anything. I mean, I wouldn't have to tell my parents. My parents have never seen my chest, do you know what I mean? My guests in my restaurant don't see my chest. But if I went on testosterone, everybody would notice those changes. Like go through puberty, become a *man* [deepens voice and laughs].

Shapiro's research reveals that some drag kings who consider themselves transgendered opt against surgery and choose to maintain "a female body as a political act,"<sup>160</sup> which I contend is another possible way of queering what it means to be trans. When Chris says that having an elective double mastectomy, or "top surgery," wouldn't "change anything," she seems to be saying that it would be a more subtle change than fully transitioning,

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 259.

which would be too “public” for her comfort. Even though drag kinging is a public act, it is performed in a trans-friendly space. After performing as a man in this contained space, Chris can retreat to the safety of her “natural” and normalized female body. Maintaining her female body allows Chris to preserve the status quo in her life rather than challenge larger social issues. Interestingly, Chris passes as a man at work anyway, even without altering her body through surgery or hormones:

Yeah, there’s always that sort of like, I might still look like a guy, I mean I’m six feet tall ... but my voice still sounds like this [feminine], and I pass at work even talking to guests, even [without] binding. People are like [in reference to me], “No, that *guy’s* getting our wine,” or “*He* said he’ll be right over.” I pass all the time because people don’t notice. I mean I still pass just the way I look right now. I love it.

Although Chris says that her female body doesn’t “fit,” she can play with gender and yet still experience a certain degree of safety and comfort in the existing condition of her female body. Many individuals who are non-normatively gendered experience discrimination in the workplace and among their families. As Butler states,

When gender norms operate as violations, they function as an interpellation that one refuses only by agreeing to pay the consequences: losing one's job, home, the prospects for desire, or for life... The consequences can be severe.<sup>161</sup>

In addition to her describing purchasing cigarettes in drag as “scary,” Chris also sees that fully transitioning might have unpleasant consequences in her relationship with her mother:

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<sup>161</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 214.

Yeah, I mean my mom is my best friend, I don't think that she would disown me or anything, but I don't think that she would understand it. But we're really good friends. I mean, she knows that I have gender issues. Everybody basically knows that.

Chris uses the phrase "gender issues" to explain how her performance helps her externalize her internalized feelings of loss in a way that is socially acceptable and reconcile the discordance. Chris self-deprecatingly laughs about how she is not a "great representation" of a girl or a female:

I manage a restaurant, and I was at a manager meeting yesterday, and I'm like, 'I'm the only girl here,' and that's like, you know, using the word 'girl' very loosely, and we were talking about how we needed to hire more females, and I'm like yeah ... sometimes I'm like the only one, and [laughs] I'm not exactly a great representation. I don't remember exactly how I said it [laughs], something like that.

Her jokes appear to be a cover for her discomfort in not "fitting" what a woman is supposed to look like, act like, or desire. Because Chris says she identifies as neither male nor female ("I live in between," she says), she performs gender(s) that are, as Butler puts it, culturally unintelligible. Even though Chris isn't consciously using her female body to convey a political message, the fact remains that she successfully passes, without even "trying," which calls into question any "natural" hold on masculinity by men. Without imposing too many "academic" terms on Chris, because she says she answers to both male and female pronouns, I was curious about how she constructed her

gender identity. Was she “genderqueer?”<sup>162</sup> I was surprised when she told me that she identified herself with terms specifically gleaned from academic discourses:

I’ve always been kind of this in between, androgynous or whatever, when that was the word for it. And “tranny” now, that’s sort of become the word for it. We kind of go with what’s popular in the sort of educated world. That’s what we end up calling ourselves. *I think [the terms] come from there, I don’t necessarily take them from there, and then I just sort of adapt to whatever language people are using. That’s how I feel about it.*

While Chris points out that she does not intentionally seek out and adopt the language of the “educated world,” because some drag king performers are also university students, their academic knowledge circulates between academic and performance circles. This phenomenon is also evidenced in the ethnographic and autoethnographic research conducted by drag kings.<sup>163</sup> Although these scholars do not explicitly discuss their specific roles in circulating knowledge between academia and their drag king communities, I speculate that the formal education of these scholars influenced the discourses of their communities of practice. Specifically, Shapiro’s research reflects that

Exposure to academic theorizing helped troupe members, both inside and outside academic circles, understand gender as continually reinforced and contested. For those familiar with queer theory, performing drag was an enactment of

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<sup>162</sup> Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins.

<sup>163</sup> For example, Eve Ilana Shapiro, “The Disposable Boy Toys: Identity Transformation in a Drag King Community” (Dissertation, University of California, 2006); and Troka, “The Kings of the Midwest: An Oral History of Three Midwestern Drag King Troupes.”

performative theories. For individuals unfamiliar with academic theories of gender, discussions within [the troupe] about performativity, coupled with drag performance, gave them a new language to talk about and make sense of gender identity as constructed and mutable.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, one of Shapiro's participants, a transman, explains that he came to understand that "gender [is] a performance even if it's not on stage."<sup>165</sup> Indeed, Butler's theory of performativity has been taken up in various degrees by drag kings, but as Halberstam concludes, "their theories of culture or gender [bear] an extremely complex and indeed ambiguous relation to what circulates as 'gender theory' in academia."<sup>166</sup> As Halberstam puts it, Butler's notion of performativity has been "bastardized" and "reduced to some notion of fancy dress within a costume-party atmosphere."<sup>167</sup> Paradoxically, the way that Butler's theory is commonly circulated, that gender is mainly about the way one *chooses* to perform, both misreads and "proves" her notion that gender is repeated to the extent that it indeed *feels* chosen. The fact that people misunderstand Butler's thinking only serves to buttress her contentions. Such a misreading demonstrates how knowledge circulates among communities of practice and the ways in which individuals adopt knowledges that reinforce what they already know - learnings that they are comfortable with.

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<sup>164</sup> Shapiro, "Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities," 260.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

In the nineties it was “androgynous,” and then there was a rise in the whole butch/femme thing again, and then it became this whole thing like, I mean there are seventeen year olds on T<sup>168</sup> out there, you know [laughs]!

Chris seems to unproblematically adopt what she sees as academic terms (e.g., tranny) from the “educated world” to describe her experience of gender, and she indicates no grappling with these terms. She simply replaces “androgynous” with “tranny.” It is interesting and somewhat troubling that Chris says she identifies herself by what the educated world dictates, reinforcing the notion that academics possess “expert knowledge.” Halberstam, whose research highlights the instability of gender, creates a taxonomy of “different forms of masculine [drag king] performance,”<sup>169</sup> a move that, to me, seems to unnecessarily create more boundaries and categories, which opens the possibility to more hierarchies.<sup>170</sup> I question academia’s role in creating categories for the purpose of classifying and organizing individuals. Halberstam’s rubric points to the contradiction of scholarship that specifically questions categories and then taxonomizes them.

I felt a twinge of ivory-towered, middle class guilt from Chris’ capitulation of her identity to people “more educated” than herself. I suppose I would have felt better about Chris’ identification if she had said that “androgynous” just no longer

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<sup>168</sup> Testosterone injections.

<sup>169</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 246.

<sup>170</sup> Indeed, in her rubric for classifying drag performances, Halberstam does not hide the fact that she privileges some types of drag kings over others. Campbell highlights (and criticizes) Halberstam’s “contempt” for femmes who do “butch” drag king performances, which Halberstam’s rubric classifies as a “femme pretender.” Campbell, 37-38.

worked for her - as she now identifies more toward her masculine side - and therefore she came to see herself as "transgendered." The descriptors androgynous, butch/femme, and transgendered bear little resemblance to one another, and Chris seems to use them interchangeably. Halberstam contends that while "academic theories ignore the so-called real world . . . the 'real world' also ignores theory at its peril."<sup>171</sup> That Chris explains the switch as simply one of faddish academic semantics troubles the notion that academia reflects the so-called real world. Chris adopts what she sees as academic language - even as she marginalizes it - because she lacks the resources to name her own subjective experiences.

Halberstam does acknowledge that "academic theorizations have a limit" and that "there are often huge gaps between the kinds of knowledges and 'facts' that we produce as 'theory' and the kinds of knowledges and facts that are there to be learned in subcultural venues."<sup>172</sup> How useful for Chris (and others) is the descriptor "tranny?" I find myself almost wishing that Chris had come up with her own words to describe herself even as I recognize that she can only identify with the discourses that are available to her. Still, Chris seems at ease with the "new" label and strives to make others feel comfortable with it as well:

Because I'm [pause] transgendered, and whatever way that I am, it's just one of things. I don't know if it's an affirmation or what, but it's like "Yeah, that's right - I'm a

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<sup>171</sup> Judith Halberstam, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 109.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

tranny.” I also try to make people very, very comfortable when they realize it, when they’re like, “Oh, um, sorry.” But you know what? I’m six feet tall, wearing men’s clothes, I got short hair – I can’t get mad at you. I also don’t correct people.

Chris recognizes that the gender binary is so fully ingrained that other people feel compelled to label her as either man or woman. That she does not correct others signals her discomfort with her own singular identification, which she dismisses with the disclaimer “whatever way that I am.” she falls into the language of the status quo when describing her drag king peers. When it comes to identifying other, she explains:

It depends. Because I think Eileen is a girl, Tara’s a girl, and Ann is a completely masculine woman dating a man throughout the two years. So like, it’s all different. It’s queering the lines, queering the norm or whatever. You’re gonna take something that’s such a fucking subculture and still queer that even further, it’s awesome. It’s fun. Ann definitely identifies as a girl. Chad and I are just more tranny. And Chad was a very pretty girl. He just wasn’t into it, you know? [Laughs.]

Chad is an attractive, suave, and well-known White drag king in his late twenties who has fully transitioned from female to male. Chad was originally one of the participants in my research, but because of a serious accident that left him in intensive care for several months, I was unable to formally interview him. As he transitioned, I witnessed Chad’s drag acts progress from a parodying of masculinity to more earnest, realistic male characters. Indeed, his most popular acts were

sultry soul songs such as Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On." Chris says:

It just depends on where you fall on whatever kind of spectrum ... [Chad and I] definitely identify our personas as "he." When I talk about [a drag king onstage], I say "he." "*He* did that," and "*He* did this." But if I saw Eileen out at the bar, I'd say, "Oh yeah, *she's* really hammered, *she's* really doing this or that," or whatever. But when we are talking about that character, it's *he*.

Although Chris identifies with Chad as trans, Chad has fully transitioned and lives as a transman, using only male pronouns, while Chris is tentative about identifying as a male. Chris says:

I don't really use male pronouns for myself. I have like five friends that decided [laughs] they're going to use male pronouns with me, and I don't correct them either. I think that's just the Southerner in me that I don't want to correct anybody in front of anybody. That makes me kind of uncomfortable or whatever. I don't have a preference. Really.

Chris' discomfort in asserting her preferences signals that she is more accepting of norms than she states. Her story shows the fallibility of a binary way of thinking about gender and sexuality. Chris is perceived as either "woman" or "man" in her everyday life by individuals seeking to understand her gender according to a dichotomous male/female system. Although she seems to embrace being "in between," Chris also feels discomfort in explaining her position to people and educating them about the nuances of her identity. Although she resists a singular gender

classification, Chris' gender identification is an ongoing and contradictory negotiation. As Noble puts it, such "incoherence" positions bodies outside of traditional categories, which highlights the potential to model a different kind of masculinity.<sup>173</sup>

### III. Learning "Masculine Performance"

In this section, Chris answers my question: How did you learn to perform as a drag king, not the costumes and such, but the *masculine act*? She explains:

I would just look around if I wanted to see how facial hair should look. Like, I would look at him [points to a man] and see that [his sideburn is] not right up against the ear, it's about half an inch away. And I would look at my friends' facial hair. You want it to look as real as possible.<sup>174</sup> I went to the costume stores and talked to the people who did makeup, the makeup artists, people who do fake beards for theater and that kind of stuff, and you know ... they gave me a lot of pointers. The hair comes in these braids, and you take the dark brown and the light brown and you mix them together and you get this color [points to own hair]. So I mean, I just watched my friends, and being in a restaurant there are so many people to watch all the time. And I've [worked] in restaurants this whole time, so you watch a guy walk and sit at a table, and you watch his body language or whatever. I did a lot of observing. Just sit and watching, like, I like the way that guy does that, and then

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<sup>173</sup> See Anderson-Minshall, Noble.

<sup>174</sup> Chris' focus on the authenticity of her facial hair (and "passing") seemingly contradicts her earlier preference for not using microphones in drag king performances. Earlier she points out that the audience knows that the kings are lip syncing rather than performing live, and so in her opinion, a microphone is superfluous. Indeed, many drag kings have no desire for authenticity, and they parody masculinity with obviously fake beards and chest hair. Chris, on the other hand, takes care to make her own facial hair look "real."

I'd try to incorporate that into my act. For the most part, I just ... it's not super specific, it's just like mannerisms, like this kind of thing that guys do [rubs imaginary beard]. It's stuff that you don't notice unless you're looking for it. But if a girl is dressed up like a boy and doesn't do those sort of things, it isn't gonna pass as well as one that does the little nuances and the little details.

That Chris watches men and imitates their gestures demonstrates what Halberstam and other gender scholars contend - that masculinity is not the property of male bodies.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, Chris "does" masculinity well and delights in her ability to pass. Her narrative of passing is complicated by her self-identification. "Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully," writes Halberstam. And "at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity. At such a moment, the passer has *become*."<sup>176</sup> If Chris sees her identity as "in between" or transgendered, then what is she passing as? For Halberstam, Chris' identity might be understood as a process with multiple sites for being and becoming.

Butler points out,

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation, between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 15.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>177</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (Routledge: New York, 2003), 415.

After being repeated differently, the subversive repetition then becomes second-nature:

Plus, I really didn't have to do all of that kind of study[ing], because a lot of it is natural for me. I'm just kind of masculine. I'm feminine too, but everybody is, everybody strikes their balance wherever they are. I think women in general are, I'm grossly generalizing, but I think that they just are softer beings than men are. When it comes to the little details. Not daintier, not weaker by any means, just softer, you know. I don't know if that's, that's a gross generalization, because I'm not soft. I have a soft side. Just like you have a little thing, [points to me] like the way your hand is on your arm like that, I just don't do that. Again, it's a gross generalization, but when you're watching so many people, you pick up those things. [With] girls dressed up like boys, and girls in general, I don't care how tranny you are, you still have that – scratch that, how tranny *I* am, I still have that basic thing, you know, I'll cry at a Hallmark commercial. I'm emotionally charged or whatever. I still have that feminine part, as much as I want to push it down, I still have it.

That Chris describes crying at a Hallmark commercial as essential (a "basic thing") to femininity is telling. Even as much as she would like to move beyond a gender dichotomy, Chris demonstrates how difficult it is. Although Chris says that she learns how to be masculine by watching male friends and customers at her workplace, she also claims that "a lot of it is natural for me" and "I'm *just* kind of masculine [my emphasis]." Chris appears to imply the existence of innate, essential gender(s) to which she still subscribes. Chris states that everyone has elements of masculinity and femininity. However, she does not construct these elements as equally legitimate or desirable. By

seeing her femininity as something that she wants to "push down," she frames it as Other.

Indeed, Butler contends that the constructed nature of gender is masked by a naturalized gendering that is invoked to punish those who deviate from the norm, regulated according to a cultural script. As she says, "gender is ... a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain ... polar genders as cultural fictions [the "softer" of which cries at Hallmark commercials] is obscured by the credibility of those productions - and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them."<sup>178</sup> Like Chris, Smith also credits her successful drag kinging to her "natural" masculinity. Smith says,

Either you have it or you don't. If you don't have it you can't force it. You know, there are some performers who are still very girlie. And when I first started, I probably seemed a little girlie. Cause, like I said, I just got into it for fun, not because I want to be a man or anything like that. It's weird, like what all it involves, like binding ... packing... I packed for the first time last night, and I was like, I don't think I like this [laughs]. It felt very weird [laughs]. Actually, it was because of the pants that my girlfriend made for me. With black vinyl pants, it just looked like you had to [pack] because they're tight. My jeans bulge there anyway; they are big enough that you can't tell. But with the pants last night, I was like

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<sup>178</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 178.

yeah, I guess I need to [pack]. I got a jock strap from Wal-Mart and put a sock in it. Yeah, and it just felt very weird. [laughs] I guess I'll get used to it. Like it's bad enough having to ... bind your breasts, but to put something down there is like, eh. But yeah [laughs] it was an experience. It's fun.<sup>179</sup>

#### **IV. Drag King Politics: Negotiating Patriotism, Misogyny, and Xenophobia**

In this section, Chris and I observe and discuss a total of six hours of videotaped drag performances featuring Chris and her drag king peers. Not only am I watching and interpreting the taped performances, but I'm also watching Chris watch and interpret them - thus observing *her* observing the performances. This arrangement gives me the opportunity to speak with Chris after she has had time to reflect on the performances and to engage her in a conversation about them. As discussed below, our conversation provided a point of entry to investigate what Chris learned and unlearned about social and political issues.

This show is [at a bar] right after 9-11 ... and all of the proceeds went to the Red Cross. And we got some flack about that because they are homophobic or something. But we didn't know that at the time, we were like, you know, we've got fifteen hundred bucks; we want to give it to a cause, and that's the only one we found because it was so right after - maybe October or November. I'm sure [the Red Cross] does a lot of good there.

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<sup>179</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, Smith's discomfort with packing was evident in my observation of her performance. Her aversion to the physical realities of drag are reflected in other participants' narratives as well. For example, all of the drag kings in my research mentioned the discomfort of binding their breasts for performances, yet they also laugh about it.

When Chris mentions Red Cross as being homophobic, I believe she is referring to its policy of restricting blood donors. The Red Cross was also criticized after 9-11 for mismanaging funds. Chris' knowledge about such policies is fragmented, and she seems to be dismissive of the new knowledge. By asserting that she is "sure" that the Red Cross "does a lot of good," she seems to be caught in a pattern of re-learning what she already "knows" about the organization and dismissing the new information. Below, Chris continues a fragmented pattern of learning, this time with race and class. We begin watching the videotape, and Chris describes the first drag king act:

That one, she cuts hair; she's crazy. Eileen. Her stage name is Johnson. I came up with it, it's slang for dick, but nobody seemed to pick up on that.

Johnson is dressed as the artist Eminem, with a white "wife beater" tank top and baggy jeans. He performs the song "Slim Shady." With his aggressive posturing and angry gestures taking up the space of the entire stage, he does a very good impression of Eminem. Next we watch one of Chris' performances. He is sitting onstage in a chair wearing a sombrero, holding a bottle of tequila, and draped with a Mexican blanket. Slumped over in the chair, Chris pretends to be drunk, nearly passed out. He raises his head up only to sing bits of the chorus of the song. As the exchange below illustrates, this viewing gives Chris an opportunity to be critical about her performance:

Chris: This one's good. There's a little bit of racism ...

Leslee: So what were you going for here, a Spanish guy?

Chris: Yeah, with the sombrero and bottle of tequila [laughing].

Leslee: Did that character have a name?

Chris: Nah, just the Drunken Mexican

Leslee: Did you get any feedback or criticism for the drunk Mexican?

Chris: No, not a bit.

Given the political nature of drag, I was surprised that Chris was not criticized for her "racist" act at the time and that she only came to see it as racist later. I wonder what had changed her thinking, so I asked:

Leslee: Do you think you would [if you did it] today?

Chris: Oh, abso-fuckin'-lutely. Even I think it's racist, I mean, I told you, "Here comes a little racism." But I don't know, at the time, it seemed innocent. I didn't think of it that way. I was stupid I guess.

Chris' admitting her cultural insensitivity made me question what sort of educational intervention had occurred to change her thinking. I asked:

Leslee: Do you think drag has become more political in that way?

Chris: Yeah, it's become a lot more political. At this point, it wasn't political at all.

Chris learns that it is unacceptable to parody a cultural stereotype and she sees "politics" in terms of race or ethnicity.

Chris does not seem to view identifying as transgendered as a political act in and of itself in its resistance to hegemonic gender norms.<sup>180</sup> Chris says that drag kinging has become more "political" with a smirk that reveals that she sees this as a bad thing. I speculate from our later conversations that Chris views drag as more of an opportunity to entertain and to be in the spotlight, rather than an opportunity to educate and politicize race and gender issues. While I do not suggest that one reason to do drag is any more or less important than another, it is striking to me that much of the drag king scholarship focuses on the political and community building characteristics of kinging, while mentioning pleasure and attention as an aside.

Chris' narrative points to a shift in thinking about social issues. In the 1990s, the focus was on tolerance, which allows a degree of ignorance about race and for racism to be active. Another discourse in the 1990s was that of color blindness. More recently there has been a move to accepting differences and multiplicities rather than just tolerating them. When Chris says that no one in the audience or in her troupe criticized her drunk Mexican act, they very well could have but for one reason or another did not speak up about it. Chris has learned that her act is racist. Trying to understand how she learned this, I ask:

Leslee: What do you think changed?

Chris: I think social awareness.

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<sup>180</sup> Shapiro, "Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities," 257.

Leslee: You mentioned "the educated world" earlier in regard to using "tranny." Do you think that influences ...

Chris: Yeah. Absolutely. Lesbians too, for the most part are highly fucking educated. And what tend to be the more progressive lesbians or queers or whatever you want to call them, because there are so many people in our community that aren't necessarily identifying as lesbian or whatever ... so just that fact that I had to say that [laughs], means that yeah, it's fucking overly academic a lot of times.

Chris points out how the singular identity "lesbian" fails, as it does not account for the identities of all individuals in her drag community. In fact, none of the participants in my research describe themselves specifically as lesbian. Chris is the only one who identifies as transgendered. Sera identifies as a "boi," Lucy refers to herself as a femme, and Smith does not use identifiers at all in reference to herself. Instead of seeing the language as failing, Chris constructs academia as the problem, complicating what she is comfortable with knowing. However, she still adopts the language of academia, perhaps seeing it as superior, more powerful, or smarter than her own.

Even as she marginalizes formal learning, Chris allows academics to tell her what to be and which subjectivities she can inhabit. Chris' "knowledge" that academics know more, or hold more expertise than she does, has been incompletely "erased." As with a palimpsest, traces of this reverence to academia remain, informing her current experience. Because this previous learning

still exists, Chris refuses to completely *unlearn* her deference to those “more educated” than she.

Why does Chris resist unlearning this knowledge? Unlearning is a challenge to her identity, as what is known and understood contributes to her sense of self. Kumashiro contends, “If the unlearning involved in learning the necessary knowledge ... leads [the individual] into a state of ‘crisis’ or paralysis (such as feeling emotionally upset), [the individual] will first need to work through the crisis before being able to act.”<sup>181</sup> What a person understands about herself and the world makes her feel comfortable and “understandable” to others. There is a requisite amount of discomfort that one must be willing to endure in order to learn and to grow. Unlearning what she knows in order to learn new knowledge challenges an individual’s identity and makes her vulnerable. If an individual is not ready to unlearn and accept the possibility of becoming uncomfortable or vulnerable, unlearning can lead to a crisis, leaving the person paralyzed or stuck.

Below, Chris tells a story about politics among drag performers and how her troupe negotiated charges of racism from another individual. This narrative also illustrates a resistance to learning.

But yeah we had some politics in ... our troupe too, because Buster Cherry, not the character, but the person who plays him, Karen, had said, or allegedly said, the N word at some point. I never heard [her say it], and then [our] troupe got accused and all of a sudden

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<sup>181</sup> Kumashiro, *Troubling Education*, 38.

became a racist troupe, although we had lots of different types of people in our group, there was this whole stigma for a minute, only amongst the folks who were in grad school at the time, the like more-educated-than-thou kind of group.

Chris' knowledge (what she has already learned) about race drives her to all but dismiss the charges of racism aimed at her troupe. She suggests the "diversity" of her troupe precludes it from any racism, or that its diversity "forgives" the racist comments of one of its members. She also seems to put forth the notion that racism is reserved for White people. Furthermore, Chris appears to take a victimized stance when confronted by individuals with more formal education than herself. Rather than acknowledging that one does not have to be formally educated to know racism when one sees it, she seems to dismiss the criticism as coming from overly sensitive more "educated than thou" academics. In describing her confrontation with one of the educated individuals who charged her troupe with being racist, Chris uses bravado to cover her insecurity about her lack of formal education:

I had a conversation with two of those people later. One actually called me and said, "Hey, I'm doing this event, would you be interested?" And I said, "Yeah, but first I think we need to clear some things up first because I was once lumped into a group that you pretty much called racist. And I just want to clear up for you that I never said that. You don't know me, you never clarified that, but you felt comfortable enough to tell other people that, like four of them, at [a women's book store], at a book signing. You said

something about the Atlanta troupe and how we were something something,”<sup>182</sup> and I was like ... it made it sound like we were performing in blackface or something. “We need to clear this up.”

By distancing herself from the collectivity of the troupe, Chris exonerates herself from racism:

So we had an hour-and-a-half [or] two-hour-long conversation and then got beers and discussed it even further. Because she was like, she was very impressed with the fact that I had called her out on it. I said, “You haven’t made things super easy for me because you’ve spread this rumor about the group that I was involved in, so I was guilty by association. And you don’t even know for a fact if this person said this thing. So before you go and fuckin’ slander somebody, you should get your facts straight.” And she was like, “You know, I feel really stupid that I said those things.” And so I was like, “Alright, cool.” Sometimes you’re just like, you know what? It’s just a fuckin’ show. It’s not a minstrel show, you know what I mean, like, just calm the fuck down and relax.

Chris turns the tables and “schools” the academic here, while dismissing the possibilities of racism. Though Chris says that she and this individual had a two-hour long conversation, she does not acknowledge that she learned from it. Her anger and outrage toward the individual was apparent in her tone and strong language. I wondered who she was really mad at – the more educated woman, or *herself* for allowing herself to be seen as ignorant about social issues. I suggest that this incident was a kind of educational crisis for Chris because her worldview was being questioned. Indeed, Kumashiro contends that learning:

<sup>182</sup> By describing the charges of racism as “something something” it appears that Chris cannot even *speak* the possibility that her troupe might have said something racist.

disrupts our commonsense view of the world. The crisis that results from unlearning, then, is a necessary and desirable part of antioppressive education. Desiring to learn involves desiring difference and overcoming our resistance to discomfort.<sup>183</sup>

As Chris is a prominent figure in her social circle and the drag scene, perhaps her knowledge about herself and her troupe had become stagnant. The crisis for Chris developed when someone questioned her worldview with the charges of racism. She was not admitting that she needed to grow. Rather than seeing herself as needing to unlearn and learn new knowledge, Chris' authority and prominence led her to feel like an "expert."

Chris' narrative reflects that she taught the educated person something about drag kinging - that "it's just a fuckin' show," and dismisses criticism by suggesting that everyone "just calm down." However, Chris' story does not reflect that she herself learned anything new. She continues to see drag kinging as primarily entertainment. Indeed, Halberstam suggests that a drag king "may be extremely self-conscious about her performance and may have elaborate justifications and theories about what she is doing, or she may just think of her act as 'having fun' and make no further claims for it."<sup>184</sup> Because Chris' narrative reflects a dismissal of any critical dialogue, I would surmise that she fits into this latter category.

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<sup>183</sup> Kevin Kumashiro, *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 63.

<sup>184</sup> Halberstam, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," 104.

In the spirit of drag king "community," Chris describes the meeting with the academic as an opportunity to break down some barriers that existed between drag troupes at that time:

And I was thinking yeah, maybe she can perform with us, because I don't see why it should be a league of teams playing against each other. I think it should be "Hey, let's do this thing, we have kind of core members that started this, and you have your core members, but why can't they weave in and out? Like Cassandra goes and does fuckin' so-and-so's show, and you know what I mean?" Why does it have to be so political? And so clubby and cliquy.

Chris dismisses the "political" nature of drag and attributes the charges of racism to being cliquy - an us versus them mentality. Chris seems to frame other, more politically minded troupes as taking themselves too seriously. She never acknowledges that the "more educated" group of drag kings might have been right about the presence of racism.

Shapiro highlights a strong collective identity or "shared sense of 'weness'" among her own drag king troupe. She suggests that her group's feminist politics "worked to construct boundaries between the group and other drag performers [and] develop a shared consciousness around drag and gender." Their performances had a strong pedagogical intent and, as she writes, "reflected this collective identity and helped members develop analyses of political events and gender codes and formulate collective strategies for change."<sup>185</sup> I worry that forging such "boundaries" and fostering "a collective identity" further

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<sup>185</sup> Shapiro, "Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities," 256.

divides people and leads to more hegemonic, unchallenged notions of identity and hierarchical “regimes of truth.” Furthermore, as discussed later in this chapter, learning does not automatically lead to social action.

Chris begins to address an interesting racial tension in drag kinging, but she ends up being rather dismissive about it:

I still feel like, I think anybody who has aged at all would say [with an exaggerated Southern accent], “That was a more innocent time.” But I have this thing about doing Black artists. If it’s a Black artist that recorded before 1960 ... you know what I mean ... maybe before the mid-80s or something, I don’t mind it. But with a newer song, an R&B or rap song, you just shouldn’t be doing it. I don’t know what that is, it could be the racist in me. You know, who am I to tell you what song you should do?

Chris constructs a divide between pre-hip hop music (acceptable) and hip hop (unacceptable). I speculate that she does not think a White king should perform hip hop because she sees hip hop as the music reflecting a particular type of marginalized Black experience that chronicles institutionalized racism and crime. For a White king to perform such a song would be received as a parody of the African American experience, and therefore racist. Shapiro’s and Halberstam’s research reflects Chris’ narrative. The performers that both scholars studied held the policy that “white people should not be performing hip-hop.”<sup>186</sup> Indeed, “racial drag speaks to some of the anxiety about identity that crops up when cross-racial performances are in

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 265.

question."<sup>187</sup> Within-race stereotypes are fair game, while cross-race stereotypes are not. Performances of race raise questions about the intent of the performer and the message that the king is attempting to convey. Chris' statement that "it could be the racist in me" to tell people what kinds of music they perform seems to reflect a desire to remain "color blind" and pretend that race does not (or should not) matter.

Regarding the conflict between Chris' troupe and the performers who accused her troupe of racism, Chris seems to view it as a personal issue concerning the political beliefs of a few "more educated than thou" individuals. Steering the conversation back to her own controversial drag act (the Mexican), larger tensions around race and class seem to be of little concern to Chris:

But if for whatever reason, there were less folks that were into the academia [earlier], or people just didn't give a shit that I did the Mexican. I only did it twice, I did it once in Asheville, and *they* didn't care [laughs], and then I did in once in Atlanta, so whoever saw it, saw it. Whoever didn't, didn't. You know, maybe they heard about it, maybe they didn't. But no, I wouldn't do it today. I'd have to be a drunken cowboy or just a drunken redneck or something that I could own.

Here Chris discusses how some stereotypes are "acceptable" and others are not, depending on the space in which they are performed. In the geographical space of Asheville, North Carolina, Chris assumes that her performance was accepted because

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<sup>187</sup> Halberstam, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," 125.

she had no indication otherwise. I question Chris' suggestion that it would be unproblematic for her to parody a drunk rural or working-class white person:

Leslee: Do you think there might be a backlash against making fun of "rednecks?"

Chris: What?! [with much surprise]

Leslee: You know, like, that it might be considered a slur against a class of disadvantaged people, that kind of thing..

Chris: What, you can't make fun of anybody anymore? Oh, brother! Do you know why "South Park" has been so successful for ten fuckin' years? It's because they make fun of all that stupid shit. It's all stupid. They make fun of it all.

Chris seems to view a parodic performance of lower-class Whiteness (for the purposes of "making fun" of and exploiting a stereotype) as trouble-free. This is one example that demonstrates that the subversive potential of drag is not inherent in the act of kinging. While drag tends to draw attention to the performativity of gender, it does not necessarily challenge other social inequalities, such as socioeconomic class and race.

More learning makes it increasingly difficult for Chris to remain ignorant. Framing learning about cultural sensitivity as "stupid shit," Chris indicates a paralysis and a refusal to unlearn. She is resentful of having to be culturally sensitive and unlearn her xenophobia.

The next act is with a Latino drag king dressed like Prince, and a scantily clad, highly made up woman is onstage with him.

OK, and that girl with him was my girlfriend at the time. This one's really *rico suave*. He's the Latin lover, so he always did sexy stuff like Prince. This is "International Lover," the name of this Prince song. See, he has painted on facial hair. It's like mascara. If you're like a fuzzier girl, like I'm not at all, I'm hairless, but you can just take mascara and color in your peach fuzz. This act is so fuckin' cheesy. People love it. See, like that's not going to ever be my shtick, ever. These [acts] go on for so long, all people really want to know is, "You gonna fuck her or what?" [laughs].

Although Chris condemns this act for its "cheesy" sexual earnestness, she did not express discomfort with a Latina portraying a song by the (post 1980s) African American artist Prince, signaling that she has not unlearned cultural stereotypes and perhaps only sees race as referring to African American people, or only as Black and White. As Kumashiro points out, *awareness* does not necessarily lead to *action*: An individual "may learn all the knowledge and skills needed (theoretically) to engage in subversive political action, but may not choose to act any differently than before."<sup>188</sup> Chris' sensitivity to some racial performances demonstrates a level of awareness, yet she remains unaware of the *depth* of racism. She is not using her rudimentary awareness about race to generalize or build upon her knowledge. Rather, she sees racism as idiosyncratic, limiting it (literally)

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<sup>188</sup> Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," 38.

to Black and White thinking. She seems to refuse to learn that racism also exists in more subtle or insidious ways.

### **Drag Kings, Bio-queens, and Misogyny**

Shapiro contends that the “supportive community” of drag kings “create[s] a space that validate[s] individuals’ gender identities.”<sup>189</sup> That Chris views drag as a “serious outlet” for her gender identity indeed resonates with Shapiro’s assertion. Validation can certainly be a positive experience, but Chris’ recollection of troupe politics prompted an important question in my mind: To what extent does validation lead to change or actually *challenge* taken-for-granted categories and hierarchies? Is validation learning – or relearning what one already knows? This section addresses this question in the context of drag king practices that continue to valorize masculinity and marginalize femininity.

As we watch another videotaped performance, Chris explains how feminine women are “used” in drag king acts:

Sometimes you’d have three or four kings on stage and we’d also have a whole cast of girls. Like sexy women. Not burlesque – they didn’t really take their clothes off – it was more about the drag king performance. The girls were there for props and show. They generally do stuff like that. You know, *bio-queens* [as defined below], I’ve heard them called that, but they were just *girls*. They didn’t have their own numbers; they didn’t do lip syncing and stuff unless they were the emcee for our show. Because we always tried

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<sup>189</sup> Shapiro, “Drag Kinging and the Transformation of Gender Identities,” 266.

to get like a sexy girl up there to play it up, especially since we perform for mainly a lesbian audience and then you get all these boys on stage, you know drag kings, we wanted to give the [straight?] guys in the audience something to look at too, so we generally brought, you know, pretty girls with us. I know ... there were probably fag boys in the audience too.

Though Shapiro and other scholars contend that performing "high" femininity is a "feminist act" in that it "resists the privileging of masculinity in both the queer and the heterosexual" cultures, and that high-femme performers "claim space for" and "empower femininity,"<sup>190</sup> this notion is not emphasized in Chris' narrative. To her, they are "just girls" only present for "props and show." Bio-queen (or "faux-queen") is a fairly recently coined term for a (usually feminine and queer) woman in feminine ("high-femme") drag. Not unlike a drag *queen*, the bio-queen dresses in over-the-top costumes that include big hairdos, heavy makeup, high heels, and outfits common in old-school burlesque performance - corsets, garters, and other types of lingerie, or in S/M (Sadomasochism) gear - leather, vinyl, and chains. But unlike drag queens, who tend to opt for a conventionally feminine look, it is not uncommon for bio-queens to be visibly tattooed and pierced, lending a modern edge to the traditional burlesque style. Some bio-queens also work as dancers in "straight" strip clubs. As Chris points out, these "girls" do not usually have their own acts and, I contend, are often used as accessories (not unlike facial hair or a fake phallus) to bolster

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 264.

the masculinity of the drag kings whom they accompany. In this way, the girls lend a sense of authenticity to the kings.

Schacht describes bio-queens as indicative that "women are still being exploited as tools for doing masculinity, power, and dominance."<sup>191</sup> For example, it is common for drag kings to mimic sex acts onstage with (or "on" as the case may be) bio-queens as part of the act, always to the delight of the audience.

Juxtaposing this with my own experience at a lesbian bar in the mid 1990s - when the sudden appearance of a stripper act caused an embarrassed customer base to completely clear the room - I see the popularity of such sex acts to be not only a parody of overt sexuality, but also a consequence of the general acceptance of sexuality (and sex workers) among mainstream culture as well. As a woman in a club dressed like a stripper is nothing out of the ordinary, the fact that a bio-queen is actually a *queer* woman is what apparently makes her presence subversive and powerful.

Next we watch another number by Johnson (Eileen), who performed as Eminem previously. The song is "Shut Up When I'm Talking to You," which is an "angry White boy rock" track by Linkin Park. Johnson repeats the violent, exaggerated gestures of his earlier act, and this time they are directed at a feminine audience member. Chris narrates the action:

Eileen does some kind of angrier stuff. It's very angry. So like [Eileen as Johnson] is a little businessman over there on his computer, and that's his girlfriend, the sexy

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<sup>191</sup> Steven P. Schacht, "The Multiple Genders of the Court: Issues of Identity and Performance in a Drag Setting," in *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender Relations*, ed. Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 175.

implant girl onstage pretending to be the girlfriend, she really has [breast] implants, and she sometimes takes her shirt off and people kind of go nuts. So [she] is one of those bio-queen things.<sup>192</sup>

As a feminine-looking audience member approaches the front of the stage to admire and tip Johnson, he grabs her face and pushes her away from the stage, dismissing her and the tip. Chris says that the feminine audience member was not a “plant” who was in on the act, but an innocent observer. I wondered if this was a critical parody of misogyny among men, or was it a real display of anger toward women? Chris comments:

You’ll see a little misogyny there, with her grabbing that girl’s face and pushing her. It’s not pokin’ fun. I think it’s serious, but you’d have to ask her. That’s the kind of music that Eileen listens to. Johnson is a little bit angry. The audience didn’t love it. And you don’t make any money doing that. The tips aren’t flowin’. Sex is the thing, man, or you know, it should at least be funny... but sex is the thing.

Chris found Johnson’s act neither sexy nor funny, and I was rather surprised by Johnson’s angry gestures. Is it that Johnson is “really” Eileen, a girl, that makes it alright for her to violently push another female audience member’s face? How much leeway are drag kings given? In their research with drag queens, scholars Rupp and Taylor point out that they allowed drag queens to grab their (the researchers’) breasts, refer to them as “pussy lickers,” and otherwise make sexual spectacles of the researchers for the sake of entertainment, “things that we as feminists would

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<sup>192</sup> Note Chris’ use of the word “thing,” rather than “person” or “woman.”

never allow other men to do, even as we realized that these were ... expressions of male dominance."<sup>193</sup> As academics, Rupp and Taylor seem to forgive the drag queens out of their own highly educated class guilt, as they "accepted these actions as part of a leveling process."<sup>194</sup> Are the "leveling" and rather humiliating actions of drag kings toward women also overlooked because their brand of queer masculinity is *not* dominant outside of the gay bar? In other words, to what extent are drag kings afforded contextual male privilege and authority and to what extent are they given a "pass" to behave in any manner that they wish? How true is Halberstam's declaration that drag kings have "lovingly and creatively re-envisioned" masculinity without "past levels of misogyny and sexism?" I wonder if the audience is as troubled as I am. They withholding tips and appear to signal their disapproval by exchanging raised eyebrows with one another; but they remained gathered at the stage watching the act.

The next act features a feminine, scantily clad woman lying on a bed, while a drag king, Willy A. Cock, lip syncs to a song that describes a man trying to get a woman to masturbate in front of him. Chris narrates the action:

Here's one that's very sexy. This is a Reverend Horton Heat<sup>195</sup> song, it's called "Do It One Time." It's about a girl basically jerkin' off. "Do it one time for me, until you come everywhere." And people are like "Yow!" You know, you got this giant sock stuffed down in some leather pants. He's trying to get her to do it [masturbate], and everyone's

<sup>193</sup> Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp, "When the Girls Are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 4 (2005): 2123.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> A punk rockabilly artist known for sexually suggestive songs.

screaming. She's not his [real] girlfriend, just some random girl. A stripper. She pulls out a dick at some point. So then you get the shadow show ...

By characterizing the woman onstage as "some random girl," Chris re-emphasizes how femininity is marginalized in some drag performances. For the shadow show, two people appear on stage with a white sheet, which they place between the stripper and the audience, so that all the audience can see is the outline of her shadow. She pretends to masturbate first with her hand and then with a dildo. The crowd screams, and the tips flow. As Chris says:

And everybody goes nuts. You know, sex is good; anger is bad [laughs]. I'm a completely different kind of drag king than Johnson.

### **Re-Learning Hierarchies and Entertaining Dichotomies**

Chris sets herself up as a different kind performer than her "angry" peers. She explains:

I want to entertain. So the anger thing or the too serious, super serious stuff, you know ... [the music I like] doesn't translate to that. I kind of like Elliott Smith<sup>196</sup> a lot, but nobody wants to see a fuckin' depressed sissy boy sitting on stage, because there's nothing sexy about that. I always struggle with the selections of the songs, what's the right thing, what's going to be entertaining and fun and sexy, so I guess entertainment is more my thing. I'm just there to entertain. And there need to be props and shiny sparkly things to make people happy. And you know, whatever that is, if it's sex, if it's dancing, if it's goofy stuff, or it's a laughy song, like we've got some funny stuff, just campy...

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<sup>196</sup> An American singer-songwriter known for writing songs about his drug and alcohol abuse.

Chris' emphasis on being funny and entertaining could be influenced by her earlier friendship with Mo B. Dick. In a 1997 interview with film director John Waters, Mo B. Dick explains her reasoning for drag kinging: "Instead of being an angry woman, I chose to become a funny man."<sup>197</sup> Like Mo B. Dick's binary of funny/angry, Chris sets up a dichotomy with fun being the opposite of angry or serious. This dichotomy is paralyzing in that it ignores that serious or angry (or even "political" or educational) can also be fun.

Although several scholars contend that drag has the potential to create new articulations of gender, kinging can also reproduce hierarchies, not only in gender, sex, and sexuality, but also with race and class, as demonstrated in Chris' narratives. Chris' drag king discourse (practices and beliefs) shuns the political for the pleasurable, which is perhaps best demonstrated in the last act we watched together. For the closing drag number, all of the troupe members came on stage and took part in the anti-war song, "War: What Is It Good For?" as a protest of the war on Iraq. Although she speaks disparagingly about politics writ large, Chris politicizes this act by reveling in pleasures that are highly political: (illegal) pot smoking and (also illegal) public and subversive sex acts. She provides the following commentary:

We were totally smoking a joint on stage, and that girl is giving the other a blow job. I mean, who doesn't love a blow job?

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<sup>197</sup> John Waters and Mo B. Dick, *In the Company of Drag Kings* (1997, accessed July 12, 2009); available from <http://www.dreamlandnews.com/print/articles/dragkings.shtml>.

Because Chris is White, she has the luxury of not having to "deal" with race if she chooses not to. In fact, as reflected in her narrative, she all but shuts down a critical dialogue about racism and instead reverses the conversation with the more educated drag king so that Chris can frame herself as being victimized by "rumors." Chris' narrative demonstrates her refusal to implicate herself in her educational "paralysis." She instead chooses to externalize her conflict onto others - academics and minorities, for example.

Chris lacks the resources to desire to work through her conflict, to unlearn and learn differently. Furthermore, she has not learned (or has not needed to learn) some of the political lessons of kinging, as Sera, a Black drag king, describes in the next chapter. Unlike Chris, Sera is aware of herself and how the world experiences her, and she uses her drag alter ego, Anthony, as an outlet that allows her to mediate her own inner conflict dealing with her anger, which she has learned is "incorrect" to express in her everyday life.



## CHAPTER 4 SERA: BEING ANGRY, BECOMING A “BOI”

### *Introduction*

As introduced in the review of scholarship in Chapter One, narratives of drag kings often reflect specific conflicts that arise from living in a world where gender is narrowly defined. As explored in Chapter Three, drag kinging can act as a mechanism for individuals to cope with such conflicts. This chapter examines Sera’s experiences performing with a drag troupe. As the only African American participant in my research, Sera, a Sociology student, emphasizes social inequities that are specific to her social and cultural background, including the judgment she perceives from the Black church as well as the expectation that Black women should suppress their emotions. Sera has learned that “only men have power,” and she feels silenced in many aspects of her life. By creating her drag king “alter ego,” Anthony, and embracing a “boi” identity, Sera is able to unlearn some aspects of femininity she finds oppressive, while learning to “express her masculine side” onstage.

This chapter examines the discourses Sera adopts in order to locate herself outside of the confines of the gender binary (and the heterosexual matrix). Like Chris’ story in the previous chapter, Sera’s narrative emphasizes the ways in which formal education intersects with (and sometimes collides with) informal education. I use a consistent font throughout this chapter, as my conversation with Sera contains less stand-alone historical information on drag kinging than Chris’, and our exchange was free flowing. The questions

guiding this chapter are: What does drag and a “boi” identity do for Sera? How do Sera’s race, class, and level of education intersect with her drag experiences?

### *Learning to “Get Pissed Off:” Conflict and Crisis in Sera’s Everyday Life*

As noted in Chapter Two, Sera is in her late twenties and is working as a lab technician until she begins her doctoral program the following semester. Although she went to college in Atlanta, she is originally from New Orleans, and her family’s home was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina. When I ask Sera what brought her to drag kinging, she juxtaposes her reasons with the purpose of the drag troupe with which she performs:

Well, to bring back the cabaret scene to Atlanta was Lisa’s [the troupe’s founder] desire. That big non-trashy, big classy, bow ties and tuxes and big band and burlesque – it was to bring that back. But for me, it really is that once every three or four months, I get to be pissed off.

When I ask her to describe her sources of anger, Sera provides a list of conflicts emanating from nearly all aspects of her life. She says:

I hate my job, I’m about to make a life transition. My girlfriend lives in Boston. I’m about to move to a cold-ass place called Chicago [for a doctoral program]. So I get to let you know how I feel. That’s just for me. You know, I’m pissed off. It’s my first time really paying attention to politics. I’m from New Orleans, I go home and my house is gutted out, and I had shit there, and Bush and them don’t give a fuck. I’m angry right now. I mean life is good, don’t get me wrong, positive things happen in the midst of the storm, but my mom’s diabetic and she needs surgery,

and they're talking about turning over national defense – how do you turn over the nation's security to somebody else? So I'm pissed off, and it's real easy get up there [onstage].

Sera describes herself as in the midst of a crisis, which she attributes to the astrological phenomenon of “Saturn Returns.” As she explains, astrologers suggest that as the planet Saturn “returns” to the position it occupied at the time of one's birth, which happens approximately every twenty-nine years, it symbolizes overcoming a major crisis and progressing onto the next stage of life. “Maybe when I'm thirty-two I'll be over it, but I'm angry right now,” she says. Sera suggests that drag kinging (and her drag persona, Anthony) gives her a space to voice her frustrations and to comment on social issues that she describes as specific to being a Black, non-normatively gendered woman – an opportunity that she says she lacks in her daily life. Sera explains:

You got to suppress that shit. I hate my job. But I'd lose my job if I told my boss, Steve, how I feel. No, that would be a problem. I can't say it in so many nice words. It's all about being PC,<sup>198</sup> which is very hard for me. And the people I work with are either male or female, in heterosexual unions. And then my mom asks me if I still go to church and if I still believe in Jesus, and all this shit! Damn! So I get to express that. In the basketball court and in the troupe, that's the two places I get to be pissed off.

Sera describes a great deal of conflict in her everyday life – from her family to her job. She compares her onstage self, Anthony, to the male basketball players at her gym:

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<sup>198</sup> Politically correct. Sera uses this term in the context of meaning “workplace appropriate.”

I play basketball at LA Fitness sometimes, and I can tell that the guys ... when I say they argue over little stuff, it's really the only place every day where they can vent their anger and frustration. So because someone called a foul on you and you didn't really foul, and you pick up a table and throw it in the middle of the basketball court, you ain't mad at that man. You mad at everyone else from 9 to 5 who done pissed you off. So that's what the troupe is for me. Instead of picking up tables and throwing them onto basketball courts, I go [onstage] and talk about church, and the Black church, being a Black woman raised in the Black church. Having issues with the Black church and with organized religion as a whole.

Because Sera identifies with the men who play basketball, and the physical ways in which they are allowed to express their anger, I speculate that she has a certain amount of respect and admiration for them.

Sera's specific conflicts with the Black church are highlighted in her interpretation of her drag performance, both in the content of the song she lip syncs and the props she uses in her act:

I did a Lyfe Jennings'<sup>199</sup> song. It's on his first album. It's called "Made up My Mind." It starts off, it's basically him talking, he starts off, "To all you church-going people, who think that your way is right and my way is wrong, let me holla at you right quick." And [the song is] not about being gay, it could include that, but it's very much about judgment, and how can you sit up on your high horse and look down at me and cast judgment? And so since it was a cool thing – and there was no ups and downs [action in the song] – I had to do something other besides just stand up on stage and lip-sync. So I made these big ol' signs and found all of these quotes

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<sup>199</sup> Jennings is an R&B performer who is known for being particularly politically and socially aware.

that I like. One being Martin Luther King, Jr.s' *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere* and *I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I am not*. I had like five quotes. And we had a rainbow background. And so I had people walking around the audience, and they were reading the quotes [while I performed]. And at the end [the people carrying the quotes] came up on stage, and on the flip sides of the cardboard signs was one long Audre Lorde quote, *It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences*. So they walk up on stage in order, and they flip [the signs] and everybody begins to read from this way [left to right] down the whole quote. People was crying in the audience.

From Sera's choice of music and painted quotes on the cardboard signs, it is apparent that her frustrations with the Black church center around what she understands as injustice, intolerance, divisive practices, and judgmental and homophobic attitudes. The quote from Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde particularly expresses Sera's views that difference should not be merely tolerated – it should be accepted and celebrated.

I want to talk to you. When you leave, when you see my piece, you be like, "You talk to me," because I'm a sociologist. That's Anthony, he's my alter ego. Anthony is very much the social commentary aspect of [the troupe]. And so me and him are the conscience, God conscience, whatever you want to call it.

Describing Anthony as the "God conscience" of the troupe, I speculate that Sera desires to make others aware of the social inequities that anger her, as a prophetic god would. Does identifying as a god character make Anthony's anger more tolerable to audiences? Sera is aware that the world experiences her first as Black. She has learned through the larger

culture that it is unacceptable for her to express her anger, and she uses Anthony to mediate this conflict. Anthony is visceral and physical, and he safely embodies the palpable anger that Sera feels in this male persona. The god aspect makes her anger palatable, purposeful, and pedagogic. Sera inhabits multiple layers of subjectivities – Southern Black woman, religious, gay, boi, academic, drag performer. As the palimpsest metaphor illustrates, all of these subjectivities, their learnings as well as their fragmented unlearnings, in various stages of inscription and erasure, continue to inform Sera’s new knowledges and experiences.

### *Learning the Politics of Drag*

Considering the political content of her performance that Sera describes above, evident in her critique of the Black church, I ask her if her drag troupe is political. She expresses some ambivalence: “No, not really. It’s not *not* political. Any act of drag is political, but directly? Probably not. You know, we have performers who just *like* to do Michael Jackson, or Chris Brown, or Fred Astaire ...” Her voice trails off for a moment. But after reconsidering my question for a few seconds, Sera decides, “But it’s always in a sense political because you have *genderfuckers* and this and that.”

As Sera introduces in the above quote, “genderfucking” is a term that refers to a self-conscious effort to mess with or play with (i.e., to “fuck with”) conventional constructions of gender identities, roles, and representations. Although Sera uses “genderfuckers” to refer to other members of her troupe, she does not use the term for herself. I suspect that she sees genderfuck as too subversive, and she separates herself from the troupe, even in her conscience-driven performance.

Lawless explains that genderfucking “provides one way for lesbians to disrupt the hegemonic ... discourse that insists upon a rigid male/female dyad of personal identity.” Although Lawless’ research focuses on lesbians, the way she describes genderfucking is useful to an inclusive framework of gender. Genderfucking works by allowing individuals to reject prescriptions for a male/female binary that “defines and restricts the heterosexual cultural complex,” Lawless writes. Therefore, genderfucking allows individuals to reclaim “all the parts of themselves that are available [and refuse] to engage only with those attributes culturally prescribed for women.”<sup>200</sup>

During our conversation, Sera appears to teach herself that the act of drag in itself – whether the drag king portrays Michael Jackson or Fred Astaire, is inherently political, because it “fucks” with an institution, that of gender and compulsory heterosexuality. As Sera explains, “Yeah, the troupe as a whole is political because it’s girls dressing as boys ... and trans and all ... that’s political right there.” Sera elaborates on the troupe’s “politics” in terms of its multiplicities:

It’s social and it’s political. Not directly political. We have people in [same sex] relationships at the troupe who can’t get married, people who would like to get married, but policy says no. You got a Black person dating a White person, that’s social and political. It’s all around. We’ve got all different socioeconomic status in the troupe. We got people who work 9 to 5 like me, we got people who work in a bookstore or a coffee shop, you got people with degrees, you got people without degrees – you got everybody in the troupe.

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<sup>200</sup> Elaine J. Lawless, "Claiming Inversion: Lesbian Constructions of Female Identity as Claims for Authority," *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 439 (1998): 10.

Like Chris in the previous chapter, Sera also harbors stereotypes of academics, even though she considers herself one:

We have a lot of people in Phi Beta Kappa and you'd never know. And that is probably me being judgmental because they're just so chill. And maybe that's just my perception, like I go against [pause] ... well, when I tell people I'm about to go get a Ph.D. from the number one program in the country people are like, "You?" I love it, it's like when Bill Cosby goes and gives a commencement speech in a sweatshirt. I could understand where people with degrees might be talking to the "mere mortals," like, "Listen to *me*." But I don't get that. You find out from people's MySpace pages that they got their P.H.s,<sup>201</sup> like me. We don't boast it. I'm sure they have bullshit in the troupe, but it's not so overwhelming that I notice it. Everything is mixed, SES,<sup>202</sup> income, jobs, where you work.

Sera's experience of her drag community differs from Chris' experience in the previous chapter. Chris holds a degree of animosity toward the "more educated than thou" crowd, diminishing their political correctness as "all that stupid shit," while Sera values and finds solidarity with academics. While Chris constructs a stark dichotomy of self/other when she criticizes the "more educated than thou" group of academic drag kings, Sera sees herself as one of them. In many ways, however, she points to the multiplicities in her troupe and the ways that she straddles many of their categories – race, education, and socioeconomic status. For example, either because of her ethnicity or casual style of dress

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<sup>201</sup> Sera shortens Ph.D. to "P.H." during our conversation.

<sup>202</sup> Socioeconomic status.

(regarding her reference to Bill Cosby's sweatshirt), she also sees herself as outside of that group: "*They're* just so chill."

### *Sera's Formal and Informal Educations*

Sera describes drag kinging as providing her with an informal education regarding gender identities. Specifically, because drag exposes her to people who identify outside of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies, Sera says that being involved with a drag king community has prepared her with "competency training" for her advanced academic studies. She explains, "It was a huge lesson. To me [gender] was just either/or, but it's not. I need that going into a Sociology Ph.D. You need some kind of social competency training, and drag gave me that in an informal way." To this end, her informal education has informed her formal education. Unlike Chris, Sera sees her informal and formal educations as *related*, rather than as separate spaces where one intrudes on the other.

Furthermore, Sera explains that through the informal education of drag, she has learned to expand her worldview of gender, an opportunity that her everyday life does not provide. As she puts it:

You meet people, and they're like "I'm no gender." It's opened my eyes to acceptance. It's open my eyes to the trans community, because I never really had trans friends before. I never *not* had them [on purpose], but now I have them, and

they're cool as hell. But it's not like *you're* gay, *you're* trans – it's all like one entity. It's not separate. So it was a big lesson in social and sexual identities.

In this way, the troupe has taught her that “The spectrum is so much broader than gay-straight-bi,” she says. “There are some days where there is no gender in particular that I feel.” Sera describes finding a sense of gender acceptance with her drag troupe that she did not experience in her family or church. Historically, she has learned to view gender as a contrived way of disciplining and organizing people: “The purpose of gender is an assignment, a box,” she explains. “It's like, I look different from him, he look different from me, so I have to assign that.” However, Sera recognizes that, as arbitrary as she might feel gender to be, it is just a box to check, gender still remains an important disciplinary practice for most people. “But when people start fucking with it, we got problems,” she adds. Furthermore, although she may not experience herself as gendered in a stable, unified manner, other people indeed do: “Parents got problems with it,” she says: “What you mean you not a girl?”

I find her use of “social and sexual identities” intriguing. Sera does not seem to set these terms up as binary oppositions, as many people do with sex/gender. Rather, she collapses the sexual into an identity that is then isomorphic with the social. Her construction of identities is problematic in that many transpeople would separate themselves from a gay identity. By framing social and sexual identities as “one entity” and “not separate,” Sera constructs a way of collapsing them into one category that glosses over differences. Sera unlearns stable, unified concepts of sexuality and gender using current experiences in drag, and then she *relearns* these constructs, but in a stable, unified manner, which creates an inherent conflict. The conflict of holding onto previous learnings that

adhere to dichotomous constructions of gender and sexuality will be discussed later in this chapter (in the section “Persistent Dichotomies), when Sera is faced with new learnings about gender roles such as top/bottom.

Mentioning that parents have problems with gender, coupled with her earlier comments about her mother being upset about Sera’s religious beliefs, signals that Sera feels judged and cannot be herself around her mother. Indeed, drag kinging gives Sera a “safe space” in which to express herself: “There’s no judgment; people aren’t looking at you like ‘What are you? Pick a lane, figure it out.’” As Sera mentions earlier, after she became involved with drag performances, first as a spectator, and later, as a performer, she began to learn that there were ways of being gendered that were more varied than she was previously taught. She explains, “Being a Black woman ... and growing up in the Black Church ... with me it was either gay or straight, Black or White. I don’t know very many African American transpeople outside of the people I met through drag.” Among the lessons she learned from transgendered individuals was how language works to create gendered knowledge, challenging her previous experiences. Sera explains,

I had to learn a lot about pronouns. Pronouns can be offensive. If you live your life as a man, who am I to decide that since you have a vagina that you’re not a man?

At first I had a very difficult time because with one king, I really had to think about it. My vision of him was a female, but he [lives as] a male. So I cannot say *she*.

Additionally, her involvement with a drag troupe also led her to *unlearn* previously held knowledge about gender, specifically that people *are* what they *appear* to be. She explains, “I had to learn that just because you *look* like a female does not mean that you *are* a female, you know ... genderfuckers ... [drag] was my biggest lesson on that.”

I found similar “informal learnings” in my interview with Smith, as she also learned from her drag troupe’s transfolk. Smith describes drag as a consciousness-raising experience in terms of non-normative genders: “[Doing drag] has made me more open-minded,” Smith explains. “It’s opened up our world, broadened our horizons a lot, because you can’t live in a box. I just wasn’t exposed to transpeople before. You know, in the drag community, you are who you are, and you’re free to be who you are, and what makes you happy.” Smith’s narrative idealizes drag kinging as a space of freedom to be whatever one desires in terms of gender.

Like Sera, Smith also learned about the power of language through doing drag. She describes the challenges she faced with getting pronouns right: “It takes a lot of getting used to *he*, you know, you’re in costume, and they’re calling you your drag name, and *he* this, *he* that ... it’s a lot to get used to,” Smith explains. She admits that she gets confused sometimes, even when referring to herself: “I’m like, ‘I’m a *girl* – Oh, wait!’ But now I’m getting more into *he*. When we use drag names and stuff, it’s hard to get used to. We’re startin’ to get used to it. We slipped a couple of times and said she. Sometimes I’m still like sheeeee---heee- oh, yeah! You just keep going. People will correct you, but not in a mean way. If it’s just an occasional slip up, you keep goin’. They’ll correct you, but in a nice way.”

Although Sera establishes that gender means not much more than an “assignment,” and she seems comfortable with the term genderfucking and unconventional use of pronouns, she says that she is not enamored with all terms used in her drag king community. Specifically, she has concerns about the re-appropriation of the word *queer*. Sera explains, “I’m from the South, and I know that a lot of people are trying to take the

word queer and then assign a positive connotation because it's been so negative, which I respect. I gotcha. But for me it's still [sneeringly] "you *queer*," and it's still, ugh. It is nothing positive. So me and the word queer don't get along." As Jagose<sup>203</sup> and other scholars point out, criticism of the word queer is not unique to Southerners. Indeed, the negative connotations of queer are difficult to unlearn. Kumashiro explains that although many have reclaimed "queer" as a way to reject "normative sexualities and genders," the term remains "discomforting to [some] people because it continues to invoke a history of bigotry and hatred."<sup>204</sup> He frames queer as a "disruptive, discomforting term, with its multiple meanings and uses." Furthermore, some lesbian feminists view queer as a white male term that subsumes women. Perhaps for Sera, whose skin color, long dreadlocks, and "masculine" gender expression always already mark her as "other," the term queer is one more disempowering identity, and one that she chooses *not* to unlearn as oppressive and negative.

### **Learning to Be a Boi**

Although Sera rejects the identity "queer," she embraces a form of masculinity that in many circles would be considered queer: She refers to her onstage persona, Anthony, as a "boi." Pronounced the same as "boy," boi is a term used to denote a masculinity that is not attached to maleness. Boi is an alternative masculine identity that has emerged from both drag and mainstream cultures, serving as a point of entry from which to interrogate not only heteronormative masculinity but also the ways in which identities and subjectivities are constructed, taken up, and enacted.

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<sup>203</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Jagose discusses how various individuals and groups take issue with the term queer.

<sup>204</sup> Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," 26.

Ariel Levy of *New York Magazine*<sup>205</sup> is one of the earliest writers to shed light on what it means to be a boi.<sup>206</sup> Levy describes bois as “young and cool” and sexually non-monogamous. Bois, she writes, have a “lack of interest in embodying any kind of girliness, but they are too irreverent to adopt the heavy-duty, highly circumscribed butch role,” which they see as “an identity of the past.” Many reasons exist for the term butch falling out of favor, some of which I will address later in this chapter. Indeed, the boi identity circumvents more commonly recognized identities such as dyke or butch, which connote lesbian female identities. Bois, on the other hand, do not necessarily consider themselves lesbians, or, as with some, even females, as many bois are transgendered. As Levy points out, boi is a fluid term ... Some who identify as bois date only femmes, while others date only other bois and refer to themselves as “fags.”

The origin of the boi terminology is noteworthy, as the word used to describe this alternative identity is not one that has anything to do with “dyke power” or “riot grrls” – two terms that connote types of feminine masculinities. Rather, it is a term that is associated with male (boy) masculinities. Furthermore, boi is an alternate spelling of “boy” rather than “men,”<sup>207</sup> which intentionally links bois with youthful playfulness rather than the seriousness and responsibilities or normativities of adulthood. Noble, a self-described “boy,”<sup>208</sup> explains that “The term boy has a softer edge to it than man ... [and] with boy, there’s kind of a refusal of the imperative of masculinity. To be a man you have to grow up

<sup>205</sup> Levy.

<sup>206</sup> While I found scant scholarly work on bois, I found a few Internet resources. See for instance, the short documentary by Amaris Blackmore and Heidi Petty, “Boi’s Life,” (2009).

[http://current.com/items/89789659\\_a-bois-life.htm](http://current.com/items/89789659_a-bois-life.htm), retrieved August 20, 2009, and an MSNBC broadcast, “Boi or grrl? Pop culture redefining gender,” posted **October 1, 2005** <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9556134/>, retrieved September 9, 2009.

<sup>207</sup> If the purpose of this identity were to signify a responsible, adult masculinity, the term “men” could perhaps be reclaimed as “myn,” as “women” is by the alternate feminist spelling “womyn.”

<sup>208</sup> Gender scholar and transman Jean Bobby Noble refers to himself as a “boy,” appropriating the traditional spelling.

... which is something that heteronormative culture depends on.”<sup>209</sup> Halberstam’s thinking on “queer time” echoes Noble’s links between temporality and sexuality. She suggests that alternate modes of time emerge “once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family.”<sup>210</sup> I speculate that because Sera is currently burdened with many “adult” responsibilities and crises in her life – a sick mother, a job she hates, feeling splintered from her community and neglected by her government – she might find a sort of solace in the free, youthful connotations of *boi*.

### **Sera/Anthony: Multiple Expressions of a Self**

Even though she refers to Anthony as her alter ego, Sera does not seem to recognize a solid boundary between herself and Anthony; rather Anthony seems to be a different expression of Sera. For example, when I ask Sera how she learned to do drag, and what she does to prepare to “get into” the character of Anthony, she explains:

I still don’t know how to do drag, I didn’t learn! I get up there and give it my best and hope for the best. I guess a lot of people spend a lot of time and energy, I really don’t. I prepare for it, I practice, I think of an idea, and I try to manifest it, but I don’t know how to do drag. I think it’s natural for me to convey and to get deep and to talk about social issues and to talk about things that I’m pissed about ... But I don’t know how to do drag. I *do* drag. But I don’t know *how* to do drag. I do *me*.

I ask her what she means that she “does herself,” and Sera explains that, unlike some drag kings, she does not have to “do a big transformation.” She has no problem passing as a man everyday. She says: “Even just being me, I never had a problem growing

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<sup>209</sup> Anderson-Minshall.

<sup>210</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.

up being called Sir.” Sera resists drawing clear boundaries between herself and Anthony, and her narrative demonstrates how fashioning a fully coherent identity can be precarious. For example, Sera not only describes her alter ego, Anthony, as a boi, but she occasionally refers to *herself*, Sera, as a boi as well, fluidly moving between the two. Gesturing to herself, she explains, “I’m a boi. Boi still gives me that feminine quality, yet I’m very confident in my masculinity. To me, it says you don’t have to pick. You don’t have to choose. You can be who you are today. You wake up, whatever you feel today, that’s who you are. That’s boi to me.” Unlike a notion of gender as a conscious choice, Sera holds a way of thinking about gender that seems almost organic. She does not necessarily choose to be masculine or feminine; rather, she uses Anthony as a way to recognize her multiple subjectivities. Sera unlearns and learns gender identities in her drag troupe experience, which has enabled her to adopt gender in a fluid and non-binary way. Sera describes her subjectivities as multiplicities:

Boi means realizing that I am biologically female but that I definitely as long as I can remember have been much more connected with a boy than a girl. So when I realized that, I like this boi thing, because I’m not trans, I don’t desire ... I don’t feel like I’m in the wrong body or anything. I don’t want to have a penis; I want smaller breasts because they hurt, not because I want to get rid of them. It’s nothing like that, but it’s very much so that I feel ... much more connected with my masculinity on stage as a b.o.i.<sup>211</sup>

Sera’s process of unlearning and learning teaches her that her subjectivities do not fit easily into strict dichotomies. Her drag experience gives her the language that describes her lived experiences, although she may not neatly fit into the popularized or normalized

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<sup>211</sup> Sera spells out b.o.i. to emphasize that she is referring to “boi” rather than “boy.”

definitions of boi. Sera's identification as a boi is intriguing in light of Levy's description of bois, as Levy portrays them as White and middle class.<sup>212</sup> While the bois described in Levy's article seem to spend their free time at the bar, Sera seems to have a much different "life story," as her narrative chronicles experiences of marginalization, concerns about prison, work, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, illness, religion, worries about war and economics, and family difficulties. In fact, that she uses her stage time as a way to convey social messages could be evidence that she does not share the vapid frat-boy mentality of Levy's bois in New York City. Sera does not differentiate herself from other bois, but she does point out the differences between herself and other performers, "Some drag kings don't necessarily convey social messages," she says. "I couldn't do that." This is not to say that bois like the ones described in Levy's article aren't ideal citizens working toward equality when they aren't drinking and picking up (and dumping on) femmes in the bar, but Sera's narrative specifically highlights her differences between her and Levy's playbois.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Noble points out that "boy [and thus boi] comes with a history of racial baggage." See Anderson-Minshall.

<sup>213</sup> I recognize the limits of an article in *New York Magazine*, and that such journalism meant for a general audience might be a bit simplistic, if not sensationalistic.

### “Power means male”

The boi persona with which Sera identifies is a compromise between a pleasure-seeking, carefree subjectivity and a hyper-aware, ultra-responsible god conscience. For example, Sera expresses that she cannot feel comfortable in the main structures of her life: “Anthony lets me feel the masculine energy that I might not be able to feel around my mom, or my family, or at work.” When I ask her to explain why she feels she cannot express her masculinity in these spaces, Sera describes gender in terms of power. “We’re so conditioned to think that power means male,” Sera says, “because power is connected with masculinity.” Indeed, the notion of powerful femininity seems difficult for Sera to imagine:

Some people are intimidated by powerful women, they can’t really deal with it. Think about, like when Hillary [Clinton] cried, people made such a big deal about it. This country isn’t ready for a woman president because they think matriarch – tender and soft – and I don’t know. You can be a powerful woman, but even that woman is fierce<sup>214</sup> in some way. When you become powerful you transition to be a little more masculine – how do you not? How do you pull power and maintain femininity? I don’t know many people who could do that. Because I can say, if I want to pull power, I would man up. Like, if I go to jail, I’m gonna be a male. That’s me maintaining my power.

Sera’s choice of terminologies, “man” and “male,” is interesting here because it signals that masculinity and power are, for Sera, tied to manhood, maleness, and male

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<sup>214</sup> In the context of Sera’s narrative, which describes Anthony as her more aggressive onstage alter ego, the word “fierce” brings to mind the pop singer Beyonce’s onstage alter ego, Sasha Fierce, who the singer describes as her more powerful and sexually aggressive persona.

enactments. “Women never had power,” she says. “It was always men.” She continues, “I don’t know how you merge power and femininity and not become hard in some way. Like, when you project [your voice], you have to get deeper, not increase octave.” Her describing the projection of power through voice inflection further situates her notion of power as tied to enacting maleness.

Furthermore, performing as Anthony gives Sera the “power to” escape the male gaze:

I always had a problem, back in the day when I’d wear girl clothes, with men looking at me, and I don’t like that. When men undress you with they eyes. So I don’t have an issue with people thinking I’m a boy. They always think I’m a boy. From behind, not from the front, from behind, they’re like, Sir, and that just don’t offend me. But a man looking at me and undressing me with his eyes, that’s a problem. So [onstage] I am a man, I present myself with much more masculine energy on stage.

She describes Anthony as different from other performers in her troupe:

I’m just speaking for Anthony; I can’t speak for none of the others. Anthony wants to touch people; Anthony’s not really the burlesque aspect of pasties and you know. All that’s good, I let the others shake it up. I will tip you if you’ve got some nice hooters, but that’s not me.

### **Drawing the Line at Crotch-Grabbing: Misogyny and “Masculine Aggression”**

In that Sera uses Anthony’s “voice” to “convey social messages,” she does differentiate herself from a fellow boi who does drag: “I couldn’t do what Johnny Cockring

does,” She explains. “Johnny is awesome. I love him. He does really cool songs, he has costumes, he pours water on his self, and he stuffs his pants ... but he doesn’t believe in hypermasculinity. Like he doesn’t feel like he has to grab his crotch. But he still brings it,”<sup>215</sup> she says, referring to the way in which many drag kings imitate hip-hop and rock performers. “Yeah, all that crotch grabbin’, you do see that at shows,” Sera says, explaining:

I can’t do that. Sometimes when you see certain shows, you think, ok what are you trying to convey here, what are you really trying to do? I’m not trying to judge your piece, I’m not trying to judge what you’re bringin’, but really, I’m kind of offended by the crotch thing – what, you forget it’s there? That’s why you gotta keep grabbing it? And it does border on misogyny, big time, but I don’t feel like what [my troupe does] touches on that at all. But I don’t find a lot of misogyny in the troupe.

Sera points out that many audiences at drag king shows “want to see that masculine aggression.” She recalls one of her performances that was not a crowd favorite:

I did an Usher song by myself, a slow groove, and I had on a silk robe and some boxers. They were bored. That was the longest three minutes. I was like, I ain’t makin’ no money. I might have made five dollars. When is this going to end! The next performance was some [king] with whips and chains and she made fifty dollars. I was like, “Damn.”

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<sup>215</sup> Johnny “brings it,” meaning that he “does a great job.”

As discussed in the chapter on Chris, I observed several drag king performances that I would consider sexist if not misogynistic. And as distasteful or even slightly frightening as these acts were to me, I do realize that such performances open up possibilities for interrogating the connections between normative masculinity and the enactment of boi subjectivities.<sup>216</sup>

A boi identity recalls the male/female binary, with its marginalization of the female other: Masculinity gets its meaning from, in Sedgwick's words, the "subsumption and exclusion"<sup>217</sup> of femininity. For a boi's masculinity to be intelligible, he must perform gestures such as grabbing his crotch. He does not, as Sera puts it, "forget it's there." Rather, he wants to make sure that everyone *else* has not forgotten. As Trimble puts it, bois objectify femmes "in an effort to secure and shore up the boundaries of [their] masculinity."<sup>218</sup>

Although Sera says that audiences like aggressive drag king performances, she recalls one of her performance ideas that was deemed "too angry" for the troupe's founder, Lisa, who told Sera that she was not allowed to express her anger at a show. Sera describes the incident: "At the end of one of my pieces, I wanted to flick off the audience, but not the audience – society in general. And they told me I couldn't do it. I wanted to be like Fuck You! And Lisa said 'No, find something else to do at the end of your piece.' And that's how the Audre Lorde quote came about. Because I wanted to leave it strong. And Lisa was like, 'I understand what you're saying, fuck the world, but someone may be offended in the audience.' And so certain things aren't allowed. Yeah. I was so pissed off trying to do that

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<sup>216</sup> Sarah Trimble, "Playing Peter Pan: Conceptualizing 'Bois' in Contemporary Queer Theory," *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2/3 (2005).

<sup>217</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990), 10.

<sup>218</sup> Trimble, 76.

piece, not because Lisa wouldn't let me, just the whole piece. I was just ugh! Lisa was like, 'This anger is obvious, you might want to figure it out.'<sup>219</sup> And so conveying that anger through quotes, conveying that anger through walking around [the stage] ... it was almost like, I'm gonna put this quote in your face, and you're gonna read this quote! Versus flickin' off the audience at the end."

As Sera's narrative highlights, she came to drag to have a voice and to release her anger because she feels she does not have such an opportunity at work, where she is the only non-heterosexual, or in other avenues of her life. However, even in the context of drag kinging, the troupe manager continues to silence Sera by censoring her work. Sera therefore resorts to shoving signs in peoples' faces instead of telling them to fuck off.

### **Persistent dichotomies**

As many queer theorists contend, gender, sex, and sexualities are socially constructed and temporally contingent.<sup>220</sup> But the language that individuals use to describe themselves reflects a static, binary way of thinking about gender and sexuality. Those who identify outside of the male/female dichotomy have a limited language with which to describe their gender identities. Therefore, it is not surprising that such descriptions will be incomplete and contradictory. While non-gendered, between-gendered, post-gendered, or genderqueered conditions exist in different individuals' lived realities, such conditions are usually not found in readily available discourses. Thus, many individuals "who do not conform to a rigid two-sex system are relegated to the discursive purgatory of non-

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<sup>219</sup> I think it is important to point out here that Lisa is a White burlesque performer. That she essentially "silences" Sera by telling her not "be so angry" or "offend anyone" suggests the difference in agenda for the two performers, Sera's perhaps being the more personally political of the two and Lisa's being more about entertaining, pleasing the audience, and maintaining the status quo.

<sup>220</sup> Jagose.

signification.”<sup>221</sup> Sera’s contention that drag/Anthony/boi allows her to make intelligible the masculinity that she cannot express at work and with her family is evidenced by her statement that “you have to suppress that shit.”

Even though Sera contends that “gender means nothing” to her, the following description of a night out with her girlfriend reveals how trying to get out of the heterosexual matrix when talking about gender, even with the good intentions of a sociologist, can be problematic: “I was in Boston visiting my girlfriend last weekend, and we were in a club, and seeing the younger lesbians, it’s kind of impressive in a way. It’s like [they’re saying], ‘I’m me.’ But in some ways it’s not so good because [they represent] a stark dichotomy – stud/femme.<sup>222</sup> And some studs want their femme to stay in their place, and I don’t do well with that.”

The “studs” to which Sera refers are among a sub-group featured in the 2005 documentary *The Aggressives*. The film chronicles the lives of “AGs,” – “aggressive” studs of color in New York City who articulate and express their masculinities within the confines of a hip-hop paradigm.<sup>223</sup> Throughout the film, the AGs struggle to define what exactly an “Aggressive” is. Although those featured invent descriptors such as “the AG wears the pants in the relationship,” their struggles to define themselves outside of a male/female binary reflect the limitations of language. *The Aggressives* demonstrates that AG, like any other identity category, is difficult to define. Sera points out the problematic

<sup>221</sup> Linda Wayne, "Neutral Pronouns: A Modest Proposal Whose Time Has Come," *Canadian Women's Studies* 24, no. 2/3 (2005): 87.

<sup>222</sup> “Stud,” “Papi,” or AG are terms that denote female masculinity and are used in opposition to femme. A stud takes a traditional role of caretaker over “her” submissive femme, supporting her financially and making decisions for the couple.

<sup>223</sup> A party invitation I received in July 2009 articulates a stereotype toward AGs in Atlanta. On the “Attire” section, it reads: “AG’s: No jean shorts or Air Force Ones.” While I understand why shorts and sneakers would not be considered appropriate nightclub attire, it strikes me as rather ethnocentric that the invitation mentions these *specific* types of shorts and sneakers and does not single out dress codes for any other queer sub-groups. For example, was it acceptable for femmes to wear jean shorts? Or for White butches to wear cargo shorts and retro Converse sneakers?

binary of stud/femme, likening it directly with male/female, and in particular, with heteronormativity. She says, “In [the stud/femme dichotomy] lies heterosexism in the gay community because if you have a stud and you have another stud trying to holla at them, they’re like, ‘I don’t know man . . . wait a minute, hold up, we both have vaginas!’ So they’re not thinking that the very thing they are combating is the very thing they are embracing. And that’s a heterosexist mindset. Between me and my girlfriend, we don’t have a man and a woman.”

Sera’s comment about the two studs realizing that they both “have vaginas” is difficult to interpret. Do the two studs she imagines suddenly realize that they are both “really” women and therefore the masculine illusion of the “stud” falls apart? That, despite the posturing, neither is really a man? Or is Sera saying that one of the studs would have to give up her phallic power and be a femme in order for a coupling to make sense? Is Sera saying that two studs together is inconceivable? Sera’s ambivalence is reflected below. She says:

I don’t play roles. I don’t do well with that. Now, when two femmes are together, that’s cute. We love two girls together just like in the heterosexual world when two women are together, it’s glorified. Don’t nobody want to see two men together on TV. Just like one stud tryin’ to holla at another stud, you get a response, like “I don’t want to do a dude.” I don’t know if that specific to drag kings, but that’s what I see. Where in older lesbians, [when] they dress, they just put on clothes. There’s not this stark difference that I see among younger lesbians. If you see a stud put on heels, they would be just messin’ around. It’s very much a dichotomy. The young

ones, they look like little gay boys, American Eagle, Abercrombie, Hollister look. Baseball caps, Polos, popped collars.

When Sera says that she doesn't "play roles," she seems to be constructing her boi identity as a way to name her feminine masculinity and not to set up a dichotomy in her own relationship, whereby she, as the boi, would represent the masculine side of the binary.

Some theorists take issue with Sera's assumption that butch/femme (or stud/femme) simply mimics oppressive hierarchies attributed to heterosexuality. As Halberstam highlights, in the 1970s, middle-class White lesbian feminists "took aim at butch/femme as a particularly insidious form of [heterosexual] cultural imitation," and they consider butch/femme like a "slavish copying of heterosexual roles."<sup>224</sup> Sera's description of erotic "roles" such as top/bottom and stud/femme as "heterosexist" recalls the camp of feminist criticism that argues that such roles reinscribe power imbalances they see as inherent in heterosexual relationships. However, gender scholars such as Nestle<sup>225</sup> and Halberstam reframe these roles, focusing on how the existence of feminine masculinities challenges the sex/gender binary as a "given." Gender cannot be unproblematically mapped onto "biological sex," and the notion of feminine masculinities highlights that masculine subjectivities (hegemonic or otherwise) are not the property of male bodies.

Sera's framing of erotic roles as heteronormative reiterates the assumption that the heterosexual is the "original" and the homosexual the "copy." Indeed, Sera is setting up butch and femme as imperfect copies of heterosexual gender roles articulates the

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<sup>224</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 122.

<sup>225</sup> Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003).

assumption that masculinity/femininity are inseparable from genetic maleness/femaleness. Sera's story demonstrates how situations that call for gender identification show how identity becomes "part of the regulatory structures that are imposed on all members of society."<sup>226</sup> Even as Sera has learned to some degree that binary gender roles fail to describe lived experience, she has not completely *unlearned* the comfort found in dichotomous, static gender categories. As Sera herself affirms below, the dominant masculine "top" is set up in opposition to the submissive feminine "bottom." As Sera puts it, "You can't just be you in an everyday situation." She says,

Gay men, they have some of that heterosexist thing too, bottoms and tops.

Women's bodies receive, men's project. I don't think they think about that. I want to say, "You sound like a straight person, you sound like your mama sayin' "You need to pick a lane." And people don't need to think that just because you're gay that you're gonna find comfort amongst every gay person. Some gay people are worse than straight people. If you're telling me to pick and choose, you sound just like them! There's shit in every culture.

Sera's narrative highlights that "gay" is not a singular, unified identity, and she struggles to resist gender roles. However, when the bodies fail to correspond to their proper roles, she seems to unlearn her new learnings about gender and falls back on the traces that remain of old knowledges that continue to "show through" and inform new knowledge, as old tracings on a palimpsest. Sera explains how previous learnings continue to inform new learnings:

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<sup>226</sup> Corie J. Hammers and Alan D. Brown, "Towards a Feminist Queer Alliance: A Paradigmatic Shift in the Research Process," *Social Epistemology* 18, no. 1 (2004): 99.

Even with some of my gay guy friends, we'll be at [a gay bar], and they like, "He a bottom," pointing to a 300-pound football player, and I'll be like "What?" And that's because I'm conditioned like everybody else in the world to think a bottom is probably a skinny, flamboyant she-male. So when you see a linebacker [bottom], that goes against everything you've been taught to think. And when you see the skinny flamboyant boy go, "I'm a top," you're like "What? You're fuckin' with my head. You're really fuckin' with my head."

Even though she resists "heterosexist" thinking about queer identities, Sera constructs the football player as the "real" male, sexually dominant, and the bottom as the "she-male," corresponding to the heteronormative masculine/feminine gender roles.

Although Sera criticizes labels and roles, and has learned (and experienced) their limitations, she falls back on former, dichotomous thinking. As individual behavior does not reflect, in a straightforward fashion, overarching ideologies and systems of belief,<sup>227</sup> and what an individual knows, here the palimpsest metaphor is a useful way of thinking about what Sera has learned about gender. Traces of old knowledges remain and continue to influence present behavior, in spite of new learnings being imprinted over them.

As Nestle and other scholars highlight, femme and butch may be seen as distinct genders in and of themselves.<sup>228</sup> For instance, Lawless writes that "the butch/femme *spectrum* is not elaborated in the lesbian community as parallel to the male/female dyad [my emphasis]." Those who identify as butch or femme often use those terms to define

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<sup>227</sup> Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

<sup>228</sup> See Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1992).

their style, presentation, and gender identity rather than strictly the role they play in a relationship.

### **Binary as productive**

Language has not evolved to correspond with the “spectrum” mentioned by participants Chris and Sera. Scholars such as McNay recognize that gender is “an active and never-completed process of engendering or enculturation.”<sup>229</sup> McNay points out that one constructs one’s gender, not completely freely, as Sera suggests, but from subjectivities that already exist.

Because it connotes a masculine gender written over a female sex, the boi identity queers the dichotomy of sex/gender. The female body is still present. However, at the same time, it reaffirms several binaries: boi/femme, masculine/feminine, young/old. Sera’s story gestures to how using new or alternative terms such as genderfucker or boi (while still a category that keeps binaries intact) can help to break down binary thinking and draw on the lived experiences of those who identify outside of more “mainstream” gender/sexual identity categories. Sera’s description of her drag king/boi persona, Anthony, highlights how a rigid gender binary reinscribes gender roles as it also proves to be a productive site. By negotiating queer masculinity and hegemonic masculinity, Trimble explains, “[b]ois emerge into the paradoxical position of subverting the ontological ‘reality’ of normative masculinity even as they negotiate its imperatives in an effort to remain/become legible as masculine.”<sup>230</sup> As much as they partake in boi-hood, manhood is not the logical next step.

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<sup>229</sup> McNay, 71.

<sup>230</sup> Trimble: 75.

However, contrary to Sera's description, as Butler and other theorists highlight, identity is more deterministic than "waking up and being whatever you feel like today." Gender is a process that not only shapes but also is shaped by language, and gender identities are constituted and reconstituted daily through discourses, practices, and experiences. Because gender expression is limited through the public discourses that are available to individuals,<sup>231</sup> human possibilities, knowledge, and ways of being are also limited by notions of gender that are always already prescribed and enacted. As Butler contends, subjects are always constituted by norms that are not of their own making.<sup>232</sup> Sera envisions not having to "pick a lane," or identify, and occasionally views gender as an "anything goes" construct. But when pressed to elaborate, she reverts to the language of the binary – essentially relearning it – and perhaps indicating the difficulty of finding intelligible words to describe herself. She also makes clear that in some situations, such as at her workplace, and with her family, she has to make herself intelligible to others by presenting herself as unproblematically female.

Sera's relearning exemplifies Butler's point that while there is a certain amount of agency in performing one's gender, one is also constrained. She states, "surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter."<sup>233</sup> Butler argues that drag can reinscribe subjectivity rather than *necessarily* create a subversive space for social change, for performativity is not something a subject *does*, but a *process* through which that subject is constituted. As Butler clarifies, "gender

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<sup>231</sup> See, for example, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>232</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>233</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 421.

performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today.”<sup>234</sup> Butler’s contention is in direct opposition to Sera’s and Chris’ musing that one is “free to be whatever makes you happy.” In other words, the performativity of gender (unlike that of drag) is not voluntary. Individuals do not pick and choose the forms in which subjectivity comes. Rather, individuals inhabit forms that are already in existence as ideological structures.

In its “literal staginess,” Jagose writes, drag “offers an effective cultural model for deconstructing those commonly held assumptions that privilege certain genders and sexualities by attributing ‘naturalness’ and ‘originality’ to them.”<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, Jagose clears up a common misreading of Butler – the misconception that performativity equates a simple change in clothing or makeup: “For gender is performative,” Jagose contends, “not because it is something that the subject deliberately and playfully assumes, but because, through reiteration, it consolidates the subject. In this respect, performativity is the precondition of the subject.”<sup>236</sup>

It can be concluded that drag communities aren’t spaces of total gender anarchy. Even though they enact gender dichotomously, these communities of knowers can open up social worlds so that performers might “realize feelings of affirmation, interpersonal power, and self-esteem.” Indeed, Smith says that drag gave her more self-esteem. Ultimately, the traditional, heteronormative binary doesn’t seem to sit quite right with many individuals. Thus, participating in a drag community allows them to imagine another way, that of boi, or tranny, or genderqueer, or “I’m just me,” with which they can more

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<sup>234</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex,”* 22.

<sup>235</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 86.

<sup>236</sup> Jagose, 86.

comfortably identify. Furthermore, drag is an experiential forum that fosters unlearning and learning processes that often originate in reworking genders.

CHAPTER 5  
LUCY: BEING AN “OTHER,” BECOMING A “HOT GUY”

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I present Lucy’s narrative of her experiences drag kinging, with a particular focus on two “plots” around which she situates what she has learned: *femme oppression* and *masculine empowerment*. As I discuss below, Lucy’s two plots invest in binary constructions of gender and power, which lead her to script a stable conception of her femme “gender expression,” rather than recognizing and exploiting the possibilities that her femme identity provides.

Within the confines of a linear, progressive trajectory, Lucy constructs her “pre-drag” queer femininity as oppressive and disempowering, while framing her “in-drag” experiences of masculinity as liberating and empowering. Because she fails to find power in her femininity, I suggest that Lucy limits the empowering possibilities of drag kinging to the arena of the stage – and thus to her performance of masculinity. She locates her power exclusively in her ability to perform activities traditionally associated with masculinity (e.g., commanding a gaze and “controlling” an audience), and her narrative neglects to acknowledge the subversive potential of non-normative queer femininities. Such framing of the femme as the disempowered, oppressed “other” embraces a limiting, deterministic notion of gender and power. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how Lucy comes to understand her gendered experiences, what she unlearns and learns, and speculates as to how she *relearns* certain discourses of power. The questions guiding this chapter are: What

are Lucy's attachments to these particular plots that are based on binaries and which seem to conspire against her desire to experience liberation/empowerment in her everyday femme gender expression? What has she learned, unlearned, and/or relearned from drag kinging?

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the analysis of my data emerged out of coming to know each participant individually. I strove not to create neatly defined categories and themes that would tie participants' narratives together to contrive a unifying "story of drag kings." The following chapter is organized around themes that emerged organically from Lucy's stories.

### **Plot Number One: Femme Oppression and the Disempowered Feminine Body**

As introduced in Chapter Two, Lucy is an attractive White woman in her early twenties with long, straight chestnut hair, a high-pitched, childlike voice, and mannerisms that would be considered normatively feminine. With her heart-shaped face and curvy figure, it is indeed difficult to imagine her ever passing as a man, and Lucy acknowledges such: "I'm not what most people think of as a drag king," she says. Lucy describes herself through the perceptions of her peers: "They think of me as a girlie girl" – and with self-deprecating humor, she expresses her dissatisfaction with this label. She says that many of her friends chide her with such taunts as "Oh, we want to see Lucy dressed up like a guy, you know, because she looks *so* feminine." Lucy takes others' perceptions to heart and admits that she also has her doubts: "I don't know if I pull [drag] off in a believable way [laughs]." Indeed, of the four participants in my research, Lucy's physical transformation is the most dramatic.

Lucy's laughter signals the pleasure and irony she perceives in a conventionally feminine-looking woman like herself performing as a man. Despite the work it takes – breast binding, application of facial hair – it is evident that drag kinging is fun for her, and Lucy's giggling frequently erupts as she talks. "Doing drag, I thought, well, that will be funny [laughs], but with the way I look, it's going to be a *lot* of work. And it is [laughs]." However, when she describes feeling oppressed by the way she looks, the discomfort she feels with her body, and the lack of power she perceives in being seen as "really femme," her giggling ceases. In fact, Lucy becomes quite emotional, at times even teary-eyed when reflecting on this aspect. Lucy's affect – her feelings and emotions as manifested by her facial expression, voice inflection, and body language – as well as her repetitive use of dualisms and metaphors signifying oppression when discussing gender and identity, signals certain important themes or tropes within her narrative. These include: *inside/outside*, a dichotomy through which she constructs her "gender expression" in opposition to her "real self;" her use of the metaphor of "*hiding*," which underscores her perceived lack of power and feelings of shame in being femme; and the binaries *masculine/feminine* and *dykey*<sup>237</sup>/*femme*, both of which frame femininity and femme as the oppressed and disempowered "other."

### **Inside/Outside Binary**

Throughout her narrative, Lucy repeatedly describes a disconnect between how she *feels* on the inside and how she *appears* on the outside. As gender scholars foreground, defining gender as "binary, natural, given, and readable is rooted in the fiction of an inner

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<sup>237</sup> In this context, Lucy sets up dykey/femme as a binary opposition. I speculate that she uses dykey rather than the term "butch" because of old fashioned or negative connotations associated with it, as outlined in Chapter Four.

‘truth’ of a gendered self that is outwardly and visibly expressed.”<sup>238</sup> As with a mind/body dualism, which privileges the mind as the “true self” over the body, which is seen as merely a “container” for the true or essential self, Lucy’s inside/outside binary also privileges the inside. As she puts it, “[Drag] worked well for me because the way I present myself on the outside is not exactly what I consider myself mentally or emotionally on the inside. I’m very feminine [pause] ... well, my *physical appearance* is very feminine,” she stresses. Because she verbally emphasizes the phrase “physical appearance” in our conversation, I interpret her statement to mean that she sees her outward feminine appearance (or performance) as at odds with the way she sees her “true” inner self, or her authentic identity. She struggles to explain her thinking: “I mean, obviously I *present* myself as a femme, but I feel like if I had any ambiguity or any genderqueerness, then I wouldn’t present myself the way that I do.” Although her explanation is somewhat confusing, if not circular, I speculate that what Lucy desires to convey is that she feels trapped in her feminine body. She adopts the narrative of gender dysphoria, a “medical” diagnosis associated with transgendered individuals (see glossary). Lucy does not desire to change her biological sex (her femaleness); she desires to change the way that she expresses her gender. Lucy constructs her gender expression as an essential, immutable part of her outside body. If Lucy felt she had any outward gender ambiguity or had a more androgynous appearance (e.g., had a less curvy figure), then her outside performance would be more inline with her “true” inside identity.

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<sup>238</sup> Elizabeth Bell and Daniel Blaeuer, “Performing Gender and Interpersonal Communication Research,” in *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication*, ed. Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2006), 15.

**Inside: The Authentic Self?**

Lucy sees drag kinging as helping her express what she sees as her more authentic “inner” self, therefore aligning her outside with her less feminine inside. “I would look different if I could. If I could present myself differently ... I mean, I wouldn’t want to bind on a daily basis or wear extremely baggy clothes. But if I could change my body, I would have really small breasts. And be kind of straight,<sup>239</sup> I wouldn’t be curvy. I would present myself differently.”

Lucy says that she has always felt a disconnect between her outside expression and her inner self, and she says that others have pointed out the incongruence to her as well. “People who know me, they say, ‘Lucy presents herself like a femme, but she’s not. She’s more comfortable in jeans and a t-shirt.’” (However, Lucy doesn’t wear just any jeans and t-shirts – it is evident by her appearance that she shops in the women’s departments.) Lucy learned in high school that her mannerisms and her identity were incongruent, according to her teacher’s standards. She recalls, “My musical theater teacher used to say ‘You look like such a lady until you sit down and open your mouth. You sit with your legs open and you swear like a sailor. It isn’t very ladylike ... so if you’d just keep your mouth shut and stand up, no one will ever know [laughs].’ And that’s kind of like how I’ve lived my life in a way.” From this story, it is clear that Lucy learned a specific narrative from her teacher about the way that women are expected to behave. Lucy learned that she should sit down and shut up.

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<sup>239</sup> By “straight,” Lucy is referring to a slender body type, as opposed to a sexual identity.

### **Outside: Struggles with Appearances**

As mentioned earlier, Lucy's narrative privileges her inside self, which she considers more androgynous, and she describes a feeling of powerlessness over her "outside" body, which is more femme. After Lucy makes several references to wishing she could have shorter hair, I finally ask her why she doesn't just wear her hair short, if that's what she wants. Lucy admits that she chooses to keep her hair long because she says it looks more attractive on her than a shorter hairstyle. She explains, "I had it cut short when I was younger, and it just looked funny," signaling her enmeshment in an appearance-conscious culture. Even though she wishes she could look "less feminine," she still values looking what she considers attractive.

Lucy explains (and a glance around her college's campus confirms) that at her college, the "in" look with young lesbians is currently what might be described as "boi." As mentioned in Chapter Four, bois are young, masculine-identified lesbians who wear short hair and men's clothing. In fact, some of Lucy's peers go so far as to bind their breasts every day. Lucy's body type and feminine "look" is not considered "hip" among her peers. They joke with her about how girlie she looks, and she complains that it is difficult for her to get a date, leading her to express alienation. Though Lucy laments not fitting in with her peers (i.e., not appearing adequately genderqueer), she chooses not to change her feminine looks to assimilate.

### **There's No There (In) There**

Lucy's attachment to the binary of inside/outside is complicated by Butler's reading of the performative nature of gender. Butler describes gender identity not as an articulation

of an inner essence but as a result of a “stylized repetition of acts,”<sup>240</sup> which “create the *illusion* of an interior and organizing gender core [my emphasis].”<sup>241</sup> In other words, there is no existing “inner” subject or self that exists prior to the performance of gendering acts; in fact, it is the gender performance that produces the acting subject, in this case, Lucy.

Butler writes:

Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.<sup>242</sup>

In other words, it is not some inner “essence” that makes Lucy a femme; rather, it is her presentation of herself as femme – her *performing* of femmeness – that makes her femme.

According to Butler, gender and sexuality are created by repetitive performative acts that place individuals in the dichotomous categories of male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual. Actions, gestures, style – indeed, all the ways in which we express gender – are learned and repeated, giving the illusion of an underlying gender essence or core. However, Butler argues that there is no true internal gender. Performative acts constitute what we understand as gender. As she puts it, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constructed by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>243</sup>

Butler argues that this “cultural fiction” of an underlying gender, or “interior gender core,” regulates the ways in which gender is expressed, and if one deviates from what is supposed to be a ‘natural’ gender, then the individual is to blame, not the regulatory system that frames or scripts gender. Indeed, Lucy views her body as somehow at fault for failing to authentically represent her real gender. As Butler contends, the illusion of an

<sup>240</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 179.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

interior and organizing gender core is discursively maintained for the purposes regulating sexuality within the framework of heterosexuality. If the “cause,” so to speak, of desires, gestures, and acts can be localized within the “self of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view.”<sup>244</sup> Lucy has learned that femmes are viewed as other, and she therefore feels judged and victimized.

According to Butler’s thinking, Lucy is a femme because her gender performance (what Lucy refers to as her “gender expression”) has been disciplined and regulated by discursive practices. Yet Lucy continues to embrace a masculine/feminine binary that ignores the ways in which her femme performance essentially produces her femme identity. Bordo’s thinking reiterates that of Butler:

our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic “core” self but are the dramatic *effect* (rather than the cause) of our performances. These we learn how to “fabricate” in the same way we learn how to manipulate a language: through imitation and gradual command of public, cultural idioms (for instance, the corporeal gestures of gender).<sup>245</sup>

According to Bordo, Lucy’s femme performance (her gestures, clothing, etc.) is stylized; she is not a victim to her gender expression. While she feels disempowered by her feminine body and her femme gender expression, Lucy embraces a plot in which she situates herself as oppressed. Butler and Bordo contend that there is no valid inside/outside distinction and no authentic inner core that constructs “inner” identity. Therefore, what these scholars suggest that is in direct opposition to Lucy’s thinking that there is an inner “essence” that is expressed through a gender expression. For Butler, there is no “essence” to be expressed.

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<sup>244</sup> Butler 1990, 136.

<sup>245</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 288.

### **Switching Closets: Straight to Gay**

Lucy appears to be fully invested in the binary fiction of gender, as she reveals that drag kinging isn't the only instance in which she changed her outward look to match her "inner" subjectivity as she perceives it. She explains, "I used to wear skirts and heels in high school, and when I came out my first year in college and started wearing t-shirts and jeans, people back home were like, 'Oh, you've changed the way you look; now you're gay.'" It is important to note here that, although Lucy wears jeans and t-shirts, they are women's styles, which don't particularly signal that she is "now gay." For that matter, I'm not sure any clothing necessarily signals gayness. While earlier she said that she "covered up" in high school, she reveals that there were times when she conformed to another ideal, that of conventional femininity as defined by her peer group – wearing "skirts and heels." And now, in college, where more androgynous or masculine appearances are valued among her peers, Lucy learned to dress with the intention of hiding her feminine body. Both strategies allow her to fit in within and negotiate different circumstances, yet Lucy's narrative does not reflect the power that the ability to adapt affords her. Instead, she describes the metaphor of "hiding," which paradoxically reinforces her feelings of marginalization, as I discuss below.

### **Lucy's "hiding" metaphor**

Lucy spends a significant amount of time describing her experiences in terms of hiding her body. Although she has a background in public performance via dance and theater, she expresses that she struggles with the extent to which she allows her body to be gazed upon in public. Lucy's femme oppression narrative focuses on normatively feminine

aspects of her body – her curvy figure and in particular her large breasts. For example, she describes her “big double D” breasts as oppressive: “There’s nothing I can do about them.” She says, “For the most part I don’t wear tanks tops, or short shorts, or skirts – unless I’m going out or something. It’s hoodies and t-shirts, always something baggy to cover up.” I emphasize her clarification that she does occasionally dress in a more revealing manner when she goes out; however, in a school setting, she prefers less revealing clothing. “When I was younger, I used to wear my dad’s clothes. It was horrible for me when I was younger because I was looked down upon even though there was nothing that I could do about them,”<sup>246</sup> she recalls. In high school there were all these girls who thought that I was trying to show off my body, and I’m like, ‘You don’t understand, no matter what I do I have boobs and I can’t do anything about it.’ Even if I wear a normal shirt,<sup>247</sup> I have cleavage.” Lucy’s narrative contains contradictions, as she struggles to be attractive and to fit in (as do most young people, if not people in general), while also worrying about the extent to which she allows herself to be sexually objectified. She does not want to be seen as someone who “shows off” her body, as she has learned that it brings her negative attention.

Lucy’s narrative does not reveal any examples of the power to be found in negotiating different social situations. Instead, her story focuses on the times that she fails. For example, Lucy recalls a particularly painful instance in her youth where she chose not to hide her body: “I took ballet for so long, and we’d always call a kind of leotard ‘fat girl leotards.’” She explains: “They were cut higher across the chest, they had sleeves and didn’t have the pretty low backs, and I hated it because I always wanted to wear the pretty ones, but I couldn’t because of my boobs. One year I finally said, ‘Screw it’ and bought

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<sup>246</sup> Her breasts.

<sup>247</sup> By “normal shirt,” I speculate that Lucy is referring to a shirt that is not particularly revealing.

one of the pretty leotards. And as soon as I got out on the floor to dance, my boobs just fell straight out for everyone to see. It was horrible.” This story reveals that although Lucy says that she usually prefers to cover up, her narrative reveals a history of flirting with other possibilities, which seem to end in disaster and embarrassment. Lucy “tries on” different ways of presenting herself, but she mainly resigns herself to one way, that which allows her to “hide.” What is absent from her narrative are any instances where she is able to imagine power or possibility in her femininity.

### **Femme Shame**

Lucy also describes her appearance in situations outside of school as oppressive: “Even at work, and I work in an office, men stare at my chest, and I’m like, ‘Hello, my face is up *here*’... and then I turn around and they’re staring at my butt [laughs]. I just feel like I can’t hide it, there is no way that I can really mask it. And I guess that’s why I don’t try to ... I feel there’s nothing I can do about it.”<sup>248</sup> Far from the Foucauldian notion that power is everywhere (highlighted below), Lucy emphasizes her lack of agency and admits defeat: “I can’t really hide my body very well, even when I used to try to,” she laments. “I have a high-pitched voice. I’m really curvy. I have long hair. I look very much like a woman and there’s no way to get around it.” Lucy’s refrain of “I can’t ...” signals her continuous lack of power and feelings of oppression.

Not only does Lucy describe her feminine body as physically oppressive, but she also frames it as psychologically disempowering – and even shameful. Eve Sedgwick’s thinking about shame is useful in exploring Lucy’s narrative because Lucy, like many

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<sup>248</sup> In reference to her outward appearance, Lucy’s uses the impersonal pronoun “it,” rather than “my body,” which I speculate is an attempt to separate her “self” from her body in a dualistic fashion.

femmes, lacks the visibility that her more “dykey” (as she puts it) counterparts have. Feminine performances can mark lesbian femmes as heterosexual, causing them to feel shameful that they “have it too easy” in negotiating their lives in a heteronormative society. “I think there are bad connotations to being feminine,” Lucy says. “I think that in the queer community, there are a lot of femmes who take a lot of shit for being femme. I guess they see it as bad.” As Lucy hints and Campbell addresses directly, there exists “an assumption that only the masculine woman can be read as the ‘real’ lesbian.”<sup>249</sup>

According to Sedgwick, not merely a feeling or emotion, shame is intrinsic to forming identity as it “sharpens the sense of what one is.”<sup>250</sup> Perhaps Lucy’s shame concerning femininity also marks what she is *not* – but what she desires to be – more “genderqueer” or “androgynous” in appearance. Lucy has options to change her appearance; however, she chooses not to alter her appearance via dress or hairstyle. Instead, she resigns herself to feeling ashamed of her gender expression. “When people look at you they assume a lot of things about you,” she says. In reference how people see her, Lucy explains, “They think of fertility. My ex-girlfriend told me that I look like a baby-making machine. I guess that’s how people think about it.” Here again, Lucy chooses to view femininity as “other” and adopts a position of disempowerment. An obvious illustration is her refusal to realize the significant source of power (from her own example) that comes from the ability to give birth. Instead, she equates being feminine with being weak: “I think that a lot of times people think that I am not very strong ... I guess ... and when they see me rock climb, they are surprised and they are like, ‘Wow, I didn’t realize

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<sup>249</sup> Campbell, 105.

<sup>250</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 36.

you were that strong!’ If I have a big gash or a bruise, they’re like, ‘That’s really hot for a girlie girl!’”

### **Identity Override**

Lucy has learned to experience pleasure when her strong “inner self” is revealed through her outward physical strength, and she suggests that rock climbing challenges what people think about her. However, she does not challenge how she views herself. She only recognizes her strength and power when she is performing “masculine” activities: drag kinging and rock climbing. While there are certainly countless women who rock climb, extreme high-risk sports are commonly associated with masculinity, which is evident in Lucy’s citing rock climbing as the only example outside of drag that makes her feel powerful and that challenges what people think about her feminine appearance. Lucy admits, “I know those stereotypes aren’t true. They think that when you’re more feminine your life is so much easier. Even when I’m in my own community,<sup>251</sup> it’s just seen as a negative thing. There is the Femme Mafia,<sup>252</sup> stuff like that. That’s good, but still ... femmes get a lot of hell for it.” Lucy acknowledges what masculine-looking (dykey or butch) women face when they cannot as easily hide their sexuality, and the assumption that femmes, who are viewed as able to pass, are thereby more easily able to negotiate heterosexual and gay worlds.

Campbell echoes Lucy’s sentiments concerning femmes. She contends that femmes are “made invisible” when “they are assumed to be straight, or [they] cannot be read ... without being seen with another (usually butch) woman;” femme identity “suffers from not

<sup>251</sup> When Lucy uses the term “community,” she is referring to her group of friends and peers.

<sup>252</sup> The Femme Mafia is an organization in Atlanta that promotes femme identity and awareness through entertainment such as queer burlesque shows. See [www.femmefafia.com](http://www.femmefafia.com).

being taken seriously.”<sup>253</sup> On her own, “the femme alone will signify as straight or femme only to those who know how to read femme performance,” she writes, and “most likely, the femme’s queerness will be subsumed by the assumption of heterosexuality, as her appearance does not mark her as lesbian.”<sup>254</sup> Lucy’s example of her work environment illustrates Campbell’s contention; she must deal with straight men’s attention at her job and the assumption that she is straight and available.

Indeed, Lucy has learned to define her gender expression relationally to her more masculine partners: “I’m usually with girls who are a lot more dykey than me,” she says. Consequently, one way that femmes lack power is that their queer identities are seen as only *relational* to queer identities of more masculine women (butches, “dykey” lesbians, etc.). Without her own sense of visibility, Lucy has come to see herself as disempowered as a femme. Like Theresa, the femme character in the novel *Stone Butch Blues*,<sup>255</sup> rather than embracing her own queer femininity and marking out her own empowered identity, Lucy hands this power over to her “more dykey” counterpart. Lucy’s rejection of power teaches her over and over to remain oppressed.

Lucy expresses a desire to appear more androgynous, which she has learned is more authentic to her queer identity. Although Lucy resists the power she has in her position,

Butler argues that femmes are uniquely situated for subversion:

Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Campbell, 105.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>255</sup> Feinberg.

<sup>256</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 123.

Lucy has not learned that the power of her femme subjectivity could allow her to displace normative constructions of gender, and she continues to see herself as oppressed and disempowered. Why does Lucy not learn another, more powerful narrative? Kumashiro highlights one barrier to learning: “the unconscious desire for repetition and the psychic resistance to change.”<sup>257</sup> Lucy’s resistance is supported by the “alternative norms” of her community, in which masculine ways of dressing and behaving are valued. What needs to be considered, Kumashiro suggests, is “not merely a lack of knowledge, but a resistance to knowledge . . . and in particular, a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what one already ‘knows.’” Echoing Britzman, he posits that “we unconsciously desire learning only that which affirms what we already know and our own sense of self.”<sup>258</sup>

Furthermore, Lucy does not make use of the power she has in being femme *and* conventionally attractive, as evident in the mocking tone she uses when she recalls peers telling her that she has pretty hair.

Although Lucy makes a passing reference to the Femme Mafia, signaling that she has learned of its existence, she largely ignores this particular queer “femme power” organization. In contrast with Lucy’s White upper middle class background and conservative manner of dress, members of the Femme Mafia represent multiple ethnicities and express intentional subversive sexualities and radical gender politics.<sup>259</sup> Rather than desiring to turn gender on its end, or adopting a radical stance on gender expressions, Lucy performs for the pleasure and power that she experiences during her performances. Could this be because a notion of feminine power does not fit in with the narrative she teaches herself? Is it because Lucy sees the Femme Mafia’s members as different from herself?

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<sup>257</sup> Kumashiro, *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy*, 24.

<sup>258</sup> Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," 43.

<sup>259</sup> See [www.femmefafia.com](http://www.femmefafia.com)

According to Scott, when one subject position “becomes an overriding identity, other subject positions are subsumed by it.”<sup>260</sup> In adopting a disempowered subject position, Lucy adheres to her narrative, fully embracing the rigid binaries that she has constructed, choosing to frame her femmeness (her self) as oppressed. There is no room for another subject position when Lucy has consolidated her subjectivity in this manner.

### **Femme Power**

At least since the 1990s, a significant body of scholarship on “the femme” and femme identity has influenced thinking on gender binaries. Nestle’s 1992 edited volume *The Persistent Desire*,<sup>261</sup> in particular, cleared space for femme identity to be considered a legitimate possibility for queer women.

The importance of femme as a queer identity has changed throughout the last few decades. As gender theorists such as Galewski have highlighted, from the early 1990s on, feminine-identified queer women have moved from the margins to the center of discourse concerning queer women’s gender expression.<sup>262</sup> Consequently, academics have sought to re-figure femme identity away from its previous alienation since the 1970s. More recently, a number of scholars have focused their research on positive femme identities.<sup>263</sup> However, as Lucy’s narrative expresses, rather than viewed as active, queer feminist agents, some

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<sup>260</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 30.

<sup>261</sup> Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader*.

<sup>262</sup> Elizabeth Galewski, "Figuring the Feminist Femme," *Women's Studies in Communication* 28, no. 2 (2005): 183.

<sup>263</sup> See, for instance, Laura Harris, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader*; Lesla Newman, ed., *The Femme Mystique* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1995); and Chloe B. Rose and Anna Camilleri, eds., *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003).

femmes experience their identities as “un-feminist,” “traitors” to queer society, as well as “passive victim[s] of the heteropatriarchy.”<sup>264</sup>

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam sets out to “explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity.”<sup>265</sup> Halberstam explores how female masculinity, what she refers to as a “minority masculinity,” challenges dominant, heteronormative notions of masculinity. In her work, Halberstam focuses on masculine (butch) women, who by their very performances of masculinity “detach” masculinity from maleness. Her framework is helpful in thinking about Lucy’s queer femme subject position, which I contend is a minority queer *femininity* that can challenge dominant notions of femininity by troubling how traditional femininity is read – much like Halberstam’s theorizing of female masculinities. Like female masculinities, femme femininities can also be a source of power and possibility.

In exploring the possibilities of femme power, Foucault’s thinking on power is particularly useful. For Foucault, power is not a top-down construction, nor is it secured by a stable powerful/powerless binary, as Lucy has learned it. Rather, power is a web of relations that is “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”<sup>266</sup> Foucault’s conception is important to Lucy’s narrative because, unlike her attribution of power to masculinity, a Foucauldian framework highlights the potential that Lucy has from her other subject positions, including the one of her “very femme” gender expression. A parodic feminine “brazenness” as performed by bio-queens, as introduced in Chapter Three, troubles

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<sup>264</sup> Galewski, 190.

<sup>265</sup> Halberstam, 9.

<sup>266</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 93.

normative binary gender identities in the same way that drag kinging does: by highlighting the performative nature of all identity and by teaching audiences and performers to question taken-for-granted notions of gender and sexuality. While the focus of my research is on drag kings performing masculinity rather than on the bio-queen's performance of "high femininity," scholarship on bio queens is a growing field. Research is needed in this area to understand how femininity can be rewritten as a powerful marker of queer sexuality, a concept not reflected in Lucy's narrative.

In addition, Lucy does not acknowledge the power that exists in the ability to "pass" as heterosexual. Passing has been examined by scholars in a wide variety of disciplines; it is generally acknowledged that, although not unproblematic, the ability to pass does bring certain power. For example, in their focus group research on the power of passing among sexual minorities, Fuller, et. al.<sup>267</sup> found a number of benefits to the ability to negotiate straight and gay communities, including providing more possibilities of self-expression.

In sum, not only does Lucy construct her femme gender expression as oppressive, but her refusal to embrace a powerful queer femininity also serves to disempower her further. The second plot in Lucy's narrative, "masculine empowerment," as discussed below, reveals how Lucy finds power in performing masculinity. Her masculine performance may bring a temporary sense of personal power (via more "comfort" and less shame), but the messages that Lucy takes (or refuses to take) from her performance further solidify her everyday feelings of oppression.

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<sup>267</sup> Craig B. Fuller, Doris F. Chang, and Lisa R. Rubin, "Sliding under the Radar: Passing and Power among Sexual Minorities," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 3, no. 2 (2009).

*Plot Number Two: Experiencing Masculine Empowerment Through Drag*

As stated earlier, when describing her experiences drag kinging, Lucy structures her narrative in terms of a progressive trajectory from a state of (feminine) disempowerment to a state of (masculine) empowerment. What I refer to as Lucy's "masculine empowerment" plot focuses on power *over* audience members' perceptions of her. For example, when describing her experiences drag kinging, she says, "I really enjoyed it. I think you feel like you have a lot more power, just with commanding attention. Like I always felt when I perform that the most amazing thing is that you could be on stage and you could portray however you wanted to, and you could make people feel however you wanted to make them feel." Lucy's masculine empowerment plot structures her narrative such that, in direct opposition to her everyday femme performance and the oppression she describes, performing as a man allows her to experience a different sort of subjectivity – one of physical and psychic power. And although Lucy does not make the sexual power of her performed masculinity explicit, the subtext of her masculine empowerment plot is her ability to negotiate her own sexual objectification: *Out* of drag, Lucy frames her femme body as a victim of sexual objectification, as demonstrated in her earlier discomfort and unsuccessful attempts to escape the male gaze at her workplace. However, as I will discuss later in this section, while *in* drag, Lucy takes pleasure in making *herself* the object of sexual desire.

Lucy explains that drag kinging has changed the way she feels about herself, and again, she centers her narrative around the metaphor of hiding her feminine self: "I was feeling that no matter how much I try to hide [my femininity], people can see it and it's always kind of bothered me. It's the first thing they see –*really feminine*. But when I'm

dressed as a man they were actually watching my performance. They weren't saying the usual, 'She's really pretty!' They were saying, 'She's really funny!'" Performing as a man, Lucy finds a moment of pleasurable refusal to be contained by her femininity, as well as a newfound sense of power over others' perceptions of her.

"To do that whole drag thing, it's just like, I just felt more in *control* of that, feeling like maybe people were paying attention to me for the right reasons: For the performance, rather than just because I have pretty hair." Drag kinging provided Lucy with the opportunity to, as she put it, control her body in public and control the way that she presented it, as well as the way in which it is received: "They take you a lot more seriously, rather than the way I am now," she says. However, Lucy actually "knows" little about how the audience feels about her; her speculation is a projection of the pleasure and power that *she* feels.

Furthermore, what makes Lucy's act "work" and what makes it "funny" is that the audience knows that Lucy's feminine body is "underneath" the drag costume. The audience knows that Lucy's pretty hair is tucked under a hat and that her "beer belly" is really caused by her bound breasts. Hanson highlights that drag allows female bodies to "imag(in)e, convert and recognize themselves as something radically 'other,' even though ostensibly through the 'same' body/self."<sup>268</sup> As much as Lucy emphasizes the desire to "present herself differently," i.e., to hide her femmeness, her feminine body is central to her experience of drag kinging, as well as to the ways that audiences experience her.

Hanson contends that drag is a "powerful bodily tool" for "enhancing women's phenomenal experience of their bodies" because drag affords kings "an empowering and personally constructed 'ideal' or other embodied perspective of the self/body that contests

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<sup>268</sup> Hanson, 73.

prevailing and even personal constructions and representations of the female body.”<sup>269</sup> In the context of learning and unlearning, drag allows performers to unlearn oppressive aspects of their femininities and place their masculinities in the spotlight. Lucy’s “personal construction” of her body is that it is feminine and therefore oppressed. It is because Lucy’s everyday body is publicly read as “very feminine” that drag kinging can provide her with an opportunity to experience a multiple sort of subjectivity. As she puts it, “I think after the performance, people saw me as maybe a little more diverse.” However, Lucy does not completely unlearn binary thinking. She limits any power she feels to the arena of the stage and to the act of kinging – and attributes it to “maleness.” As Lucy’s drag performance does little for her in terms of deconstructing her own dichotomous constructions of gender expression, she seems to have only partially learned the lessons drag that drag can teach her.

Because drag only makes sense when maleness is performed over/through/in the presence of a female body, the metaphor of a palimpsest is a useful way to think about the female body in drag. A palimpsest, a document that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and legible under the new writing, helps imagine the male performance as written over the female body, but the female body is not fully erased. Traces of the female body are still present. Lucy learns to “erase” her femininity and write masculinity over the feminine erasure. Yet, as her female body remains underneath, her femininity continues to inform her masculine performance. Therefore, drag kinging is an interconnected rather than strictly comparative learning experience of before-and-after, located within complex and sometimes multiple and conflicting narratives. Drag kinging writes a masculine performance over a feminine body,

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 75.

yet the feminine body “shows through.” The palimpsest metaphor is useful in exploring experience as being layered. She experiences drag in these ways because of what’s underneath – her femme/female body. Lucy still sees herself as disempowered, and she remains in a “loop” of sexual objectification.

As Butler suggests, “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”<sup>270</sup> If Lucy were to recognize that her drag performance foregrounds the mocking of “naturalized” gender expression and gender identity, Lucy’s attachment to the idea of a stable, inner essence that is diametrically opposed to her outside expression keeps her feeling oppressed and disempowered.

### **Drag Performance, Reversal of a Gaze, and Self-Objectification**

Lucy says that when she is in drag, people see her as “more diverse,” yet she continues to delight in comments about her physical (outside) appearance, such as when one audience member tells her: “You make a hot guy!” While she shuns and mocks compliments directed toward her feminine body and her attractiveness, in the context of drag, she expresses pleasure in comments that focus on her looks. In other words, she differentiates between sexual comments (objectification) made to her femme self and those made to her drag self: She sees comments toward the feminine as disempowering, and toward the masculine as empowering.

For example, when she performs the “Dick in a Box” act described in Chapter Two, Lucy is in fact drawing attention to her body and to her sexuality with a song about her dick and her vagina (or “box”), *making herself* an object of sexual attention. When I

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<sup>270</sup> Judith Butler and Sara Salih, eds., *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 111.

suggest this to her, she explains, “Right, but it didn’t make me feel uncomfortable or dirty. I don’t want to use the word *brave*, because that’s kind of strong, but being looked at that way was powerful. I was more in control of the sexuality that I had, not like it was something that people could take advantage of and take that away from me without me even doing anything. Like it’s not all about what they think.” Campbell agrees that “during a drag king performance, the power lies with the King performer and his negotiation of the desire directed his way.”<sup>271</sup> But with her trajectory of power tied to her depictions of others’ perceptions of her, Lucy’s narrative indeed emphasizes what others think. The ways in which she interprets others’ perceptions of her indeed construct her subjectivity. (Put another way, it *is* “all about what they think.”)

Scholarship on the “male gaze” from the field of film theory, which links femininity with passivity and masculinity with the power to command a gaze, is useful in thinking about Lucy’s drag performance and her feelings of power and control over how others see her. Mulvey explains:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure ... In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.<sup>272</sup>

As the above passage highlights, men have been described as sole commanders of the gaze (to control *who* is looked at and how they are looked at) and women have been constructed as the powerless Other. Lucy expresses that she feels less inhibited about her body when performing as a man and that she is able to embrace her sensuality by controlling how others perceive her. However, as Halberstam argues, Mulvey’s framework

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<sup>271</sup> Campbell, 125.

<sup>272</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39-40.

simply highlights “the remarkably restricted ways in which spectators can access pleasure.”<sup>273</sup> Lucy flips the gaze, but because she only sees her power in either/or terms, she does not stray from the binary.

She explains, “Afterward someone was like, ‘That’s kind of hot,’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah, that’s right, ‘I AM [hot], aren’t I!’?” [Laughs.] How should this be read against her earlier sheepish and self-deprecating descriptions of her physical appearance? Here I suggest that an interrogation of Lucy’s framing of herself as powerless is necessary. As an erotic subject, Lucy actually wields quite a bit of power, and I wondered why she prevents herself from appropriating this power out of drag, when she clearly does so in drag.

Despite the masculine layering over her femme body that Lucy engages in for drag kinging, she seems to view her masculine self onstage as separate from her feminine self, and I suspect that this is why she doesn’t carry over the empowerment (power over others, or other manifestations of power) into her everyday life. Lucy downplays her looks and dresses to “hide” her body beneath hooded sweatshirts, while she embraces her sexual power and agrees that she “looks hot” dressed as a man. I interpret this contradiction to mean that Lucy sees that men are allowed, even encouraged, to act certain about their sexual power, while women are encouraged to downplay their own sexual power. As a “man,” she is able (or “allowed”?) to command attention and embrace power that she cannot imagine out of drag because she has not unlearned rigid constructs of gender. As Hanson explains: “in general it’s bad form in our society to go around talking about how great you look and feel.” In drag, “it’s suddenly more okay to say, ‘damn, I look good,’

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<sup>273</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 85.

‘cause you’re sort of talking about someone else.’<sup>274</sup> Drag allows Lucy to claim sexual power in a way that she does not find in her everyday femme performance.

As mentioned previously, Lucy is not necessarily *transcending* her feminine body in order to experience pleasure and feelings of empowerment. Rather, it is *because* of or *through/over* her feminine body that she can experience herself differently when she is in drag. But “she” is still underneath the men’s clothing. As Lucy points out: “It’s kind of bittersweet because I realized how much power is in just binding myself. I even had people say how did you make your boobs go away?”

Lucy contends that her friends’ attitudes changed toward her, “People I guess just reacted to me differently. After the performance, they’re like ‘you were so good, you were so funny.’ I felt like it had nothing to do with how I looked or who I was. Or anything like that.” However, it has *everything* to do with her femme body that is still underneath the drag. “When a lot of people saw, they didn’t realize it was me. My eyebrows are really darkened. I have facial hair. Stuff like that. I can pull off a guy pretty well. People who didn’t know it was me would like come up to me, and I had this high-pitched, bubbly voice, and people were shocked – like ‘Lucy?!’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, hi.’”

However, Lucy’s feminine body is not erased; but rather written over, and her performance informed by and through her femme-ness. Symbolically, her box in the “Dick in a Box”<sup>275</sup> number is empty; it contains no phallus. A drag king’s female body is central to the dynamics of her performance. Drag kinging provides a space where women can embrace their own masculinities and enact desires and fantasies concerning their own masculinities. This can lead to “knowledge and acknowledgment of an embodied self that

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<sup>274</sup> Hanson, 68.

<sup>275</sup> Described in Chapter Two.

has been somehow ‘changed’ by the experience of engaging with those desires and identifications.”<sup>276</sup> For Lucy, identifying with masculinity seems primarily about controlling how others see her.

### **How Experience Constructs Subjectivities**

By choosing certain “plots” and rejecting other available possibilities, Lucy constructs a particular type of subjectivity for herself. Lucy’s storyline reveals her investments in and attachments to a binary and heteronormative construction of gender that limits possibilities. By embracing such plots as “femme oppression” and “masculine empowerment,” her narrative ignores other available discourses that might be more empowering to her and make her feel more integrated. By rejecting the possibilities of finding power as a femme in a feminine body, and instead confining her construct of power to the masculine, she limits the empowering aspects of drag kinging to the stage. What does this do for Lucy? By adhering to rigid constructions of gender and power, she focuses on an individualistic notion of empowerment, and she in effect teaches herself what she already knows – that she as a femme is oppressed, and that power can only be found in masculinity or male mimicry.

Lucy’s personal narrative reveals a linear trajectory of oppression – from feeling uncomfortable with her feminine body and struggling to hide and contain her body, and keeping it from spilling out into public view – to feelings of power and control over others through drag performance. The act of binding her breasts, which once caused her much embarrassment in ballet, now becomes a way to experience a different body and transforms into a source of power.

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<sup>276</sup> Hanson, 73-74.

For Lucy, the stage provides the possibility for adopting and performing different subjectivities. Her body, once framed as a trap or a prison, is now framed as offering Lucy another sense of subjectivity. When she performs as man, she gets pleasure from the power she feels over the audience to control how they see her. When they see her as “funny” or “a hot guy” rather than a “girlie girl,” as she puts it, audience members are fully aware that “she” is underneath. Still, since she revels in being called a “hot guy” in drag, Lucy is still being valued for her looks, which seems to be exactly the opposite of what she says she wants. Lucy’s narrative is problematic in that she ends up reaffirming a stable, immutable binary construct of gender.

The complications in Lucy’s narrative are reflected in Butler’s thinking on drag. Butler clarifies that drag is not necessarily radical, and it does not escape binary thinking about gender. Rather, drag is “subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality”<sup>277</sup> The subversive potential of drag kinging appears to be absent in Lucy’s narrative. Although she feels a personal sense of empowerment through drag kinging, Lucy still views gender as an *essential* trait; she would just prefer that her outside body match her inner, authentic gender. Lucy uses uncontested resources (or plots) by which to story her gendered experiences. As Kopelson suggests,

[A]s the performative rearticulation of gender and sexuality posits the fundamental lack of substance beneath the *acts* of gender and sexuality, it establishes these categories as highly unstable and open to resignification. When gender and sexuality are understood as expressions of repeated expressions, rather than as

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<sup>277</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex,”* 125.

expressions of an authentic self, conveniently bounded identity categories tend to dissolve and a productive confusion takes their place.<sup>278</sup>

I suggest that because the power Lucy describes is bound to binary thinking, she repeatedly cites, rather than alters, disempowering practices, and what empowerment she attributes to the act of drag kinging stays confined to the performance venue and does not feed into other parts of her life.

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<sup>278</sup> Kopelson, 20.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

### **Introduction**

From the narratives of drag kings presented in this dissertation, I have uncovered significant implications for education that I will synthesize in this chapter. Through its self-conscious challenging of identities as singular and “given,” drag kinging makes evident the performative nature of identities and opens up spaces for examining multiple, conflicting subjectivities. In contrast to the stable, fixed, and unified subject that education as a field often takes for granted, drag kings’ narratives foreground selves that straddle multiple subject positions, calling attention to the multiplicity of all selves. In line with Britzman’s suggestions, I move the objective of pedagogy beyond the desire to construct unified, singular subjects and instead to “ponder the fashioning of the self that occurs when attention is given to the performativity of the subject.”<sup>279</sup> In other words, how do subjects who recognize themselves as multiple, “incomplete,” or unfixed relate to other such selves? Drag kings’ narratives serve as a point of entry by which to delve into the multiple ways in which selves – and knowledges – are constructed. Therefore, these narratives have significant pedagogical value in examining the relationships between subjectivities and knowledge.

Because learners move across multiple subject positions, never fully adopting any singular, stable subjectivity, they take up a multiplicity of knowledges in similar, fragmented ways. Therefore, education can be viewed not as a one-way transmission of

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<sup>279</sup> Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, 87.

bits of unified information onto learners with stable, taken-for-granted identities, but as movement among various positions of knowing – and of learning and unlearning in fragmented moments and with multifarious results. The following pages summarize how these implications arose from my data. Specifically, I tie together the themes of multiple selves and fragmented learnings and unlearnings, as well as explore the usefulness of the palimpsest metaphor for educational thought.

### **Multiple Selves**

My data – particularly, the narratives of drag kings – reflect the ways in which individuals straddle multiple subjectivities in fragmented ways. Participants' perceptions of their gender identities point to the shortcomings of stable, unified identity categories. Chris, Sera, and Lucy each use an existing identity label, or a combination of existing labels, to understand their gender identities, even as their narratives point to the failures of identity labels. In her struggles to unlearn racism, Chris, as a prominent figure in her drag community, moves across the subjectivities of authority/expertise and ignorance/lack of resources. Similarly, Sera negotiates the subjectivities of being a Black woman and a boi, and being informally and formally educated. These multiple selves lead to idiosyncratic learnings specific to particular subjectivities in specific spaces. These distinctive knowledges expose individuals to various and incomplete, fragmented, and context-specific opportunities for learning. Subjects are multiple, never complete and fixed but always changing.<sup>280</sup> I contend that, because an individual's sense of self and experiences directly influence the degrees to which she learns, one's process of learning is only as

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<sup>280</sup> Alecia Youngblood Jackson, "Performativity Identified," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10 (2004): 686. The literature on multiple selves is interdisciplinary and encompasses the fields of education, anthropology, philosophy, and other academic disciplines.

cohesive or unified as one's subjectivity. I do not mean to suggest that a unified or cohesive subjectivity is a goal; rather, I wish to point out that neither learning nor subjectivity is singular or fixed. Individuals express different identities in different ways and can inhabit spaces simultaneously. As discussed below, when selves are fragmented and multiple, their education (learnings and unlearnings) is also fragmented and multiple.

### **Learnings and Unlearnings**

In my research, participants' narratives, which reflect their experiences and conceptions, and their learnings and unlearnings, constitute them as multiple subjects with fragmented knowledges. For instance, Chris identifies simultaneously as a "girl" *and* a "tranny," which, as she puts it, "queer[s] the gender line even further" by drawing attention to multiplicities of subjectivity. As Jackson contends, "multiple, conflicting, and hybrid subjectivities are ... contingent and fluid," signaling that selves and realities are always "in the making,"<sup>281</sup> and I add, in multiple, fluid junctures of learning and unlearning.

The processes of learning are predicated on the *unlearning* of previous knowledge. Unlearning often challenges one's worldview and sense of self, creating an inner conflict, interference, or crisis, as Kumashiro and Britzman suggest.<sup>282</sup> The individual must have the desire as well as the knowledges to push through such a crisis to synthesize and accept (or reject) new knowledges. Otherwise, a challenge to one's historical knowledge can lead to what Kumashiro describes as paralysis, the "paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning."<sup>283</sup> Learners can experience a crisis of learning by which their various unlearnings leave them feeling stuck, prohibiting movement toward future learning. Lucy's

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* and Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education."

<sup>283</sup> Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," 44.

narrative reflects this paralysis: she is stuck in a crisis of feeling disempowered by her femme gender expression. Likewise, because Sera's "new" formal and informal learnings go against her historical learnings, she feels splintered from her family and church. She is on the verge of dramatic changes in her life and is caught in a space where she feels silenced at work and in her family. To unlearn, individuals must work against the ongoing citation of historical knowledges that prohibit them from new learnings.

"Rational" approaches to learning cannot account for unconscious desires not to know, to ignore, or to remain attached to one's existing knowledges. For example, Sera's narrative reflects her inner anxieties about gendered categories (e.g., stud/femme, straight/gay, and top/bottom). Although Sera *unlearns* the usefulness of stable identities to some extent ("just be you," she says), when confronted with the idea of two studs together, or a linebacker bottom, her visceral and unconscious reaction points to incomplete unlearnings: "*You're fuckin' with my head.*" Sera resists thinking the unthinkable and falls back on prescribed categories of what can be thought.<sup>284</sup> In other words, the *traces* of her former knowings are incompletely erased and only partially written over by Sera's academic learning. Similarly, Chris' conflict deals with her own inner struggles with unlearning xenophobia. To admit that she needs to unlearn this aspect of her thinking would point to a failure of her *self*. Kumashiro suggests that an individual unconsciously desires to learn only that which affirms her sense that she is a good person; individuals resist learning anything that reveals their "complicity with racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression."<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, an important part of learning is the desire to unlearn what one has previously learned as normative.<sup>286</sup> As Lucy's narrative reflects, by allowing

<sup>284</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (1995).

<sup>285</sup> Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," 43.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

herself to be normalized and disciplined by discourses already circulating about femmes, she closes herself off to other possibilities that challenge her worldview.

According to Britzman, examining unconscious attachments can be helpful to theories of learning because they turn “curiosity toward what is not learned.”<sup>287</sup> Thinking about education as a multiplicity of unlearnings and learnings shed light on participants’ conscious and unconscious motivations and desires for adopting various subject positions. Indeed, Weems and Lather describe learning as a messy space, “polluted by the hopes, desires, and anxieties of others and ourselves.”<sup>288</sup>

### **Education as a Palimpsest**

The notion of learning as fragmented and multiple (and to a large extent, unconscious) puts pressure on educational thought that rests on the idea of consciousness, rationality, and unitary knowledge. This turn allows educational inquiries to challenge the assumptions of stable knowledges and identities and the accompanying pedagogical fascinations with incremental results, goals, fixed stages, and certainty. The metaphor of the palimpsest is useful for illustrating the concept of fragmentary learnings and unlearnings and individuals’ attachments to historical or previous knowledges.

As discussed previously, a palimpsest is a manuscript from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text. It can also mean an object, place, or area that reflects its history. Because previous (or historical) learnings are never fully erased (or unlearned) from one’s subjectivity when new learnings are encountered,

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<sup>287</sup> Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, 68.

<sup>288</sup> Lisa Weems and Patti Lather, "Review: A Psychoanalysis We Can Bear to Learn From," *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 6 (2000): 42.

traces of these earlier learnings remain and become part of the new learnings and subjectivities. For example, when Lucy experiences a sense of power and control when performing as a man, it is her earlier, historical learnings of disempowerment that inform this new drag subjectivity. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Five, because drag kinging only makes sense when maleness is performed over/through/in the presence of a female body, the metaphor of a palimpsest is a useful way to think about what drag kings both learn and teach through their performances. A palimpsest helps to understand the male performance as written over the female body, but the female body is not fully erased and is still quite present. Lucy desires to “erase” her femininity and write masculinity over the erasure; yet, as her female body remains underneath, her femininity continues to inform her masculine performance.

The palimpsest illustrates an *interconnected*, rather than a strictly comparative, learning experience of before-and-after. Various traces of unlearnings remain beneath the new knowledge that attempts to replace it. By taking up the metaphor of learning as a palimpsest, education theorists can come to understand learning and unlearning as located within complex and sometimes multiple and conflicting narratives and subjectivities. Traces of unlearnings remain and subsequently intersect with and inform new learnings in various ways in the sense that new experiences conjure old ones,<sup>289</sup> as Britzman and Pitt suggest. Indeed, the palimpsest metaphor serves as a useful link between education and the psychoanalytic concept of “transference,” the idea that past unresolved conflicts with others and within the self are projected onto the meanings of new interactions.<sup>290</sup> The palimpsest focuses attention on incomplete unlearnings and unresolved learnings and can

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<sup>289</sup> Deborah P. Britzman and Alice J. Pitt, "Pedagogy and Transference: Casting the Past of Learning into the Presence of Teaching," *Theory into Practice* 35, no. 2 (1996): 117.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

help individuals investigate what prior knowledges or understandings intersect with new learnings. As Weems and Lather suggest, an “inquiry into learning involves the careful tracking of the relations of learning in their various, incomplete, and recursive movements.”<sup>291</sup> How do prior learnings and unlearnings map onto new meanings and multiple subjectivities?

If identities and subjectivities are taken to be unfixated and unstable, as drag kings’ narratives illustrate, an educational space is opened up for individuals to question their social practices and historical learnings – aspects of their lives taken as common sense. The palimpsest metaphor can steer the focus of education toward the unconscious and affective aspects of unlearning and learning. Educational theories can then begin to recognize the significance of layers and traces of desires, hopes, anxieties, and resistances that are part of inherently multiple and fragmented educational processes. Britzman and Pitt suggest that “identifications are partial, ambivalent, and shifting. They pass through specific memories and unconscious desires.”<sup>292</sup> Educational theories that insist on unitary knowledge and stable subjects ignore the multiple subjectivities and various unlearnings and learnings reflected in the lived experiences of individuals.

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<sup>291</sup> Weems and Lather, "Review: A Psychoanalysis We Can Bear to Learn From," 41.

<sup>292</sup> Britzman and Pitt, "Pedagogy and Transference: Casting the Past of Learning into the Presence of Teaching," 120.



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