

The origin of love: Possibilities with/in of trans performance

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth A. Nelson: The origin of love: Possibilities with/in of trans performance
(under the direction of Della Pollock)

This paper is a discussion of the way drag kings and transmasculine performers perform gender as a way to make personal, social, civil and legal change. This project began primarily focused on dramatizing trans as a dimension of sexual heterogeneity and trans performance as making space for gender heterogeneity. However, the project transformed to reflect the radically heterogeneous world of gender variant performance. The range of political engagement varies widely from what I would consider dangerously unreflexive reiterations of the worst of gender stereotypes to transformative performances of difference that open up possibilities for understanding gender variance and engaging people in political action. Nonetheless, most of these performers, even those who are not particularly skilled in performance per se, are performing courage. These performers are putting their bodies on the line to help audiences think, see and feel through the everyday threats (psychological, physical, sexual, political) they face. These performances are demonstrating not just the reality of difference as it already exists, but also ways to re/form the world so that gender variant people can access a full range of possibilities for a livable life.

This project is an exploration of their experiences through their voices and critical theory. The people with whom I spoke are those who work to resist messages of oppression and stage messages of hope and possibility. They are creating critical work

that strives to make this world not just welcoming to diverse subjectivities, but also a site of social change. Through their words and work I explore some of the questions such as: What motivates gender variant performers to perform? How do gender variant performers grapple with other intersecting identities they either bring to or represent on stage? Why performance? What are the erotics of gender variant performance? What is masculinity in a gender variant performance context? How might their performances contribute to, or complicate, claims that all gender is performative? Is this work making social change?

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ambiguous Inches

I saw the musical “Hedwig and the Angry Inch” live for the first time at the Carrboro Arts Center in October 2007.¹ The show is a night in the life of Hedwig, an effeminate young man living in East Berlin before the Berlin Wall came down. Abandoned by his G.I. father, and kept at arms length by his unaffectionate mother, Hedwig constructs a fantasy life of performing in the U.S. by singing along with American Forces radio programs. His wish seems to be coming true when an American soldier stationed in Germany proposes marriage and pays for his surgical transition. However, the transsexual surgery is botched, and the marriage fails. Hedwig finds herself living alone (as a woman, *mostly*) in a trailer in Kansas. Down, but not out, she remakes herself into a glamorous performer and cultivates a creative partnership with an excitable military brat, whom she christens “Tommy Gnosis.” Their creative and intimate relationship flourishes until Hedwig demands that Tommy love her from the front, which requires acknowledging her “angry inch” or the surgical remains of her “failed” transition. Gnosis not only rejects her in that moment, but also goes on to have a successful career using songs she wrote for them.

Hedwig tells us her story as a nightclub act during which she is “bombing” due to drunkenness, outrageous diva behavior and her heartbroken rage about the Tommy Gnosis concert next door. She treats her former drag queen husband, her band and often

¹ I am not analyzing “Hedwig” as a show, but this story explains how this night informs my project.

the audience cruelly. However, the biting humor, powerful musical numbers and incisive social critique keep the audience invested in, and hoping for, Hedwig's caustic optimism to result in happiness. In the song "The Origin of Love," Hedwig describes how the three original kinds of humans, the fused bodies of two men, two women or a woman and a man, were torn apart by jealous gods. Ever since, those separated bodies have been trying to reunite in love. The song is a compelling claim for the imperative desire of any intimate coupling, but what I find particularly significant is the way the man/woman pairing plays as heterosexuality, masculine/feminine dynamics in homosexuality and the gender duality of an individual(s) even when not partnered. This complex valence is realized when Hedwig is "reunited" with Tommy Gnosis, and is revealed to be in the same body. During the intense climax we see how this reunion frees Hedwig not only to reconcile her/his parts, but also how this frees him/her to allow others the space they need to be themselves. In the liminal space of contemporary musical performance, the possibilities for inhabiting self and embodying Other, while letting others do the same, come to fruition.

Affects and Effects

As is likely clear by now, I was deeply moved by the show. My kinesthetic response was overwhelming, and illuminating. However, before explaining how I felt moved to action, I must continue to describe the overall event. The evening was part of the Hidden Voices series with this night focusing on transgendered people and, to a lesser extent, transsexuals. The opening "act" was a mixed drag show featuring popular local drag queens and the drag king ensemble The Cuntry Kings. The evening ended with a panel discussion. During the discussion, none of the performers explicitly identified as

transgendered or transsexual,² yet each of them spoke of the challenges and opportunities of living in their own gender non-conforming bodies. They also described their work as intersecting with trans issues. I took particular note of how they discussed the ways doing gender drag performance made living with day-to-day gender ambiguity more tolerable for themselves and those who came to watch them. Several expressed their ambition to use performance as a tool to educate and enlighten about non-normative gender expression, as well as to create a space for genderqueer individuals to feel safe and affirmed.

Mid-discussion a burgundy haired woman jolted upright and asked how she could help her gender non-conforming 12-year-old. She had come to the show to better understand her child's gender incongruity, and to find resources and community. The performers affirmed her experience, and offered resources and support. Both her grief and her hope were palpable as she sat down and clutched her friend's hand. Her loving response was met with loving energy by so many in the room. While the conversation covered a variety of salient topics, this moment stood out for me because it marked the way the performance created a space to discuss openly what can barely be named in other spaces. I wondered: What affective circuit had been generated in that room such that a group of strangers could witness (to) incoherence and respond with love? Could the space we all made in that room extend beyond the performance and reach out in the form of a mother's loving arms to a 12-year-old struggling to become who s/he perceives him/herself to be? I continue to believe that what happened that night helped a 12-year-

² Terminology is an ongoing challenge in this project. The general distinction between transgendered and transsexual persons is that the former do not begin, or do not complete, medical transition while the latter do. Please see my longer discussion on terms in the next section.

old avoid becoming a disheartening statistic. I am often thinking about subversive embodiment and radical political performance, but in that moment I made the decision to use my dissertation project to explore how trans performance might be changing the way(s) we can understand contemporary gender embodiment and expression.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*Behind every image is a story. Behind every word is a revolution in the making.*³

Coming to Terms with Terms

*The genderbent's gent. A genderqueer, trans, fagette. The King of All Kings, his royal majesty. An XX boy. Just a guy. An FTM femme transman. A beautifully handsome woman and all man. A genderqueer dyke. A man with a vagina. An outlaw. Ocean. A tranny fag. A boy dyke. A boi. A woman in touch with her masculine side. FTM. It depends. I don't know right now ... I really don't know.*⁴

No universally accepted terminology for gender variant embodiment exists. The multiplicity of terms and arguments for their legitimacy can lead to more confusion than clarity. Processes of identification and naming are always bound up with technologies of becoming and levels of power. Staking any claim in this contested terrain, in this minefield, necessarily means delineating some representative boundaries for an identity. However, there seems to also be a desire to keep those very boundaries porous and permeable. Gender variant naming is rather like a cellular membrane – the conditions both within and outside of it determine its level of permeability at any given moment – too much pressure on either side threatens rupture. This naming is a living thing – a basic unit of life. Coming to terms with terms in such mortal conditions can be intimidating, but is also crucial for survival.

Naming is a significant technology of becoming that helps locate you in discursive structures of knowing and being. Being recognizable to yourself and others as

³ This quote is from the publicity poster for the website trans-genre.net, a virtual “community for Transgender Artists, Musicians, Performers, and Speakers (A.M.P.S. for short) and the audiences that value them.” The site features individual artists and connects trans A.M.P.S with venues who want their talents or services.

⁴ Participant responses to the question: What is your preferred gender?

the person you perceive yourself is a way to continuously create and thereby become that self (even if becoming is an ongoing process. Being able to articulate that self, both as a body self and as a discursive self locates you in a network of possibility. To self-name is to make a claim to existence in a way that demands recognition, and invites response. To be recognizable, even as someone who is not desired, who is rarely addressed, is at least to exist within the possibilities of desire and address. Ideally, self-naming is a way to mark a self, or a process of self-making, that includes access to social, political and psychic power. Through performance, it can be a way to demand that power for self and for others. I believe in the importance, indeed the imperative, of finding words with which to describe, claim and advocate for our own (and each others') lives. Naming discursively recognizes what performing makes possible.

At the beginning of this project I thought using truncation *trans* without quotation marks (as in trans performers) would best describe *all* the people with whom I spoke. What I gathered from the literature is that this broad category would be a useful overarching framework for all the particular naming that might follow. I thought it would comfortably describe the participants work and help lead into a discussion of other kinds of transness in performance. Sometimes non-trans authors will use “trans” (with quotation marks) to distinguish an individual trans person, but I wanted to avoid that because to me this usage questions the legitimacy of trans as a gender claim. In literature by and about transgendered people, trans without quotation marks is used to represent transfolks in general because it can be paired with “gender” or “sexual” depending on the transitioning status of the person. Many folks use trans with the intention of being inclusive. What I did not see at the time was the way this particular use could also imply

the need for an ending, for something that would transform the implicit unfinishedness of trans into an endpoint of legibility. In addition, I did not fully consider how using trans so broadly might dilute the identification for some people while distorting it for others.

What I have discovered is that my usage is inaccurate and limiting. Consequently I have replaced the terms trans performance/performer with gender variant performer/performance or the term preferred by the participant. In this way, I am trying to honor a diversity of voices re/presented here without inadvertently mis/re/presenting their identities, experiences and/or performances. Everyone represented here is performing what they perceive to be a gender variation, even when their sex and gender in performance align. Over the course of this project, my conversations with participants and others whose beliefs, feelings and experiences inform this project have helped me better understand the differences that make a difference among different existing categories. Thus, in each chapter I have relied on each of them to help me describe their identity and experience. Nonetheless, before continuing it will be helpful to have a sense of how transgender came about as a category, and to distinguish between female-to-male (FTM) trans people and drag kings.

Trans/gender, FTMs & Drag Kings

To begin, I will define “transgender” as it applies my work because it is from here that other refinements and distinctions emerge. Following David Valentine, I understand transgender as a discursive category that has emerged alongside other queer identity categories, primarily the categories “gay” and “lesbian” (Valentine, 2007). According to Valentine (2007), the category “transgender” marks and contains gender non-normative persons in discussions of queer visibility and rights. He argues that assimilationist gay

and lesbian politics was premised on the idea that being culturally legible as “male” or “female” proves homosexuals are “just like everyone else” and therefore deserving of rights and protections. This argument strategically disaggregated gender inversion and homosexuality, which ultimately lead to homosexuality being depathologized in the DSM-IV (Valentine, 2007). Valentine rightly notes that this resulted in positive changes for a wide variety of queer persons. However, one result of this disaggregation was to isolate gender variance as pathological, and thus people now understood as “transgender” inherited the medical, social and political baggage previously distributed across queer persons (Valentine, 2007).

As same-sex relationships have gained some cultural acceptability and legal protections, at least in the United States, the term transgender has inherited some of the stigma historically associated with the term homosexual (if not also the practice of homosexuality). However, as a result transgender has also gained power and mobility in more progressive queer rights discourses and activism. While invoking transgender is a distancing technique for some, it is a rallying cry for others. Like “the homosexual” roughly a century earlier, the medical, legal and social discourses that attempted to stigmatize and control transgendered people also created the possibility of a counter discourse that made it possible for transgender people (and their allies) to “speak on their own behalf” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). By the early 1990s transgender was a term of resistance used to mark and unleash the potential for gender non-conformity to resist homogenizing and pathologizing discourses and to attempt to build community and coalition across different gender variant constituencies (Papoulias, 2006). This work was occurring with and against more assimilation oriented mainstream queer activism.

Transgender (as a term, an identity and a movement) has quickly gained momentum, and in contemporary usage is somewhat heralded as the apotheosis of inclusion toward which many queer activists are aspiring.

Despite the pragmatic and aspirational usefulness of the term/category “transgender” in progressive politics and among queer activists, it still fails to represent the diversity of persons who self-identify, or are identified, by transgender. As Valentine (2007) notes, “transgender” has had positive and negative effects in the lives of transgendered persons, but a critical problem is the way(s) it obscures issues of class, race, sexuality and other intersectional identities in the pursuit of rights. Another critique of “transgender” as a term is the way it came into use primarily to identify the gender variance of male-bodied female persons and therefore obscures the lives and experiences of female-bodied male persons (Halberstam, 2006; Valentine, 2007). The limits of “transgender” are somewhat ameliorated by the increasing diversity of voices in the transgender canon, as well as the increase in adjunct identifications (such as genderfree or genderqueer)⁵, and gender-neutral pronouns. Nonetheless, the friction around what “transgender” means and who it includes or excludes remains a heated theoretical debate.

As earlier stated, I previously thought trans was a useful broad category with which to frame all of the participants and performances in this study. In some instances it might be, but the participants in this project preferred to reserve trans for FTM (female-

⁵ Genderfree is an identification for someone who either rejects the category of gender altogether and is “free” of gender, or who “freely” explores/invents a range of gender embodiments over time. Genderqueer is an umbrella term for someone whose gender cannot be sufficiently explicated by other terms, and/or who claim the queerness of their gender embodiment as a normative subversion. I will discuss this term more in chapter _.

to-male) individuals.⁶ Female-to-male (FTM/trans) are people who were born female and spent some portion of their lives identified (or identifying) as female, but currently identify as trans male or as a man. This distinction is imperative to performers whose performances stage the politics of the transitioning body, as well as the material body of transitioning performer. Trans includes people who may identify as either transgender or transsexual. Trans is meant to be welcoming to all FTM people⁷, but in the places where I have done my research it is also meant to exclude people who do not identify as men. FTM is a status you must earn by taking the steps to change your body and identity on a more permanent, everyday basis. An FTM/trans person may still identify as a drag king in performance, or in some performances, but off stage he is a (trans) man.

In the terms of this project, a drag king is distinguishable from FTM trans folk because they do not identify as male even if they express masculinity in everyday life. They may also identify with femininity and/or some other form of gender fluidity, but the key distinction is that they identify either as female or as a sex other than a male.

Volcano provides a useful definition of a drag king by describing them as “[a]nyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity” (16).

For trans performer (and former drag king) Del Lagrace Volcano, a drag king can be a person of any physiology or any sexuality (Halberstam & Volcano, 1999). I agree with

⁶ In this project, both trans folk and drag kings considered transitioning a key distinction between trans and king performers. Of those transitioning, all were taking testosterone, only one did not either remove or conceal their breasts, and none had undergone any reproductive or genital surgery.

⁷ Transitioning is expensive and potentially hazardous to a trans person’s health. Some folks are able to take testosterone and have chest reconstruction surgery, thus “fully” transitioning (since phalloplasty is almost never done). Some people want to medically transition, but cannot for financial or medical reasons. Some people are sufficiently male/masculine presenting that transition seems unnecessary, so they focus more on signifiers of masculinity – short hair, men’s clothing, a male name, male pronouns, masculine identified employment or activities, etc.

his assessment, as do many of the kings with whom I spoke, but there are no heterosexual or male born male-bodied voices represented in this project. The drag king voices you will come to know are all queer, female born female bodied people whose masculinity, however “natural,” has not been assumed as true since birth. These drag kings engage in practices to perform their masculinity both on and off stage, although for some there are fewer adjustments necessary for masculine presentation than others.

Drag kings, like transmen, are all unique individuals with personal and particular stories. For the purposes of this project, all of the drag kings are performers, but exactly what kind(s) of masculinity they perform is unique to the person. Judith “Jack” Halberstam begins to create a more refined categorization through her articulation of the two main types of drag kings she observed in her late 1990s study. Halberstam (1999) writes:

[There is] the “butch” Drag King [who] performs ... what comes naturally, and ... celebrates her masculinity or distinguishes between *her* masculinity and male masculinity. [The other kind is] the “femme” Drag King or “androgynous” Drag King [who] assumes her masculinity as an act. S/he understands herself to be engaged in some kind of parody of men and s/he leavers her masculinity behind when she takes off the fake hair the boxers and the chest binding. (p. 36)

I disagree with the absolutism of Halberstam’s distinction between butch and femme/androgynous drag kings, or her suggestion that masculinity can be an exclusively cosmetic performance. Nonetheless, the explanation is useful because it begins to parse out the variability of the ways drag masculinity in performance correlate or diverge with the way(s) performers might perform masculinity (or not) in daily life. Some drag kings

consider their performances as extensions of their everyday masculinity, while others see their kinking as one among a range of gender performance possibilities they also in everyday life.

Within the broad categories of trans/FTM and drag king there are infinite permutations of what his FTM identity is and what her drag masculinity does on or off stage. These mutually agreed upon, but indiscreet categories help us begin to explore the dynamics among physiology, identity and performance that have emerged in this project.

Parsing Performance: Staged Events with Radical Potential

One identity that unites all of the voices represented here is that everyone in this project is a performer. As Carlson notes, Strine, Long and Hopkins (1990) identify performance as an “essentially contested concept,” or a concept with inherent ambiguity about its meaning (as cited in Carlson, 2004, p.70). In other words, performance can be used in different contexts to mean different things. The performers with whom I spoke engage in a variety of performances (as we all do), but our conversations focused primarily on their performance work that is most explicitly staged. The “staged” performances I explored in this project are best framed by Baz Kershaw’s definition of performance as:

cultural presentations that have recognizable theatrical components: namely, framing devices that alert the audience, spectators or participants to the reflexive structure of what is staged, drawing attention to its constructed nature, and more or less to the assumptions – social and/or political and/or cultural and/or philosophical, etc. – through which that construction is achieved. (Kershaw 1999, p. 17)

The performers with whom I spoke work in the space(s) of performance to make social change, although as you will find what that means varies widely among performers. I consider their work explicitly political because it impacts the way(s) they/we view ourselves, each other and our worlds. Some of the work is also political in that it intends to rally support for specific causes, legislation or other public policy measures, although to what effect is beyond the scope of this study. Many hope their performances contribute to change around issues of gender diversity whether or not they consider themselves to be political agents. They certainly spend time performers thinking, even agonizing, about how their performances speak identity (including, but not limited to, gender identity). Yet, as this project comes to a close, I have only anecdotal accounts of whether or not performing the change they want to see is making a difference in the world. Recognizing that the results of these self-reported outcomes cannot be fully understood in this moment, as yet unquantifiable, I need another lens through which to understand them.

For me, both the expansiveness and the limits of how I am talking politics are well contained in a consideration of these performances as radical. They are radical in their form and content, even when they are simultaneously regressive and seeming to reinforce the very binaries and stereotypes they wish to challenge. These variety shows are also intended to have radical effects on the audiences for whom they are performed. In some ways, these performances are radical simply because they *are*. People whose gender identity and presentation is discontinuous with mainstream expectations have found support, fun and even celebrity on stage. Gender variant performers have found each other, venues, and audiences where they can perform the stories they think need telling. They have been able to sustain and evolve networks of performance. They have

been able to exist in their own communities, however that might be defined. They are radical because they, like the performers themselves, are continuously *becoming*.

Kershaw frames the power of radical performance to:

create various kinds of freedom that are not only resistant to dominant ideologies, but that also are sometimes transgressive, even transcendent, of ideology itself. In other words, the freedom that ‘radical performance’ invokes is not just a freedom from oppression, repression, exploitation – the resistant sense of radical – but also freedom to read beyond existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action – the transgressive or transcendent sense of the radical. What [Kershaw is] interested in centrally, then, is not the ways in which radical performance might represent such freedoms, but rather how radical performance can actually produce such freedoms, or at least a sense of them, for both performers and spectators, as it is happening. (Kershaw 1999, p. 18-19)

These performances are not above critique, but they do both represent and produce some of the freedoms that gender variant performers want to realize. Sometimes they do so in ways that I read as actually consolidating the very power structures they want to subvert, but the performances remain radical because even with the complications we will explore in later chapters, that they are performing in their bodies on their terms is still transgressive and sometimes even transcendent. I do not think all radical performance is inherently liberatory, but I can account for, and be accountable to, some of the immediate radical effects, the created freedoms, that emerge in these moments of performance. And, with some effort, I can co-describe how radical gender variant performance is

shaping a place for gender diversity within and against existing structures of gender, putting pressures on those structures, through the stories of individual performers.

As much as I wish the terms of radical performance could safely house all that will be discussed here, I should really be so lucky as to be able to rely on such delimitation. This project was inspired by a musical and a history of witnessing staged gender transgressions in performance. I am lucky to have seen each of my participants perform live, and to have been the beneficiary of the generous sharing of stories and recorded performances. I have also ventured into virtual and material spaces where drag kings and FTM performers go, with mixed reception, in an effort to understand their world(s) better. However, it is limiting to engage in ethnographic conversations with people in a variety of settings and limit your understandings to *only* staged performance. I talked with *people*, off stage entities performing everyday life, also understood as being themselves. The conditions of each interview, the permeability of on and off stage selves unique to each individual, the energy and spirit of a conference, the virtual representations and communication on the Internet and the mosaic exigencies of zines all inform my project focused. So, ultimately, this project is about a particular definition of gender variant performance as staged event *in relation to* “off stage” (although not necessarily unstaged) gender variant performance(s) as a mode of being, an inescapable epistemology, and (in this world) a vibrant hermeneutic.

Identifying what I mean by performance provides me a clearer frame within which to talk about the performance of gender performativity. Following Judith Butler, I understand gender as performative, a stylized repetition of acts, while recognizing that how one does gender is deeply informed by the context in which one performs (Butler,

1988). That gender is performative challenges the notion that any gender expression is natural, an effortless by product of an essential nature. It simultaneously challenges that idea that gender is exclusively a social construction on top of an essential self that can put on or removed at will. For Butler, there is no essential self to begin from or return to that is separable from doing and being done by gender. Rather, possibilities and constraints for gender expression exist in culture contexts which favor prevailing norms, we all have material bodies that will express or be read as expressing gender, and the ways we are read have social, political, economic and identity effects (Butler, 2006).

Gender performativity pervades every moment of life. Gender is one of the shared scaffoldings upon which we construct ourselves, and each other, in ways that are both glaringly obvious and practically imperceptible. Even as it can be theoretically disaggregated from performances of identity and considered in a range of contexts, it ultimately cannot be fully separated from the body or identity in question. Gender verification (of self, of other) feels hardwired because we are so cunningly socialized from birth to recognize each other, to prove our individual and shared existence, by associating selected physiological characteristics with a behavioral characteristics that link to assumptions and predictions. Most of us know the scripts so well they feel inborn. Many of us habitually read someone's off script performance with/in the limits of our gendered expectations. We might minimize or normalize it (oh, she is in her tomboy *phase*). We might hyperbolize or pathologize (something is *wrong* with her, she just *isn't right*). Even if we dismiss it as a personality quirk (oh, that is just how she *is*) we are still relying on some essential *she* with which to make the assessment. Even those of us who take a critical perspective on gender socialization likely have some habitual "if/then"

expectations of gendered others based on what we see or know about them. Personally, I have been surprised how much gender assumption pervades my own thinking, and how challenging it is to undo.

Recognizing that gender is something we do, and a way we are done, was a preliminary step for the individuals represented here, although to call it preliminary is not to suggest it was easy, brief or painless. Rather, it was usually an extended stage of turmoil during which they tried to follow the script, and just kept (internally and/or externally) failing. Most of them have felt off script, or even acriptual, since childhood. While our conversations did not focus on their individual gender genesis from cradle to interview, shadows of the struggle to become who they are (on and off stage) seeped into our conversations. Their performances of playing a gendered part are a way to re/consider not only how we learn our gender scripts, but also how they might be rewritten, or remain under constant revision. The performers represented here perform themselves, and therefore their gender, every day. In performance, in the events they stage, they more explicitly stage gender performativity, the doing of gender. Through performance, they are staging the ways we do, and are done, by gender in an attempt to intervene on unconsidered or unreflexive repetitions of stylized gender acts. They use their own complex bodies to expose layers of gender performativity, as well as the effects of how gender performances are recognized, misrecognized and/or unrecognizable, thereby reminding us of the complexity of gender. In the stories that follow, their words and performance will help me perform a tenuous theoretical disaggregation in order to understand some of the ways these performers see their performances as radical, as opening gender, even if only for a moment, in order to promote gender diversity.

Gender Variant Performance: Performance and Possibility

In a culture deeply committed to gender legibility as a pretext for humanness (Butler, 2003), I see gender variant performance as a critical intervention attempting to expand the categories for what, and who, gets recognized as human. Recognition includes, but is not limited to, full access to the rights, privileges, responsibilities and day to day acknowledgement that any person with a more mainstream gender embodiment might enjoy, such as freedom from school harassment, workplace discrimination and a safe restroom.⁸ At present, a person denied rights and privileges due to gender expression or perceived gender expression has little, if any, recourse. These are the kinds of intolerances and inequities gender variant performers are surfacing in their performance work. They are also doing the more subtle work of show the pleasures of a gender variant body, and the ways gender diversity can literally produce new erotics, new possibilities for engaging the material body in pleasures. From the ways gender diversity promotes new possibilities for kinship to affirming other culturally disconfirmed excesses like fat and body hair growth to exploring non-genital erogenous zones to the simple pleasure of finding clothes that fit the body and self, gender variant performers are representing the radical possibilities of enjoying your body in all its glorious im/perfection. These performers are literally putting their bodies on the line in an effort to

⁸ I am not suggesting there is a monolithic “mainstream” gender embodiment, or that traditionally gendered people move blithely through life enjoying unchecked power and/or privilege. “Normal” varies among contexts. Gender embodiments that may be welcomed (or tolerated) in one environment may be unwelcome (or targeted) in another. Rather, I argue that to engage a conversation about power and privilege around gender embodiment demands that gender variant people be recognized as humans rather than as less than human. In this way, gender variant people participate in a political history of dehumanized minorities challenging oppression by claiming their humanity.

create awareness around and action toward legal, social, cultural and political recognition of gender variant people.

In performance these performers are combining their urgent messages for change with playful, although still critical, scenes of dynamically embodied living. These performances highlight the similarities, and differences, among diversely gendered people. Each performer has a unique style. Some performances are didactic theatrical lessons. Other performances are sensory explorations. Still others performances are mystifying in their form. Some performances deal with mundane, everyday issues of gender while others are more abstract explorations. Irrespective of the format of an individual or group number, most performances are showcased in a variety show format. These performance messages are radical in intent, and sometimes in content, but the medium is accessible and familiar to many audiences. The form is fairly easy to describe: the shows I have seen are multi-media, mixed genre affairs that include plenty of camp, sass and a provocative intertextuality. A less quantifiable valence that runs through these performances is a queer *fabulousness* that infuses these shows with a synthesis of anxiousness, anticipation, vulnerability, power, sensuality, sexuality, intelligence, subversiveness, costume, play, danger and (at least temporarily) community.⁹

I follow Judith Butler's compelling arguments for denaturalizing gender embodiment while still being careful to realize that we need ways to understand and identify ourselves in the world, especially when we are a minority group seeking

⁹ As several incisive critiques note, community is not a homogenous body of people blissfully coming together with shared goals, mutual respect and unyielding devotion (Josephs, ; Munoz). When I say community here, I mean a group of people who temporarily come together around a shared event and suspend difference (however temporarily or provisionally) in order to have a good time.

recognition as human (Butler, 2004). Butler charges us to disrupt our complicity in perpetuating conventional gender embodiment ideals and to *intervene*, to make political changes that improve the lives of people on the morphological margins (Butler, 2004).

She writes:

To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality and to use, as it were, one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim. I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification. (Butler, 2004)

Gender variant performance can be understood as an intervention wherein performers perform their “unreality” as a lived reality, perform their embodiment as a site of possibility and mobilize action toward change that improves the lives of those gender variant people currently excluded from conceptions of the human.

Considering the imperative(s) under which they perform, perhaps the greatest possibility for gender variant performers is the way their work can be a praxis for personal, and potentially social, transformation. When I took my first performance studies course in 1994 I discovered how a performance praxis could not only enable me to examine and critique the world as it is, but also to create embodied imaginings for how the world (and my place in it) could be. The semester was organized around the anthology “The Woman That I Am” and taught by the anthology’s editor and critical performance scholar, Dr. D. Soyini Madison. In the introduction, Madison shares a quote

from her mother that I have used as a mantra ever since: “Being the woman that I am, I will make a way out of no way” (Madison, 1994, p.1). In that class I discovered the miracle of performance is the way it “makes a way out of now way,” or is a site where an individual or group can mobilize their marginality, abjection or illegibility towards re/formation into circumstances of not just surviving, but thriving. The performers who participated in this project are using performance to transform their “no way,” the challenges and oppressions of their on and off stage existence(s), into “a way,” a life that honors their subjectivity and unique processes of becoming.

Why it Matters: The Need for Livable Lives

This work is urgent because, even in its problematic iterations, it is creating more affirming spaces for gender variant people. In order to talk briefly about the need for these performances, I will return our attention to the story that opens this writing, the creation story for the genesis of this particular performance. Ever since that October night the quote “I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents,” has looped in my brain (Sedgwick, 1993). More than 25 years after this statement was published, queers of all ages, including gender non-conforming persons, are still killing themselves because so many places in their world(s) are inhospitable to their Otherness¹⁰, and the specter(s) of Otherness they raise.¹¹ When you combine this with the number of homicides and hate crimes directed toward queer

¹⁰ Here I use the term(s) Other/ness to invoke the seemingly inverse term “Self” with the intent to problematize this binary (among others) throughout my project. I recognize that using “Other,” even with qualifiers, could reinforce categories I see gender variant performance as resisting and subverting. At this point, I have accepted the necessity of using problematic terms simply to gain some discursive traction.

¹¹ Gender non-conforming persons are generally included in the category of “queer” irrespective of how their sexuality relates to their physiology.

people, especially gender non-conforming people, the statistics for queer lives ending prematurely are staggering. I am haunted by the statistic emailed to me (by an FTM performer) in April 2008: an LGBTIQ¹² murder has been committed an average of every 8 days in 2008.¹³ In 2008 there were 18 confirmed murders of trans people, and numerous reported acts of violence (GLAAD, cite). Irrespective of the particular mortality statistics, the body count is (and always has been) too high. In addition, these deaths only hint at the non-fatal familial, social, institutional, and economic violence directed towards queer and trans people that threaten the livability of a queer/trans life (Butler, 2004). Gender non-conforming and gender variant people must consider their mortality and viability at almost every occasion, even within queer communities.¹⁴

Despite these disturbing statistics, there is hope. Life is arguably better for queers and gender diverse people now than at any time in recent history, and the rise in trans activism is at the forefront of some of the more radical work happening in queer communities. Cultivating a livable life at the margins of legibility remains a dangerous practice, but space to accommodate, understand and support gender diversity is becoming more available. As earlier stated, the category of transgender has some problematic

¹² LGBTIQ is the unruly acronym for: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Intersex, Trans, Queer & Questioning. I appreciate the way it none too subtly reveals the hope for, and impossibility of, an exhaustively inclusive term for difference.

¹³ I cannot account for the veracity of that particular number, but this performer tracks queer homicide stories for a tribute performance that unfortunately continues to grow. Reports of trans deaths are difficult to verify because the exact relationship between the person's gender expression and their death are not always reported in the crime (nor could they be). Nonetheless, news of these deaths travels among grassroots information networks and they are collectively mourned in the space of performance.

¹⁴ Here I am both reminding the reader of the ways that trans people interrupt assimilationist tendencies toward gender normativity and raising the spectre of elision(s) and erasure(s) inherent in claiming community across a number of overlapping identifications under the term community.

implications, but the increase of social programs, policy protections and even day to day awareness of transgendered persons in diverse geographic areas across the United States (among other places) has improved the potential for gender variant people to cultivate increasingly livable lives. Academics, activists, performers and others are working through the theoretical and material implications around gender variant embodiment, generally (although not exclusively) with the intent to expand cultural recognition of the humanity of those who may confound gender expectations. Increased recognition of gender diversity can, and sometimes does, lead to critical conversations about everything from exploding the categories of gender altogether to cultivating and implementing gender-neutral language to seemingly mundane issues like access to safe restrooms. While much work remains to be done, the way(s) trans issues intersect with other concerns about rights and resources is receiving critical attention.

As a critical performance scholar, I am lucky to have inadvertently borne witness to a performance r/evolution over the last fourteen years (long before I had the language or direction for this project). I saw my first drag king, none other than the phenomenal Drag King Dred, in 1995. S/he was Lenny Kravitz, Prince, Marvin Gaye, RuPaul, and Eve, some of my favorite celebrity crushes, and the first proof I ever saw that my attraction to masculinity had very little to do with male-bodied men. Since then, I have seen more performances that bring gender performativity into dis/comforting relief, especially those that relate gender performance to social, political and cultural issues. The increase in gender variant performances over the years has included a deepening of the politics of performance, and moved the work from primarily entertainment and male impersonation to be more focused gender activism and masculine gender performance.

These days there are more welcoming spaces for queer and gender variant persons to enjoy a night out, and to see themselves and their stories represented on stage. Also, because of the diversity of audiences¹⁵ seeing a gender variant performance, this work continues to expand the range of inhabitable spaces for such people in the wider world. Often these spaces are also made explicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, pro-disability “safe” spaces with sliding scale shows, which models a kind of inclusive community almost exclusively available in performance spaces. These are reasons to be hopeful.

And yet, all is not well in the world(s) of gender diverse performance. While performance collectives work to create performances that explicitly engage critical issues and advocate for change, performance troupes continue to make performances that are less reflexive and possibly reinforce social norms that negatively impact gender variant communities. In an effort to stage recognizable masculinity some performers create sexist, racist, misogynistic and even homophobic scenes that they consider “just for fun”. Performers might (intentionally or inadvertently) create performances that support gender non-conforming people, but they also risk exoticizing, objectifying and othering gender variant bodies. Differing interpretations of responsible and/or meaning performance between and among performers contributes to local, regional, national and international tensions among gender variant performers. The growing sub-culture of gender variant performance is experiencing critical growing pains that will likely never be resolved.

¹⁵ Several performers mentioned performing for crowds that did not “expect” a drag king or trans show. These audiences sometimes took a few moments to understand what the show was about, but every performer I spoke with said people were at least polite and respectful, and many were fully participatory and enthusiastic.

I can empathize with the sense of upheaval in gender variant performance because I experienced some of my own over the course of the project. One significant change that occurred as I pursued my research was my intention. When I began the project I thought my work would be primarily focused on dramatizing trans as a dimension of sexual heterogeneity and trans performance as making space for gender heterogeneity. I underestimated how radically heterogeneous the world of what I now understand as gender variant performance truly is. The range of political engagement varies widely from what I would consider dangerously unreflexive reiterations of the worst of gender stereotypes to transformative performances of difference that open up possibilities for understanding gender variance and engaging people in political action. Nonetheless, most of these performers, even those who are not particularly skilled in performance per se, are performing courage. These performers are putting their bodies on the line to help audiences think, see and feel through the everyday threats (psychological, physical, sexual, political) they face. These performances are demonstrating not just the reality of difference as it already exists, but also ways to re/form the world so that gender variant people can access a full range of possibilities for a livable life.

The people with whom I spoke are those who work to resist messages of oppression and stage messages of hope and possibility. They are creating critical work that strives to make this world not just welcoming to diverse subjectivities, but also a site of social change. Through their words and work I explore some of the questions that have emerged during this project such as: What motivates gender variant performers to perform? How do gender variant performers grapple with other intersecting identities they either bring to or represent on stage? Why performance? What are the erotics of

gender variant performance? What is masculinity in a gender variant performance context? How might their performances contribute to, or complicate, claims that all gender is performative? Is this work making social change?

Methodology

As I reflect back on this project, I am nostalgic for the way it never was. I began the work with a fairly simple plan: conduct some interviews, be amazed by people's deep and abiding political performance engagements, assemble a purposeful sketch of this moment in a movement, and write about it. I was optimistic about what I would find. However, now that I have gone through the process of meeting people, participating in interviews, going to shows, attending a conference and having informal conversations with people for the last year and a half, I realize how very rose colored my glasses were. This project has been intellectually challenging, physically rigorous, and emotionally draining. Some research encounters have been inspiring and mutually constructive. Many others have been hurtful and, if not mutually deconstructive, at least unpleasant. I have never felt more woman identified or less queer than I have during the duration of this work. Sufficed to say, things did not go as I anticipated they would.

As a performer and a performance scholar, I thought performance ethnography would be the best method with which to pursue this work. Performance ethnography is a methodology that helps synthesize and develop performance theory and praxis because it is a kind of speaking with rather than speaking about (Madison, 2006). Performance ethnography acknowledges the performances inherent in qualitative research among all of the participants, and values the unexpected and accidental moments of encounter at least as much as the planned and produced ones. Performance ethnographies invigorate

scholarship by adding new, perhaps previously underrepresented, voices to ongoing discussions in the academy, but can also re/connect academics (whose range of interests and investments may also be underrepresented) with individuals and/or communities differently engaged with the issues that matter to them. In this way, performance ethnography is also distinctly queer, a method that makes the everyday strange in search of critical engagement.

As I continued to work on this project, the genre of the project became a bit blurred. While I still claim this work for/as performance ethnography, I might also describe it as an extended study in witness. I operated as a witness in three key ways. First, throughout this project I witness through my own bodily register for response. Following Conquergood's description of a "co-performative witness" as someone with a "deeply sympathetic, theatrical identification" with those whom I witnessed. I registered these acts of co-performative witnessing in my body, and have written them in embodied terms. Second, I have operated as various kinds of witnesses, including social critic as political witness. The kinds of testimony I provide may not be precisely aligned with what is presented. Rather than engage in the "enthusiasts infatuation" with the people and performances I saw, thereby obscuring critique through a "too facile identification with the other coupled with enthusiastic commitment [that] produces naïve and glib performances marked by superficiality" (Conquergood, 1995, p.1). In other words, this work is not a romantic treatise on difference, but rather a critical exploration of multiple and fraught implications of difference with/in the gender variant performance community. Finally, in keeping with Kelly Oliver's notion of witness on which I rely heavily in this writing, I bear witness to responsibility and response -ability in the many

ways it surfaces in my project. I feel deeply accountable to those who have shared their time and energy with me, as well as to myself. These forms of witness are expressed through various modes of “I witnessing, ” which Geertz explains as finding ways to write yourself as a researcher into “they picturing” or ethnographic texts (Geertz, 1988, p. 84). As an I witness my analysis is informed by the various perspectives I have inhabited both in research and in writing (as detailed further below).

I am still new to research, and was (and still am) intimidated by the prospect of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Doing this performance ethnography allowed me to use what I have learned in the last six years to invite people into conversations about performance and performativity, but I have far from mastered the arts I have studied. Nonetheless, after this project I know I will never listen to people the same way again. I am indebted to my participants, and the ethnographic process, for helping me practice gentle, patient and care-ful(l) listening. I have developed my listening beyond listening for, or even listening to, and am becoming more adept at listening *with*, paying deep attention to what is/not said and listening in multiple registers. The project has also helped me reconnect with radical political performance as a form of social activism, even if I am more wary of it than I once was. Through this work I have been invited, or invite myself, into spheres of performance and the worlds of performers that I might otherwise miss, be excluded from or even choose not to participate in. Even more personally, it has reconnected me with community based live performance, especially the messy, DIY, sometimes amazing, mostly awful world of *shows*. These evenings of makeshift entertainment remind me that all it takes to stage the world you want to see is a concept, an outfit and a willingness to put yourself out there.

I entered this work with a critical frame and a personal investment: I am a feminist, queer performance scholar dedicated to dialogic work and performative writing. I believe social justice is kinesthetic and therefore that performance can (help) change the hearts and minds of individuals, and by extension, the world. Thus, for me, speaking with gender diverse performers is an ongoing conversation where we each (and all) contribute to ongoing conversations about performance and performativity, specifically around issues of gender, with the hope of and intention for making social change. I engaged in intensive, semi-structured, dialogic interviews. My intention has been to engage in “genuine conversation” with gender diverse performers in the spirit of Dwight Conquergood’s prolific legacy, especially his description of a “ dialogical stance” that “brings self and other together even while it holds them apart” and is “[m]ore like a hyphen than a period” (1985, p. 9). For better or for worse, I did “[go] *in* ...at risk of going *under*” by following Pollock’s advice to resist the seductive illusion of “activist instrumentality” for this work in favor of having conversations that will help me answer the question: “now that [I] know this, what am [I] going to do with it?” (Pollock, 2006, p. 327-8). In fact, this whole writing is an unfinished answer to that very question.

Before proceeding, I want to explain more clearly the nature of dialogism in the interview/conversations in which I participated. Ideally, a dialogical interview locates both interviewer and interview participant in a dynamic “genuine conversation” (Conquergood, 1985, p. 9). Many of my interview experiences were truly dialogical in the ways the performer and I were able to open up to each other and talk not just about their performances, but also our respective performance backgrounds and aspects of our offstage lives. Miss B. Haven and I moved quickly from me asking her formal questions

about her performance work to an enthusiastic back and forth dialogue about performance, popular music and even favorite movies. Syd Duecer and I shared a comfortable ease within which our slow paced, yet steady, conversation felt like rocking on a porch swing at twilight while discussing life with a new friend. While I have paused to write in this moment, this document is even dialogic because it continues the conversation (and will likely be read by participants). Should I continue to pursue this project in whole or in part, I anticipate opening the conversations even further.

And yet, because I was operating in multiple fields of practice and engagement, some research encounters were not precisely dialogic. Ethnographic fieldwork includes points of intersection and points of collision. In the literal sense of dialogue, some conversations were more difficult to manage than others. For example, I resisted Cole's efforts at interpellating me as his "friend" by reasserting a personal boundary for myself as "researcher." Despite the number of times we actually encountered each other, we never achieved an interactional style that transmuted these roles. At times, I was also operating from a variety of my own social locations. When moving through the space of IDKEX, for example, it became particularly stressful and unproductive for me to continuously attempt to cultivate a dialogic interaction by staying open to those around me. Instead, I had to fortify myself against rejection and create opportunities for reciprocal engagement by asserting myself into situations and spaces. However, these moments still contribute to an overall "dialogic performative" that "is charged by a desire for a generative and embodied reciprocity, sometimes with pleasure and sometimes with pain. IT is a mutual creation of something different and something more from the meeting of two bodies in their contexts" (Madison, 2006, p. 320). In other words, these

research encounters may not have been a smooth dialogue, but they nonetheless engaged a dialogic performative that “opens up the possibilities for alternative performances and alternative citations” (Madison, 2006, p. 322).

Perhaps more significantly, I began my fieldwork anticipating that the interviews would be framed in the terms of critical performance and explicit social critique. As I learned, this is not the case. In “That Was My Occupation: Oral Narrative, Performance and Black Critical Thought” D. Soyini Madison fleshes out the sometimes troubled relationship between indigenous knowledge, or what Moraga and Anzaldúa have called “theories of the flesh,” and what Patricia Hill Collins has called “specialized knowledges,” of the academy (Madison, 1998, p. 319-320). Surprisingly, the theories of the flesh, the ways that these performers tended to tell the stories of their performances, were incredibly matter of fact and often rejected any suggestion that their work was “critique” or “political.” We not only did not share a critical language with which to discuss these performances, but we had had very different sense of what their performance praxis was/is doing. Thus, in this writing while I have honored the words and intentions of those who shared their stories with me, I have also sometimes taken the role of critical scholar or social critic and re/framed some of the performances and experiences I had in the field in more critical terms. This is not meant to be an imperialist assertion of the superiority of specialized knowledges, but rather a way to begin opening the dialogic possibilities for continuing to engage this research with existing bodies of theory.

In this writing I have attempted to maintain the sense of dialogism as being engaged in an ongoing conversation not only with this project, but also with the larger

world of gender variant performance. At times, I have spoken more directly and been in greater control of the description and analysis of events. At other times, I have yielded the floor to the participants and presented their words and experiences as they were shared. The ethics of writing towards a balance of voices has been challenging. As a critical scholar, I cannot simply re-present information with no critical frame. And yet, I must not discipline the inherent unruliness of this emergent performance phenomenon by imposing a critical coherence that betrays the personal and political investments of these performers, or myself. Thus, I have attempted represent all who participate in this project (including myself) as part of a dynamic experience with multiple interpretive possibilities while also making purposeful interpretive claims. My positionality shifts among different roles: scholar, critic, feminist, woman, queer, not queer, performer and even friend. Often I perform multiple roles in any given set of circumstances.

I formally interviewed thirteen people for this project. I coordinated these interviews over a roughly nine-month period. The formal interviews were unique events. The longest interview lasted five consecutive hours and included much shared YouTube watching. The shortest interview lasted 50 excruciating minutes where the performer's negotiation of drag king persona relative to my negotiation of researcher/performance enthusiast persona could never quite calibrate into a comfortable conversation. Each interview was recorded on a tiny voice recorder that I placed between myself and the other person on a table or other stationery object. By keeping the recorder in view, but not holding it, I was trying to create a comfortable atmosphere without obscuring the reality that our conversation was being recorded. The average time of interview was about two and a half hours, although several of them have included some related casual

conversation or specific follow up that I have not timed. When I initially proposed this project I planned to speak with local performers. Unfortunately, despite repeated attempts to obtain interviews from a variety of people, I was only able to coordinate two local interviews. As I detail in Chapter Four, I attended the International Drag King Extravaganza conference in order to solicit more interviews. My strategy was fairly simple: I approached people who seemed friendly and asked them if they would like to be interviewed for my project. I assessed their “friendliness” by their behavior during panel discussions. Equipped with my voice recorder and computer (handy for watching YouTube videos), I was able to perform an interview at a moment’s notice.

As earlier stated, these interviews were semi-structured, which for me meant having a prepared set of questions and allowing the interview to develop organically. Before each interview I obtained informed consent from the participants that they would be participating in a non-confidential interview. I made it clear that while I was not obscuring their identity, they were in control of what information from the interview I was allowed to use, and that they could withdraw their interview at any time. No one with whom I spoke expressed any concerns about confidentiality. I began each interview by asking the person’s preferred name, gender, age and preferred pronoun. This was partially in order to collect demographic information, but primarily so that I could speak with them using their preferred language of self. Next, I would ask them to describe their performance work. As I discovered, this question opened onto conversations that could not have been planned. From these descriptions we eventually came around to the topics about which I was curious, such as the politics of the work and what (if any) intentions they had for how the work would impact audiences, but how we got there was different

every time. During some interviews, the participants and I watched YouTube videos of performances as well. My interview partners were in control of when the interview ended.

In addition to the formal interviews, I have informally spoken with roughly 20 more performers. I have also accumulated bits of conversation and observation that do not coalesce into a particular story or emergent theme, yet they deeply inform my work. I have seen live performances, watched performance dvds, visited countless troupe, collective or individual performer websites, read a zine series about gender performance called Genderbent, gone to see a departmental talk in an art department, organized two events around gender in performance for the UNC campus and spent untold hours on YouTube watching gender diverse performers do their thing. After the conference I wrote a long list of individual performers and troupes requesting interviews. Again, I received a few replies from folks who seemed interested and thought their friends and co-performers would participate as well, but when I tried to follow up by scheduling the actual interview I often got no response. However, I am very appreciative that the participants who did speak with me took the time to do so. As part of this process, I did explore quite a few websites and watched online footage of performances. Although I have not officially studied audience effects, the audiences I have been a part of also seep into this work. I have spent a *lot* of time talking about gender diversity news stories with my sister and others (who now consider me an “expert” on gender diversity) trying to use my “expertise” to help them come to terms with what seems like inexplicable, and unnecessarily painful, difference. This research has been a process that I continue to process.

How “the field” is constituted in this project also requires some explanation. When I began this research I felt as though I was turning my attention to “my” queer community of performers. I began quite literally in my own backyard by seeking to speak with the performers who live and play where I live. More broadly, I felt connected to a wider world of queer performance through my more than ten-year participation in queer performance events as both a performer and an audience member. What I did not know was that making this choice meant there were no parameters on my field of study. I stayed saturated by the project. Since that first performance I have been unable to close the space in myself that was opened, that was undone, by the haunting thought of that gender variant child and all who suffer because of their gender incongruity. I have constantly collected information, stories and experiences that connect with this project. I am often caught off guard when others are not primarily experiencing the world as a study in gender performativity and variance. The gift of my engagement is my deep feelings of responsibility to be careful with others in this project. My care extends to everyday life where I am more deeply sensitized to the shocking pervasiveness of gender as a foundational assumption upon which so many social norms rely, and thus try to promote more gender parity and possibility. The collateral damage of my experience is the profound loss of community as I found myself increasingly displaced in the world(s) of queer performance I once inhabited. I never realized my own phantasmic reliance on “queer community” to make me feel validated as a person until I lost it. This writing marks the end of a period of my life. Grief and loss inform my commitment to gender justice. However, mine is a meager one compared to those who have lost their lives or loved ones, or those whose lives are currently under threat.

In the following pages four of the performers/interview partners share their time and talents with me. Selecting the people on whom this writing would focus was not easy, but did happen organically. As a group, they represent a wide range of identities in a radically heterogeneous subculture. I will discuss them in order of appearance here. Cole was the person with whom I had the most conversations about gender variant performance. He was my first interview, and he generously shared much of himself. He embodies the synthesis of trans and performance. Through Cole I learned how powerful self-determination can be. At the risk of sounding a bit too metaphysical, I believe the Universe lead me to IDKEX so that I could meet Johnny Blazes. Talking to Johnny complicated and challenged this project while also infusing it with a needed dose of hope. I am grateful to Johnny for zims generative spirit. Asha/Al took hold of me through performance. S/he is perhaps the most phenomenal performer I have ever seen live because s/he creates performances that – however unsettling – are phenomena. S/he produced a radical shift in my understanding of what it means to queer, and thus s/he had to be here. Finally, Vanessa is a friend and someone I admire. Her courage, commitment and service to social justice work and progressive politics is exemplary. Vanessa is an example of someone who consistently performs her values, and thus beautifully represents the political possibility in this work. Without minimizing the contributions of any other participants, these were the interactions and relationships that chose me.

The first performer here is Joshua Bastian Cole in the chapter “‘You See A Whole Journey in Five Minutes’: Performing Trans.” In this chapter I will discuss a Cole’s goal to be understood, then briefly illustrate two ways that Cole helps ground the lines of inquiry in this project. First, I will explore how Cole’s goal to make performances that

can be understood suggests a politics of legibility. Next, I will focus on Cole's role in the film against a trans narrative by Jules Roskam. As Transman, Cole helps introduce the conflict around a pervasive narrative of queer female to male trans becoming that suggests transitioning starts at one gender (female) and progresses through transition (the trans stage) in order to achieve the other gender (male). This film also raises some important questions about how transitioning impacts various aspects of a transman's life. I will then describe Close Up, a performance Cole did with another transman, that works against this pervasive narrative in an effort to encourage transmen to forge their own path. Cole wants to create art that helps people understand that trans is "something that is itself. Trans is not a lack of something, or too much of something. It just is." Finally, both of these performances allow me to start taking about the performances and my ongoing curiosity about the dissonance among the performers' experience(s) of their work, how the audiences I was in or saw in recordings seemed to experience them, and my perception of them.

The next chapter features Johnny Blazes in "Excuse Me, But You Look Just Like Johnny Blazes': Performing Genderqueer." In this chapter I will consider the possibilities and problematics of genderqueerness that Johnny Blazes presents. I will argue that genderqueer identity is a site of resistance and struggle that creates the possibilities of expanding gender systems to include greater fluidity both within and among individuals. One way Johnny's version of genderqueerness creates possibility is by resisting a linear narrative of trans becoming that relies on gender as a polarized binary, a journey from she-ness to he-ness, and instead considers gender as an ongoing becoming with multiple options for expression. Zie invites others into zirs struggle through performances that

create the possibility for witness, for a an affective engagement with difference that enables a viewer to see the other as a subject and enables them to respond as a subject (Oliver, 2001, p. 15). Finally, I examine Johnny’s advocacy around gender-neutral pronouns. I argue that while gender-neutral pronouns are an innovation that create the possibility for new performative iterations of gender, the claim to “neutrality” is undercut by what I consider an uncomfortable similarity between gender neutral pronouns and male generic language.

Next, I briefly describe my experiences at the Tenth Annual International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKEX) in Columbus, Ohio. I attended the event in order to learn more about the drag king community. I was also interested in the increasingly large population of transmale performers within the community. Before attending I thought this conference would be an excellent place to make contacts and perform interviews. I was able to connect with some people while I was there. However, for the most part, I battled an ongoing process of unrecognition. As a perceived agent or representative of normative gender, I was repeatedly unrecognized over the course of the conference. Through this experience I consider how the norms of the conference created a circuit of recognition in which I was an interloper whose incongruity was performatively disciplined through unrecognition. I also describe how I reworked unrecognition as a kind of access to the information and experiences available at the conference.

The next chapter focuses on the work of Al Schlong, as performed by Asha Leong, in the chapter “‘They Can’t Believe I’d Go There’: Performing Queering.” In this chapter I will explore two sets of questions that concern me, one specifically having to do

with Al and the other with the overarching concerns of this study. Among those questions I wanted to address to Al were: with all due respect, *what* are you doing? What are your goals for your performances? And without being precisely sure how I would ask the question, I wanted to better understand what inspires Al to perform as he does. More generally, “his” performance raises and underscores these questions in relation to my inquiry into the nature and meaning of performance in the trans-queer community: what are the aesthetics of the awful? How is femme identity in/extricable from gender variant performance even among drag king and transmasculine performers? What is the significance of queering the grotesque, the monstrous, excessive body, with/in gender variant performance (Russo, 1994)? Through Asha I will explore how one performer challenges the subculture of gender variant performance by claiming a space for femme and actively queering existing expectations for drag king performance. Finally, I will argue that Al’s grotesque performances produce divinity effects, a sense that the way he embraces his abjection as a fierce form of subjectivity is what makes not only him, but also anyone with the courage to actually embody their convictions, divine (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993).

The final performer/participant in this writing is Vanessa featured in the chapter “‘We Just Put These Seeds Out There and Wait for Them To Grow’: Performing Politics.” In this chapter I will explore the motivations and challenges around “political” performances in the drag king community represented with/in Vanessa’s 10 year drag king journey. I will describe several key points during Vanessa’s journey from being an entertainer to a political performer. Her experience serves as a representative example of how a drag king performer might (and how many do) become politicized and start doing

more politically aware performance work. Key to this examination is parsing through the imprecise terms “entertainment” and “politics” as I have heard them deployed in ongoing discussions of identity and representation. A major portion of this discussion will revolve around issues of race in performance as I heard them represented in interviews (primarily Vanessa’s interview) and at IDKEX. Within this discussion I will briefly address the way Vanessa in particular uses the power of witness to help others “reconstruct subjectivity” by “reconstructing notions of self, self-reflection, relationships and love” (Oliver, 19). I will also discuss ways in which this interview and her aspirations inspire my hope for the future of drag/gender variant political performance.

In the concluding chapter I will summarize the preceding chapters, make some overarching observations and consider possible future directions for this research. This chapter will mark not an end to the possible explorations, but a performative pause in the momentum of what could be a lifelong project. Finally, I will end this writing the same way that I began: a transformative experience of performance.

CHAPTER 3: “YOU SEE A WHOLE JOURNEY IN FIVE MINUTES”:
PERFORMING TRANS

Bastian Cole is brilliant femme FtM, queer activist, playwright, dancer/performer. He participates to [sic] numerous brilliant queer projects, books and production. He recently participated to [sic] the transjunkproject as a playwright and performer (XX Boys Magazine, 2007).



(Image 1: Cole 1)



(Image 2: Cole 2)



(Image 3: Cole 3)



(Image 4: Cole 4)



(Image 5: Cole 5)

¹⁶ All photos reproduced with permission.

Joshua Bastian Cole, who prefers to be called Cole, was the first interview partner who participated in this project. We met at an Athens Boys Choir show in March 2008. After the show I approached Katz, the performer who is Athens Boys Choir, with hope that he would agree to an interview (which regrettably never happened). Cole walked up beside us and started nervously tapping his foot and clearing his throat while Katz and I chatted. As soon as he heard me say I was interviewing “trans performers” he interrupted, “Hey, I am a trans performer too!” He began rattling off his performance credentials and ambitions, including moving to New York City “as soon as possible.” I could not fully absorb what he was saying, but he sounded like someone I would want to interview. Mistakenly thinking I had just secured an interview with Katz, I turned to Cole to ask if he would like to participate in the project. He replied “Hell yeah” and gave me his card. I thanked both of them and left them to speak. At the time I thought this was a positive sign that finding participants would be fairly easy, conducting interviews would be a smooth process, and managing field relationships would be relatively uncomplicated. I was wrong on all three counts.

The contact information and web address on Cole’s card were incorrect, so I had to do make more of an effort than I anticipated contacting him. Searching for him online proved fortuitous because I found the now abandoned website where he chronicled his first few years of transition. The site includes pictures, blog entries, and other information about Cole, including a creative non-fiction short story about his pre-testosterone, social transition from the tomboy Belinda to the transmale Cole. After reading the story I perused the rest of the site. The archive of those first few years of testosterone shots, physical changes and emotional developments were simultaneously

captivating and banal. Having only seen before and after pictures of people who had completed transition in books, I was surprised by how nonchalantly Cole posted pictures of his nude torso and extreme close-ups of his face, underarms and chin. He showed every new facial hair, the evolution of his breasts, his new body hair and the increasing muscularity of his still very slim build. The pictures are intimate snapshots of a person transforming not just his appearance, but also his gender presentation. And yet, the stories that go with these photos are so matter of fact that the transition seems like a common activity. His words are literal narrations of the picture. One picture of a shaved face with a bit of stubble is captioned: “July 16, 2002 I shaved my face for the first time ever on June 17, 2002 (day 239, 110 injections) and since then, I've been shaving once a week because I get fairly noticeable [sic] stubble on my mouth about that often.” Sometimes there are a series of photos with a caption, but the text is generally just an explanation of the images.

What surprised me about the journal, especially considering the photographic intimacy of the pictures, is the significantly less personal tone of the text. He expresses his feelings rarely, if at all. When he does describe frustration, or anger, the feelings are not dimensions of psychic angst about the process of transition, but rather mundane concerns about whether his transitioning body is consistent with the look he wants to achieve. And yet, it is remarkable that the text of a series of pictures showing a female-bodied person becoming an increasingly male-bodied person can seem bland. A representative example is Cole's consideration of his new body hair:

2 years 5 months, 2 years 1 month injection - Really really time for an update!!! I'm getting mad hairy. My facial hair is starting to fill out more.

A lot of the time, I'm able to keep a little chin beard, even though it's still not that impressive. I'm getting hair under my chin now, too. More is coming in on my cheeks. I'm getting a LOT more chest hair now, too ... which I'm kind of iffy about. I don't want chest hair ... (Cole, <http://jbastiancole.sridout.com/transition.html>, 2006)

The typographic emphasis on his chest hair supports his ambivalence (“I’m kind of iffy”) about this increasingly noticeable masculine feature, but there are no clues as to why this might be a problem. Even his more expressive statements are largely descriptive, and even dismissive. These descriptions make me curious about their implications for his transition. Why does he not want chest hair? What is more appealing about facial hair? Did he think he could choose the elements of masculinity he values while evading the aspects he does not prefer? These are questions that cannot be answered with the available text. When I reread the text for something I may have missed the tone of the writing is impersonal and matter of fact. I rapid cycle through interest into disinterest. For me, his straightforwardness forecloses further curiosity.

Cole’s limited discussion of his feelings in relation to his transition is surprisingly common in transition journals. I did an online search and found a number of similar online female-to-male transition journals that included a series of pictures accompanied by minimal text. The pictures were stark, intimate images of bodies transforming the landscape of their chests, stomachs, faces and arms. Each set of pictures in the series is dated to record the number of months on testosterone, the progression of body hair or the time before and since top surgery. The accompanying text tended to mark the physical changes, such as more body hair and increasingly dense muscles, with little emotional

commentary. The photos are more reminiscent of medical photography, or even criminal mug shots, than the kinds of photos a person might put in a photo album in order to reminisce about them at a later time. A few folks talked about their mental health issues in separate sections of their journal, but these entries seemed disconnected from their gender transition. These photos capture moments in a journey, and arguably show a story, but what functions does the story (in whole or in part) serve?

Annette Kuhn's study of family photographs in *Family Secrets: Act of Memory and Imagination* describe photographs as a kind of "memory work" (Kuhn, 1995, p.9). Kuhn defines memory work as "unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of culture don't quite work" (9). At first, this might seem like a fitting definition of these pictures because they are telling stories that do not quite fit with cultural expectations of gender becoming. However, a key difference is that these photographs are not contextualized with/in the history of a family. Instead, they are radically decontextualized in several ways. These are photographs of lone individuals, and often photograph isolated body parts rather than a whole body or a body in a scene. They are not staged to be a photo intended to produce a future nostalgia for a happy past that may or may not have been (Kuhn, 1995). The photographs are self-shot images where the subject of the photo poses for her/himself and an undefined audience. In addition, these photos deliberately record the kinds of awkward physical transitions that adolescents being photographed try to avoid discussing publicly. They seem to function as a way to capture the present and represent it as the immediate past, as the stage that they are leaving as they progress towards an as yet unrecorded future as a masculine person.

However, a greater sense of what past they are leaving and what future they are becoming into goes fundamentally unaddressed.

These photographs are also differentiated from family photos because they seem almost expressionless. There is little palpable emotion in these photos. They just *are*. My lingering impression from seeing these photos is that their potential power might be in their understatement. As photographic performances of a body transitioning to better reflect a self, these photos make the adolescent awkwardness of transition public, yet they reveal little about how the changing self inhabits the changing body. As authors, the transmen that create these blogs seem primarily invested in using their virtual recording to authorize their own becoming.¹⁷ Through photos they are revealing the ways their bodies are changing and how they respond through new personal grooming routines. These journals function as a technology of becoming that demonstrates the cultivation of their body as a practice of developing their self (Foucault, 1986). However, these journals are not private acts of self-care. Instead, they are social insofar as they are publicly available to anyone who makes the effort to find them. Who do they think might be looking at these intimate, vulnerable photos? I argue that one function of these journals is to provide a lifeline for other trans people. A transperson or trans questioning person with access to the Internet could access these online resources. For someone who might not otherwise have resources or support, online journals might be a step towards exploring their trans identity. For someone about to begin transition, these blogs might provide inspiration or comfort. In both possible examples, the relative emotional

¹⁷ I found many of these blogs through the clearing house site http://www.dmoz.org/Society/Transgendered/Female_to_Male/Personal_Pages/.

understatedness might be a way to diffuse anxiety about transitioning. The stories might also read quite differently to someone considering or experiencing similar changes.

When I first saw these pictures and narratives I was puzzled, but not provoked. I want to know more, to understand this experience better, but the journals do not seem particularly inclined to help me do so. I recognize that it is not the job of the transitioning person to expose the changes in the psyche or perform any other explanatory function to me (or any other internet visitor). That said, creating a public, online journal in which someone identifies her/himself as transitioning is a potentially dangerous act. The photos include the blogger's faces, and often mention their location or provide contact information, so finding these folks in real life would not be very difficult. Why are they putting themselves in potential danger? As I thought through this question, I reframed it to wonder: are they putting themselves in potential danger? Without minimizing the acute danger of anti-trans violence that any trans person might experience, I suggest that these journals might provoke quite a different response. Perhaps their simplicity and lack of strong feeling is a performance of anti-spectacularity that positions the transitioning body as a fact rather than a curiosity. In this way, these journals refuse or resist the socially constructed freakishness of gender non-conforming bodies and present transitioning as if it were not that big of a deal (Adams, 2001). A full study of these journals is beyond the scope of this study, but I want to mark them as an area for further exploration.

I discuss these journals in relation to Cole not just because he wrote one, but also because they illustrate his style of performance on stage as well. Cole creates performances that visually represent stages and process of female to male transition with

only vague reference to the psychological or emotional dimensions of those experiences. As I will discuss further, Cole's primary performance goal is to be understood. He wants his medium to be clear, and he wants his message to be understandable. In a way, he achieves his goal. Irrespective of the psychological or intrapersonal complexity of Cole's stories of transition, he translates his experiences into narrative style performances that tell an aspect of his story in a simple narrative style. When I say narrative, I do not mean a performance that includes a lot of first person storytelling, but instead a performance that tells a story using movement, minimal text and the lyrics of a song as a thematic backdrop. Like his journal, the performances reveal certain intimate details about his experience while in some way obscuring other details. As a result his performances can sometimes make transition seem like a series of steps rather than a life-changing journey. And yet, within these somewhat recital like performances, Cole is touching on issues of deep significance for other trans and gender non-conforming people.

In this chapter, I will discuss a particular aspect of Cole's performance style, then briefly illustrate two ways that Cole helps ground the lines of inquiry in this project. First, I will explore how Cole's goal to make performances that can be understood suggests a politics of legibility. Next, I will focus on Cole's role in the film against a trans narrative by Jules Roskam. As the character "Transman," Cole helps introduce the conflict around a pervasive narrative of queer female to male trans becoming that suggests transitioning starts at one gender (female) and progresses through transition (the trans stage) in order to achieve the other gender (male). This film raises some important questions about how transitioning impacts various aspects of a transman's life. I will then describe "Close Up," a performance Cole did with another transman, that works

against this pervasive narrative in an effort to encourage transmen to forge their own path. Cole wants to create art that helps people understand that trans is “something that is itself. Trans is not a lack of something, or too much of something. It just is.”



(Image 6: Cole 6)

Cole is a 29-year-old FTM, is a short, slim person with peach skin that is often red with breakouts, a common physical response to testosterone. He wears his graying brown hair styled in a fauxhawk or Caesar cut. He has bright blue eyes framed by square black glasses, a pointy nose, a small mouth, and elfin facial features of which he is quite proud (due to his love of The Lord of the Rings series.) He wears two earrings and has several tattoos, the most notable of which are giant block letters that spell out TRANS on his left forearm and HUMAN on his right forearm. Cole likes to dress in all of the latest

urban trends, but is most likely to be seen wearing a t-shirt, carpenter jeans and some sort of open button down shirt. Many of his shirts are graphic t-shirts that reflect some aspect of mainstream pop culture such as his beloved TEAM EDWARD shirt, a shout out to anyone who follows the Twilight novel series. In general, Cole likes to express his fandom for various artists, movies or other cultural artifacts through his dress. Sometimes his breasts are visible under his clothing, and sometimes they are not. He wears a prosthetic that mimics the bulge of a penis in his pants, but that is only visible if he is wearing tighter pants or tights. With his looks and grooming he generally blends into the landscape of twenty-something hipster males in the Durham and Chapel Hill area.

Cole's TRANS HUMAN tattoos, which cover roughly 60% of his delicate forearms are just one way he is out about being trans. While most non-operative or pre-operative transmales bind their breasts, Cole is committed to not binding, partially because he has a small chest and partially because he doesn't "consider my chest female at all, and I've never met any problems with partners or strangers. The only people who've had problems with my chest were a handful of loud transmen who tried to make me feel ashamed for not binding because they were insecure with their own bodies and projected it to me" (Cole, 2008, 4). He has taken testosterone for seven years, and never plans to stop. For reasons that he considers inexplicable, he has a fairly prominent Adams' apple that he has had since before taking testosterone. His driver's license bears his legally changed name, Joshua Bastian Cole, but his sex is still listed as female, as it is on all of his official documents. At the time we spoke Cole considered his sex to be female, his gender to be male, and his sex and gender in/congruity to be a form of trans

visibility. In the two years I have known Cole he has grown less belligerent about foregrounding his trans identity, and sometimes lets himself pass as male (Cole, personal communication). However, being subtler has not erased his commitment to promoting himself as FTM.

While Cole lived in North Carolina he perceived himself to be the epitome of a displaced New York City transmale. He was born in the state of New York, but in a small rural town far from the lights of off-off Broadway. When we were initially getting to know each other Cole romanticized New York City fashion trends, metrosexual grooming, in-group slang and styles of self-representation exhibited by the transmale artists he whose careers he follows. He spent years cultivating relationships with popular transmale artists by writing them emails and sending them copies of his own performances. He has attended numerous performances, watched countless recorded performances, and read as much print material as he could access in order to stay current on the latest in female-to-male performance. His ultimate performance goal is to create a successful Broadway musical about trans experience (to feature himself), so he created a long distance working relationship with a New York City based composer to help make this happen. Although Cole seemed more intent on dreaming about rather than actually moving to New York, he took the step. In July 2009 he relocated to New York City. We are not in direct contact, but his updates on Facebook suggest an active social life full of FTM friends. He is still writing his first musical.

Narrative Performance Versus Performance Art

Before our interview I assumed that Cole's performance work and personal politics would neatly align with all of my readings and preparation for this project. I

overestimated how much Cole (or any single person) could represent a heterogeneous, evolving genre of performance. I mistakenly assumed that all of my interview partners would be as interested in challenging the norms of performance as they are in challenging the norms of gender. As I learned, Cole's desire to expand the categories of gender to include trans identities does not correlate with a desire to radically reinvent any particular genre of performance, although he will adjust or slightly innovate a genre to better suit his needs. Instead Cole wants his work to create new content about trans lives that can be comfortably performed with/in existing performance genres. His current work is something he calls narrative performance art (a slight innovation on drag) and his goal is to write trans musicals. As I will discuss more in the next section of this chapter, he wants his performances to encourage trans people to live as trans in their own way rather than following a narrow script for trans becoming. However, he wants the messages in his performance to be comprehensible for almost anyone who sees it, and so he gravitates towards mediums that are accessible for a wide range of audiences. In this way, he works to be understandable.

When I asked Cole what genre he considered his work, he blurted out “well, I was *told* it *isn't* performance art, but that was by someone who is a *performance artist*.” His tone implied that he thought of himself as a performance artist, but not the detestable version of a performance artist that he considered the person who critiqued him to be:

I think of [my work] as narrative performance art, but not like performance art like all, um, hard to understand and heavy and ... I don't know, you know, like (rolls his eyes) performance art. Like, I want to tell stories. Everything I perform is telling a story. Like, I have characters and

there is a conflict. I have a theater background so I want to tell stories. I don't want to perform like, just, **anger** if that is what performance art is. You can't understand that. But, people can understand a story where there is a conflict and then you solve it. That is what I want to do. Because, how can you understand if you just, like, make faces and wrap yourself in tin foil? I don't want to do that. What is that? I don't know what that is. I want people to understand exactly what I am saying. Like, I want my performances to be an experience that I know people will completely understand. When people see my stuff, they get it. (smiling proudly) I am understandable.

For Cole, the abstract explorations and boundary pushing identified with a kind of "performance art" are not helpful to producing "understanding." Instead, Cole pursues a politics of legibility that includes not only performing narratives that progress through a traditional plot structure, but also that include a core lesson. In his final declaration "I am understandable" Cole implies that his style makes his message completely clear.

As earlier stated, Cole's particular narrative style is like a visual tour through a process or experience. In a slight innovation on drag, he uses a song with lyrics related to his message to set the backdrop for the mostly visual scene. He also uses minimal text to help explain the sequence of events. He performs about a select number of topics that relate to his life including transphobia in queer communities, resisting pressure from other transmen to pursue full medical transition, and even negotiating boundaries in transmale sexual encounters. Cole is so determined to be understandable that he performs the same story lines over and over again. He improves the quality of each

performance, but at the time of this writing his repertoire of performances is still limited. The main story he tells and retells, either in whole or in part, is how to make choices about transition that reflect your own goals and priorities. As I heard repeatedly from Cole and other participants, the trans community puts a lot of pressure on a transmale identified person to follow the idealized linear path of tomboy childhood, male gender identification, living as male, taking testosterone, having chest reconstruction and a hysterectomy and then going “stealth,” i.e. living full time as a man without acknowledging your history as a female bodied person.¹⁸ Cole does not believe everyone must follow this particular path to trans becoming, so he wants his work to provide people with alternative possibilities. Cole has experienced a lot of negative feedback for his decisions to pursue some aspects of medical transition and not others, as well as for being openly trans instead of passing as male full time.

Cole performance format is fairly consistent. He stages his resistance to the “master” narrative version of the trans subculture through stories that have a transmale protagonist considering how to transition and a more experienced transmale antagonist trying to lead the young protagonist down predetermined paths of becoming. At some point in the story, the antagonist tries to pressure the protagonist into making a choice, and a conflict arises. The conflict is resolved when the protagonist chooses a different path than the antagonist tried to make him take. Using this same basic plot, Cole is trying to show new transmen that they have more than one option for becoming trans. He is

¹⁸ As I will discuss further in Chapter Three, this path is “idealized” not because everyone naturally follows it, but because it is consistent with the medical and psychological narratives for authenticating trans identity. As I learned in the film against a trans narrative transmen in the transmale community often coach new transmen to tell this “trans narrative” in a very specific way in order to access medical therapies, psychological support and legal recognition. The narrative is likely true for some folks, but the problem seems to be that this narrative is homogenizing trans becoming in a way that has a negative effect in transmale communities.

trying to show them they do not have to follow a specific script, even if other transmen tell them they should. He is also using the performance to warn young transmen about the ways that their trans mentors can pressure them into doing something that might not be best for them. Finally, he is also calling those trans mentors out for pressuring young trans men. Thus, for Cole, making these stories understandable is a way to offer lessons to other trans people. “A lot of people have come to me to (*makes finger quotation marks*) ‘learn how’ to be trans. I can’t teach them that. But, I can help them figure out how to figure it out for themselves.” Through his performances and fairly predictable story arcs, he offers fellow transmen life lessons on how to navigate the becoming process without succumbing to peer pressure to be a certain way.

The value of his narrative approach is that a transman watching the story will likely identify with it in some way, whether it is seeing himself in one of the characters or gaining a different perspective on trans becoming. Cole genuinely wants to help people make choices that work for them. According to Cole, he has had a number of people thank him for his performance work because it told “their story” in a way that they felt was not otherwise being performed. In other words, when Cole re/presents his narrative(s) on stage, some audience members make a strong affective connection with the work that makes it feel like their story is being told. Cole’s representation makes them feel *represented* in a way that they did not previously feel. One transmen I met through Cole told me that when he saw Cole perform, his more than forty years of gender confusion were suddenly made clear, and he began transitioning. When I watched the performance DVD that Cole gave me, I heard the audience screaming in affirmation of the performance they are watching. They understand the story, they know when to cheer,

and they take their cues very seriously. In all three of these situations Cole's narrative performances are apparently making the kind of impact that he wants to make on his community.

Both in his explanation and in his art, Cole distances himself from the kind of "in your face" or "you can't get it anyway" approach that more abstract artists take. For Cole, creating understandable work means fighting against the unintelligibility of what he perceives as the abstract and opaque world of "performance art." We did not discuss the artists to whom he is referring, so I can only speculate about what Cole means by his distinction. However, I think this is a point worth noting because I repeatedly heard performers distinguishing themselves from "performance artists" without precisely specifying what that label means. Are performance artists somehow producing work that is in opposition to understandable and accessible work? What precisely were they talking about when they said "performance art?" I acknowledge that some performance art can be too obtuse or incomprehensible to produce specific understanding about a certain issue. However, I think that what is more relevant here is that contemporary gender variant performance does not seem to have a strong connection with the history and practices of queer performance art. Performance art, including narrative performance art, has been a tool that queer, female and different abled artists (among others) have used to explore discourses and social formations around gender, sexuality and their bodies (Carr, ; Jones, 1998; Miller, 2006; Schneider, 1997). I am not sure precisely what to make of this disjuncture, but I think it might be a direction for further exploration.

Cole's preference for his style of narrative performance seems related to his desire to write and star in a Broadway musical:

I want to take the performances I have been doing and do the bigger, you know, better. I want to do this all the time. There is so much you can do with [performance]. There are an infinity of identities. There is endless stuff to talk about. But, like, I do mine. There are a couple of recurring themes that I do. There is the pressure, like, the way that you are trans stuff. That is very prevalent. The transfag thing, the gay trans male thing. And then also, like, the femme thing. Like the femme transfag thing. And musicals. I want to do them as musicals. I am not a scholar of musical theater, but I do love a musical. Musicals combine story, spectacle and hyperbole in order to not only entertain, but also to reflect, examine or critique aspects of culture. In a musical, the drama of everyday life can so exceed spoken language that the characters must break into song and dance. Whether the songs are exhilarating, heartbreaking, defiant, suspect or otherwise emotionally charged, these moments represent a level of feeling that exceeds the capacity of conversation. Perhaps the transmale experience is best represented as an experience of the everyday so powerful it ruptures language into song.

Cole's intention to transform his favorite narrative performance topics into a Broadway musical is motivated both by his desire for fame in general, and his ambition to be a Broadway star. He felt that the people in North Carolina just did not understand the superior quality of his performance work, but the people who visit Broadway will. His aim for fame is explicit: "People a lot of times underestimate my ambition. I am going to be famous, like, really famous." The fame Cole wants seems a much a way to hurt the people who have hurt him as to achieve a positive benefit to himself.

As Cole indicates, his transition has become a point of leverage in climbing the ladder to Broadway success. As a woman in the glitzy world of musical theater, he would not have stood a chance. However, as a (trans)male he feels his options are much stronger:

I always wanted to do musical theater, but I didn't have the confidence. And, before I transitioned, it wasn't really possible. To be a girl in musical theater you have to be SO good. All women on Broadway are brilliant. The women are just *too* good. I will never be that good. So, then, when I first started transitioning, first started T, I was too weird. I looked dykey and I was small, but my voice was weird and (pause, nervous laugh) like, what part would I play? A child? They have children for that – or small women. After all this transitioning, though, I look exactly what a Broadway male looks like. I'm like – my voice is right and I look gay – so I'm perfect. The standards for men are MUCH lower. And, since I am writing a musical, I know that I am perfect for that role!

Cole's lack of confidence as a female performer is likely related to deeper issues about his gender identity that we did not discuss. However, his continued explanation goes on to reveal that he does not have the talent to compete with women on Broadway no matter what his gender. By comparison, his work is not SO good, *too* good or brilliant. Having seen him perform, I have to agree that he has neither the singing nor dancing ability to compete in that arena. However, the logic that as a male he looks the part, and therefore is capable of competing with other Broadway men, is astonishing. He considers looking "gay" and like other "Broadway men" a sufficient substitute for the rigorous training and

experience that generally cultivates a professional performer. Musical theater is an endurance activity that requires excellence and precision. Cole has had only nominal vocal, dance and acting training and has never been in a professional theater company. And yet, he is confident that his looks will lead naturally to his success.

By becoming male Cole perceives that he is positioning himself to meet the lower standards for stardom that Broadway has for men. However, if looks are not enough to catapult Cole to leading man status, then he is content to create a musical that he can use as a vehicle to launch his career. When he told me about his plan, his eyes lit up with pleasure at his own cleverness. That getting a run on Broadway is an arduous task that requires previous success, revenue, professional contacts and the promise of star power that will attract audiences (none of which Cole possesses) seemed entirely removed from his thoughts. Cole believes he can perform realities into being, and he has some evidence to back up this stubborn resolve. He has undertaken a monumental life transition by becoming FTM. His tireless self-promotion has resulted in him being featured in books, magazines and a movie. Cole takes every opportunity to perform. He does have a fan base. Against quite a few odds he relocated to New York City. He *can* make things happen for himself. And yet, in moments like this, Cole's mix of insecurity, arrogance and dismissals of others reveal how limited his perspective can be. His desire for fame and to be a star has eclipsed all other considerations. Whether or not this will lead to continued success remains to be seen.

Against a Trans Narrative

Cole is currently enjoying a moderate level of fame thanks to his breakthrough role in the film against a trans narrative by Jules Rosskam (2008). Cole was still living in

North Carolina when the UNC School of Social Work brought the film and the filmmaker to campus. When I saw him just before the screening he approached me excitedly saying, “get ready! Get ready to have your mind **BLOWN!** Seriously – this is so amazing. I hope you brought a bag to put your head in because it is going to **EXPLODE** this is so good. You’re gonna LOVE it.” This film illustrated what Cole had previously described to me as the pressure on transmen to pursue physiological authenticity. “To be considered really trans, you have to want everything that would make you a man. You have to do your year on hormones, then start passing as a man, then have your top surgery, then change all of your legal stuff, then be a man.” When I asked about the possibility of phalloplasty, Cole replied, “the one thing everyone agrees on is that bottom surgery is just terrible! Nobody wants it. But, if it worked you would be expected to want it.” His responses and the themes of the film both confirm that this “trans narrative” is a limited and limiting story of trans becoming that does not represent all trans male experience.

Described as “a provocative and personal experimental documentary investigating dominant constructions of trans-masculine identity, gender, and the nature of community,” against a trans narrative is a film that directly relates to the themes of Cole’s other performance work (Roskam, 2008). The film is part dramatization and part documentary. The dramatization includes different scenes of female-bodied male people trying to access the medical and psychological support to transition into living as full time males. Each of them has an experience of being told how to tell their story in order to access the means of transition. In effect, each of them is told how to tell themselves through the “trans narrative” that doctors and psychologists require to diagnose someone

with gender dysmorphia disorder and therefore being a candidate for medical transition (Valentine, 2008). In general, the story a trans person must tell is that s/he has always been a man trapped inside a woman's body, a rather classic retelling of the "invert" narrative that doctors originally applied to queer people (Valentine, 2008). The FTM person must describe a tomboy childhood, a masculine identified adolescence, and a strong dissociation with the female sexed parts of their body. S/he must perceive her/himself as male and be unable to be happy unless s/he undergoes medical transition. These scenes are counterbalanced by small groups of friends (of various races, sexualities and ages) discussing the politics of transition, including how, or if, FTM transpeople fit into queer female space(s). The film also features a dramatic storyline between one transitioning person, Transman, and his partner, Feminist, which is counterbalanced by documentary footage of similar conversations between the filmmaker, Roskam, and his then partner.

In the film Cole plays the character Transman, a kind of everytransman struggling to understand what it means to transition from being a masculine, dyke-identified person into whomever he will be when the transition is over. Will he be a heterosexual identified male, trans, queer, or something he cannot even imagine? Part of what Transman does in the film is articulate the conflict between wanting to identify, live and pass as male without losing his existing connections with other women and the lesbian community. Transman struggles with a number of issues. He is uncertain about how transition will affect his sexuality. He does not know how to transition without alienating friends or, most significantly, his female lover. Now that he is increasingly read as male, he is starting to receive the benefits of male privilege. How does he manage this new

privilege when he also has a history of feeling oppressed as a queer woman and gender deviant? In addition, this “privilege” comes with a cost of a readily perceived alliance with women. How does he deal with being treated as a trespasser in female space or an “other” sex when he meets women who never knew him as a woman? Transman spends most of the film either discussing or fighting about these issues with Feminist.

Transman’s foil is his female lover, Feminist. Feminist says she wants to support Transman’s transition, but fundamentally thinks he will become a man and therefore a threat. According to Feminist, Transman is abandoning her, and by extension all lesbian feminists, to assume a dominant role in the heteropatriarchy. Feminist clearly states he is leaving his queer female community behind. She feels it is unfair of Transman to expect her to understand and support him, especially when he does not seem to be sympathetic to how it affects her identity. If Transman becomes a man, then what does that make Feminist? Is she now heterosexual? What does his transition say about the value (or lack of value) of being a woman-identified woman? She expresses confusion about why he wants to be a man, as well as frustration that he expects to retain full access to queer female space even though he will now have access to heterosexual male space. Feminist also suggests that the root of Transman’s desire to transition is actually internalized misogyny, and he should change that aspect of his psyche instead of his gender. In the fight scenes, Feminist is the aggressor.

The scenes between Transman and Feminist are stylized re-enactments of another feature of the film, vulnerable scenes of diary footage of the filmmaker (Roskam, the inspiration for Transman) and his then girlfriend (the inspiration for Feminist) discussing his transition and what it means for their relationship. In these scenes, Roskam comes

across as a very sympathetic character. He is intelligent, articulate and clearly struggling with his identity, sexuality and sense of community. His desire to maintain his relationship with his partner is expressed in the way he repeatedly tries to connect with her. His then partner, on the other hand, appears to be very unsympathetic. She is dogmatic, unyielding and often unkind. She makes some thoughtful points about why Rosskam's desire to have access to multiple communities might be unfair to queer women or perceived as opportunistic, but she does not appear to be making an effort to extend him the benefit of the doubt at any turn. For Feminist, Transman is a traitor to all women, but especially queer women. Based not only on the footage, but also his responses in the question and answer session following the movie, I felt for Rosskam. He was trying to explain a perspective that seems very true for him. He said that when his former partner saw the movie she was embarrassed about how combative she was, but stood by her questions and concerns.

Although Cole frustrated me on many occasions, I was hoping that this performance would reveal a depth in him I had not previously seen. As with the previous five performances I had seen, I found Cole's work to be more competent than impressive. But what did impress me was how closely the theme of this film aligned not only with Cole's performance work, but also with the work of other performers with whom I spoke. After the movie I returned to Cole's performance DVD and the footage of our interview. Cole's performance work reflects his genuine desire to offer transmen an option that deviates from the "trans narrative" script. No matter how self-centered he may be in his desire for fame, Cole also has a message for other transmen who want to resist full physiological transition. When we originally spoke, I asked about how he responds to the

pressure to be trans in a certain way. As is characteristic of Cole, rather than just answer me directly he described his performance entitled “Close Up” which was originally performed sometime during 2006. He co-developed and performed the piece with another local trans performer, Keegan, whom Cole told me had “gone down this really strange stealth route” (a “fact” I later discovered was untrue). Despite Keegan’s role in the piece, Cole primarily talked about the number as if it were his. He did give Keegan lukewarm credit for “choreographing it. He is a real dancer with, like, training in modern dance.” Otherwise, he spoke about his role and how many people came up to him after the performance “to thank me for being honest, for putting it out there. So many people told me that was exactly how they felt. It was probably the best thing I ever did here.”

Close Up

Cole and Keegan are on stage in sleeveless white t-shirts, loose sweatpants and bare feet. Keegan is a few inches taller than Cole, has longer, black hair and carries at least 20 more pounds. Keegan’s olive skin is stretched over well-defined muscle, and his t-shirt is tight enough to reveal the surgically sculpted pectoral look of someone who has had top surgery. Standing next to Cole, who at this point was even skinnier and paler than he is now, Keegan looks very much like a man standing next to a boy. Cole’s expression is bright and eager, as if he cannot wait to get started. Keegan’s expression is brooding, and lacks any sense of playfulness. The camera angle is tight. All I can see of the stage is them, the microphone on a stand, and a few strips of black fabric hanging from the ceiling. The black fabric is painted with words written in white capital letters. From left to right, the messages say TRANSITION, HORMONES, SURGERY and FINDING ME. When Cole rustles the HORMONES fabric strip, I see what seems to be

visible to the audience at all times: a white, square panel affixed to the back of the stage painted with THE (in black) and CUNT (in red). Although the camera cannot consistently capture the image, the stage seems to read THE CUNT, TRANSITION, HORMONES, SURGERY and FINDING ME. If there are more messages, I cannot see them.

Cole stands between TRANSITION and HORMONES while Keegan stands to the right of FINDING ME. Keegan takes the microphone from the stand, and announces that they will begin as soon as Cole reads a piece from an essay. He then says, “Thanks to everyone for coming out, especially my Aveda crew.” Screeching ensues from what I presume is the Aveda crew. He raises a black power fist towards the screech, then hands the microphone to Cole, saying “I’m not much of a talker, man.” Cole grabs the microphone, grinning wildly and trying to adjust his glasses while holding a book. He says the piece they are going to do is “about the way that everyone expects trans men are supposed to be.”

The music begins. Rather predictably, the song (“Close Up,” from which the number gets its name) is one by queer favorite Imogene Heap’s band Frou Frou.¹⁹ Almost all of Cole’s pieces are performed to Heap’s music. Cole picks up a wooden square painted black, which has been laying face down on the stage next to his feet. In white paint, the board reads HOW TO BE TRANS. With a serious expression, Cole turns the board to Keegan and thrusts it towards him. Keegan makes a concave shape with his torso as if this message is making contact with his body. He does some curious modern dance moves vaguely resembling Elvis’s karate moves in his Comeback Tour

¹⁹ See Appendix A for song lyrics.

television movie from 1968, then gets behind the fabric marked TRANSITION. We can see only Keegan's arms and feet behind the fabric. He moves his arms up and down seductively, as if he were having amorous relations with the fabric. Cole is still standing in the exact same position, and I realize the sign is pointed toward the camera rather than where the crowd seems to be. The crowd is madly cheering.

At this moment, the sound track makes a terrible noise, and somehow Neheh Cherry's Buffalo Stance seems to be remixed with the music. The action on stage stops, and Cole and Keegan come out on stage. There is scuffling, cheering from the crowd, and then the music starts again. They repeat the action of the first stanza. This time, Cole puts his sign down as Keegan emerges from behind TRANSITION in time for the chorus which repeats "I love you/I hate you" several times. They visually acknowledge each other, and yet neither of their expressions changes. They approach each other with stiff, stylized steps and raise their arms toward each other without touching. Cole looks like he might be counting in his head; Keegan's expression is not visible. Cole and Keegan do more modern dance moves as the chorus sings I love you/I hate you. Their bodies mirror each other, sometimes appearing to move together harmoniously, and sometimes appearing to be engaged in battle. Sometimes their movements are coordinated, and sometimes they are about half a beat apart.

When they separate their bodies, Keegan starts to go behind the HORMONES screen, but stops short of actually going behind it. Instead, more coordinated/combatative dancing occurs in front of the fabric. Cole moves out of the view of the camera, and returns with a strip of black fabric that does not appear to have any writing on it. He wraps the fabric around Keegan, and they move together for a moment, before Keegan

begins resisting him. Each holding the fabric, they begin to move in a stylized tug of war motion. Finally, Keegan moves with enough force to break free of the fabric, and Cole bunches it up in his arms. Cole again moves off camera, and returns with no fabric. They repeat the same coordinated/combative dance sequence they have been repeating the whole performance. Keegan then spins behind the SURGERY fabric briefly, and stands there. He comes out from behind the fabric quickly, and lunges back down stage with a speed that suggests he might have missed a sound cue. Again, they perform their coordinated/combative dance sequence. I find this unbearably repetitive, but the crowd continues to cheer.

Finally, Keegan goes behind the FINDING ME panel. His arms and legs are visible. He reaches down, and feels around for something. He then picks a mirror up off of the floor. Cole turns to face the audience, standing still on stage. Keegan performs the same seductive movement behind the FINDING ME panel that he did behind the TRANSITIONS panel, but this time he sometimes flashes the mirror towards the crowd. It looks like he might be trying to turn the mirror around to face the FINDING ME panel, but he never does. Cole keeps standing there. Keegan comes back out from behind the panel and approaches Cole. Cole picks up the HOW TO BE TRANS message board and pushes it at Keegan in the same way they opened the number. Keegan thrusts his torso out in a convex shape, as if rejecting the message from his core. Cole pushes the sign towards him again, and Keegan re-thrusts his chest out. Cole recoils, as if from the force of Keegan's chest. He puts the sign down, and faces the audience. Keegan turns to face the crowd. The music stops. The crowd cheers wildly and breaks into raucous applause.

“Close Up” is a narrative performance in many ways. The number has two differentiated characters (a protagonist and antagonist), a conflict (whether or not to follow the lead of an already transitioned transman) and a resolution (find your own way). Cole wants the piece to tell a story of a transman facing pressure from a fellow transman, almost succumbing to that pressure, but then making a different choice. By telling the audience what the performance is about, and marking the stages of the story using signs, Cole makes the performance clearly legible. “Close Up” can be understood, in part, as a response to the non-narrative structure of performance art that he finds so pointless. In addition, the performance is a counter narrative to the “trans narrative,” the disciplinary, socially constructed and socially imposed narratives of trans becoming that Cole (and others) perceive as stifling. He is quite literally walking the audience through a series of steps that a newly transitioning transmale might face. Each step is a moment of reckoning during which the protagonist must decide if he wants to follow the lead of his antagonist trans friend, or make his own way. The resolution clearly champions following an individual path rather than conforming to expectations. And yet, despite all of these narrative conventions, there is an allusive, non-dramatic quality to the nature of the narrative here. What does FINDING ME mean? Is wanting HORMONES or SURGERY inherently wrong? Can finding a mentor be helpful, or is it only ever harmful?

For all of its apparent clarity, “Close Up” is difficult to understand fully in the absence of other information about trans experience. Cole may want his work to be understandable, and he (and Keegan) should be credited for using a plot structure that is familiar enough for almost anyone to follow whether they are familiar with trans issues or

not. However, for someone outside the trans experience, neither the complexity of the choices facing the protagonist nor the motivation for the antagonist's behavior is entirely clear. This story, like the journals of transition that I saw online, gestures towards an emotional journey without fully explicating what it is. In this way, the piece is perhaps understandable as a story, but I wonder if it is comprehensible as an explication of the deeply vexing challenges facing many transmen. I wonder what the cheering audience saw, or felt, that I cannot experience as a remote observer watching and rewatching the recording of the number. I wonder if it matters. The performance might have been dealing with some of the larger issues of trans becoming, including what kinds of choices a female to male transman might make about their transition, but what strikes me most powerfully is that the reality of transness is never in question. *Trans is*. The transness of both characters just is. In this way, the work, however simple, can also be quietly powerful. The focus of trans agency shifts from carefully following the plot of a pre-existing trans narrative to deciding to make the transition process a kind of choose-your-own adventure story where the trans person can create the story s/he wants to live within the frame of available options.

CHAPTER 4: “Excuse me, but you look just like Johnny Blazes!”:
Performing Genderqueer



(Image 7: Johnny 1)²⁰

Johnny Blazes is known throughout Boston’s drag and burlesque scenes for zir genre-bending, gender-blending, tongue-in-cheek performances. After training in traditional performance arts, theater, opera and ballet, Johnny started to develop zir own style of performance and art. While attending Oberlin College in Ohio, Johnny continued to expand and assert zir own personal style of performance while testing the limits of gender and genre in the performing arts...

By day, Johnny is a teacher of movement, drama and social activism to kids ages 2 through 16. Zie strives to be a role model that kids can look to as a positive example of gender non-conformity.

Johnny is currently working on an evening length piece, entitled wo(n)man show. This sequence of comical vignettes will incorporate physical theater, prop manipulation, puppetry, dance, lip synch and classical voice as it explores the question: How does one

²⁰ All photos reproduced with permission.

arrive at one's present gender? Johnny plans to tour this show nationally in 2009, and hopes that hir's use of physical comedy and recognizable archetypes will make this a show accessible not only to folks who are already interested in gender fluidity, but also to folks who have never been introduced to the topic (<http://johnnyblazes.com/about/>).

Johnny Blazes is, if you will pardon the pun, hot. Zie is an accomplished performer with years of training in a variety of theater arts who performs almost continuously while also working full time as a primary school teacher. In addition, zie is well educated about a wide variety of social justice issues, and committed to creating space for everyday gender fluidity through zirs performance work and personal example. While Johnny primarily performs in amateur venues such as local open mikes, queer cabarets, academic venues and in collaborative projects with other local artists, zie is also seeking to make performance zirs full time career. Johnny is committed to entertaining all audiences “no matter what they know about gender, or any issues, or even performance art,” so wherever zie performs zirs performances are aesthetically rich, technically complex and precisely executed. After all, Johnny is a “Sir/Ma’am Rockstar Bricoleur Cowboy Clown Genderqueer Fagette Ringmaster Vaudevillian Dragster Femme Queen.”



(Image 7: Johnny 2)

In this chapter I will consider the possibilities and problematics of genderqueerness that Johnny Blaze presents. I will argue that genderqueer identity is a site of resistance and struggle that creates the possibilities of expanding gender systems to include greater fluidity both within and among individuals. One way Johnny's version of genderqueerness creates possibility is by resisting a linear narrative of trans becoming that relies on gender as a polarized binary, a journey from she-ness to he-ness, and instead considers gender as an ongoing becoming with multiple options for expression. Zie invites others into zirs struggle through performances that create the possibility for witness, for an affective engagement with difference that enables a viewer to see the other as a subject and enables them to respond as a co-subject (Oliver, 2001, 15). Finally, I examine Johnny's advocacy around gender neutral pronouns. I argue that while gender neutral pronouns are an innovation that create the possibility for new performative iterations of gender, the claim to "neutrality" is undercut by what I consider an uncomfortable similarity between gender neutral pronouns and male generic language.

A Note about Pronouns

As I just stated, I will discuss pronouns in greater depth towards the end of this chapter, but before going further I must explain that out of respect for Johnny I have referred to zie exclusively in gender neutral pronouns. I initially found Johnny's preference for gender neutral pronouns charming, but I have since developed a complicated relationship with them. Gender neutral pronouns are cumbersome. They neither flow trippingly off the tongue nor peck smoothly from the fingertips. When I first started using them in language I felt silly, and typing them has been a chore. At first I wanted to use "he" and then make liberal use of my find and replace function. However,

I determined it was unethical and disrespectful to honor my language and typing habits rather than Johnny’s complex and contested identity. Thus, I decided to commit to the more ethical choice and use gender-neutral pronouns from the beginning. I am glad I did in part because I later discovered I was misusing them, and have had to find and replace quite a few pronouns after all. The table below is a usage guide²¹:

Table 1: Gender Neutral Pronouns

Subject	Object	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive	Number	Notes
<i>THIRD PERSON</i>						
sie	hir	hir	hirs	hirsself	singular	neutral
zie	zir	zir	zirs	zirsself	singular	neutral
ey	em	eir	eirs	eirsself	singular	neutral
they	them	their	theirs	themself theirsself	singular	neutral

Johnny and the Cavalcade

Johnny is a short, slight, person with cropped, curly blonde hair, pale peachy pink skin, bright blue eyes, delicate bone structure and what seems to be an excess of teeth, generally presented as a smile. Zie is generally dressed in a kind of vaudeville-hipster blend that suggests not only an appreciation for the variety show style performances zie likes to create, but also that zie can afford (both monetarily and in life) to dress in such a consistently eccentric fashion. Johnny is generally wearing some sort of tapered pant, often pegged, with argyle socks, multicolored bowling shoes, a colorful vest, a collared

²¹ <http://aetherlumina.com/gnp/technical.html#declensiongnp>

shirt and suspenders. I have not seen Johnny in warmer months, but zie professes to love “old man golf shorts” which I imagine zie pairs with a shorter sleeved version of zirs usual shirt – possibly sans socks and suspenders. While this might sound like a thrifted look, each individual piece is actually a high end brand and part of a collection of similar pieces. Zie also wears an assortment of hats with different outfits, generally some style of bowler or fedora. These tend to be actually thrifted items, thus providing some hipster street credit to his otherwise more refined look.

Zir also exhibits a stylized, somewhat anachronistic, politeness. Johnny tends to bow as a general greeting, and to shake hands with a light, yet firm, grip. Before taking the seat next to me in the panel session at IDKEX where we met, Johnny looked me directly in the eye, gave a slight bow and requested the pleasure of the seat next to me, with my permission. As someone terribly fond of anachronistic language and excessive formality, I granted permission with a flourish and complimented zirs gallantry. I also made a mental note to secure an interview with “Blazes, Johnny Blazes” after we formally introduced ourselves and shook hands. I felt strangely as if I was entering into a gentlemen’s agreement, and in a way perhaps I was. Upon learning that I was at the conference for research, as well as pleasure, Johnny became very interested in my project. Zie expressed indirect interest in participating by saying that it sounded like something zie would be interested in reading, and if I needed connections zie would be happy to make them for me. While Johnny never really followed through on connecting me with other people, we did enjoy a four hour conversation during which zie was incredibly generous and forthcoming.

Johnny's dandy affectation seems to be a byproduct of zirs unassailable belief in zirs own personhood. Johnny recognizes that zie does not enjoy full recognition or citizenship in the world at large, but as a Boston resident with an impressive academic and performance pedigree who works at a prestigious private school and often performs for queer or academic audiences, Johnny tends to move in spaces where zie is physically safe, and acknowledged as human. However, zie does not experience life without resistance to zirs embodiment or gender fluidity. Johnny faces challenges from within and beyond zirs immediate community because zie does not fit into the prescribed role for a "trans genderqueer." Having a prescribed role for genderqueerness may seem counter-intuitive, and in some ways, it is. Genderqueer is an identity that works as a hermeneutic in that genderqueer performance re/interprets (and sometimes re/imagines) the possibilities for performing gender in excess of the male/female binary. Ideally, to be genderqueer is to resist and subvert the gender binary. Genderqueers challenge the naturalization of gender performances by innovating their own performances of gender in ways meant to exceed a system where male and female are the poles of gender, and transfolk are travelling from one pole through the murky middle "on their way" to the "opposite" pole. To be genderqueer is to seek an innovation that is not reducible to a discursive location on the linear trajectory from male to female or female to male. In a spin on Butler's description of gender performativity "improvisation within a field of constraint," genderqueers are constantly working to reformulate the possibilities for gender performativity by increasing the varieties of improvisations and reducing the constraints (Butler, 1993).

Ironically, the potential for genderqueer identity to offer individuals a way to perform gender that transcends the narrative of gender as either a single location or a linear journey from one location to another location is limited by the sociality of gender. Based on my conversations with genderqueer performers, as well as queer friends, even the best innovations on gender tend to be limited, indeed sometimes thwarted, by the willingness (or perhaps ability) of those around the innovator to understand them beyond the terms of male/trans/female. Instead, genderqueerness tends to be understood as a stopping point on a person's journey towards realizing an allegedly "authentic" gender-self, which is generally the "opposite" of the gender to which the genderqueer person was hailed at birth. Genderqueerness is also sometimes understood as a resting place in the process of identification, generally as a synonym for butch identity. The way the word "genderqueer" is deployed suggests the problematic way bisexuality gets (mis)interpreted as either a stopping point "on the way" to accepting a homosexual identity or as a temporary diversion from heterosexuality, rather than as a vibrant sexuality of its own. Bisexuality might also be allowable as a synonym for polyamorous or sexually adventurous identity. I draw this parallel not because I think sex and sexuality are the same, but because despite the politics of inclusion that informs queer rights rhetorics, queer communities often still have a great deal of anxiety about fluid identifications. Within and beyond the queer community, we all too often reduce the fluidity of gender to a single channel that at best leads to a specific destination rather than as an open space within which to move and/or morph. Or, more insidiously, we withhold acknowledgement of another person's legitimacy, indeed humanity, until they reduce

their experience(s) of gender (or sexual) fluidity to a recognizable, linear narrative of becoming who s/he “really” is.

Precisely how the common linear narrative of trans identity originated is beyond the scope of my work, but I heard the common motifs of the narrative recounted by a number of folks. In general, a female-bodied genderqueer individual (especially if they also identify as trans) must primarily identify as masculine, and/or male. They are expected to have always been tomboys with an interest in sports, boy’s toys, and courting little girls. Any feminine behavior or female identification was a trauma forced on them by a dominating external agent (family, teachers, social norms, etc.). They always wanted to be/come men. They took many steps towards becoming men from wearing men’s clothes to having masculine haircuts to possibly even changing their name to something gender ambiguous or outright masculine. The female born person must feel totally dissociated from femininity/femaleness (as if these are the same) and deeply identified with masculinity/maleness (as if these are the same). At some point, having gotten involved with radical queer identity politics, they learned about trans. In trans, they found the identity for which they had long been searching, and immediately began the journey to fulfilling their ultimate identity as a man by transitioning. A transman’s transitioning process will be met with resistance; therefore he must turn to the trans community for friendship, resources and support. If he is lucky, his cisgendered female partner will stand by him, making the transition from queer couple to straight couple as he makes his gender/sex transition. After transitioning, the mythical trans tale has two possible endings. The idealized ending finds the transman willingly sacrificing his masculine legibility and male privilege in order to be out as trans and a leader in trans

rights in his community (and/or beyond). If he still harbors trans shame or is unenlightened, he will go stealth and become a full-time man.

In his film “Against a Trans Narrative,” Jules Roskam (2008) suggests that the narrative is as pervasive as it is because it is the story that must be told (and retold) in order to access a Gender Identity Disorder psychiatric diagnosis, medical care, social support and visibility in queer and trans communities. The most significant of these is the psychiatric interview because this is the gateway to medical therapies and legal transition.²² In a way, telling the story is a phenomenological tool that represents the transmaculine future as a present condition, a becoming that already is (and therefore should be) because it always has been. Roskam explores how this seemingly universal narrative is actually a mythical story that transmen tell so often to access the resources and support they do, in fact, need, that the story becomes true through repetition. It is naturalized performatively. However, what the story leaves out are the myriad ways telling this story actually fragments trans histories, the memories and experiences of growing up gender dysmorphic (or perhaps, quite clear on their own unique gender in a system that does not privilege innovation). In addition, these narratives interrupt and sometimes foreclose conversation between and among transmen and their queer female-bodied female friends, lovers and allies about what the sudden critical mass of men in their midst might mean. One of the critical tensions that the film illustrates is how to be inclusive of transmale bodies in (formerly) queer female spaces when these men often want both the privileges of masculinity and the feminist, minority, outsider status of queer (and sometimes, former female).

²² I have heard that many trans folks, especially trans youth, get unregulated testosterone from dealers and inject themselves, which can lead to serious medical complications. I did not speak with anyone who was illegally transitioning, so I cannot present an account of the process.

Johnny not only refuses this narrative, but also works to create alternative story lines. Zie is not interested in medically transitioning, and expressed concern about the pressures on gender non-conforming female-bodied people to transition. Johnny deftly avoided explaining exactly what zirs concern is (claiming zie “can’t really speak to someone else’s experience”), but zie was willing to explain why zie gets frustrated by people who assume that genderqueer identification is a stage in the process of pursuing full transition. While Johnny does identify as a “trans genderqueer,” zie does not identify as trans. For Johnny, the distinction is that zie is keeping gender fluid, and zirs transness is not about moving from one end of the gender spectrum to the other, but rather about travelling all along and beyond the spectrum at will. Zie is strongly femme identified, although zie does not consider that reducible to being feminine, and sometimes even performs “as a woman” or dresses in feminine styles. Nonetheless, Johnny has been “informed” by more than one friend or acquaintance that “*he* is really a guy.” Sometimes people say it in a joking way, as if to test Johnny’s response to determine whether or not their assessment is correct. Others are more condescending, and act as if Johnny’s claim to gender fluidity diminishes others’ claim to transmasculinity. To be fair, Johnny acknowledges that many people are supportive, but very few people “really get it.” The extent to which Johnny receives such negative and disciplinary responses suggest that the advocacy of fluidity in queer rhetorics of inclusion becomes anxiety when that fluidity becomes an embodied practice, a performance that spills over the “drag” stage and snakes in rivulets through the everyday, dampening the already shaking ground on which we perform our gender, creating a mud that sticks to our boots and heels.

Zirs response(s) to the resistance of others is to use performance to illustrate the challenges zie and people like zim experience when they embody their gender. Johnny wants zirs art to be “a statement (pause) to call attention to the fact that gender is performable.” Zie explores femininity, masculinity, and “whatever else there is” through zirs performance work. Johnny tends not to perform as zimself. Many of the performers I met during this project have a core character or persona who then performs other characters or personas on stage. Johnny, on the other hand, creates characters with unique personalities. Some characters are based on aspects of zirs identity, while others are identities or perspectives zie wants to explore. These characters, once created, do not play other characters or personas. Instead, they portray themselves in a variety of every day situations made strange through Johnny’s skilled performance of each character’s particular personality. For Johnny, the characters are drag because their gender is not zirs gender, and yet zie also resists the notion of zirs work as drag. “Not all of my characters include gender performance aspects. They just are who they are...other people call what I do "drag" merely because the gender of my characters is different from my own, but I don't necessarily consider what I do drag performance or drag kinging.”

While Johnny performs with and in the drag king community, zie “thinks of myself as as a clown who creates characters, and the characters' genders are often different from my own which makes them drag, but the point is more often what [zir is] using the character to say, rather than the mere fact of it being drag.” Thus, zirs performances become about what is happening in a particular character’s life, and each performance contributes to the ongoing story of that character. Johnny embodies these variously sexed and gendered characters, each of whom embrace various performance

genres including burlesque, drag, circus arts, and, as Johnny puts it, “weird-ass, pomo performance art.” This kind of flexibility allows Johnny to explore zirs primary performance subject, gender, from a variety of perspectives. “Things get created for different reasons like themed shows, inspiration from songs or other people I meet.” But zie does not always want these characters to have a “deeper meaning than just what is there.” Thus, creating multiple characters allows zim to “sometimes just perform.” In these moments Johnny lingers in surface play, thus resisting the reification of “authentic” or psychologically “deep” identity.

Johnny claims that zie does not do “overtly political work,” yet every single one of zir characters I have seen in the roughly fourteen performances I have seen on film is in the process of a gender related struggle. For example, zie claims that when his character Jonathan attempts to conduct the La Habenera from Carmen zie explains “I don’t think this number is *about* anything more than what appears on the surface.” Yet, Johnny goes on to hope “that the audience is amused, first and foremost, and that they appreciate the complexity of the joke of me as an *obviously* female person performing an *effete* masculinity which is subverted by my own female body.” I have been struggling with how to understand zirs performances with/in these multiple characters. The significance of this particular doubling certainly relates to Johnny’s express desire as a performer to explore multiple forms of embodiment. Zie is a skilled performer who enjoys exploring the limits/limitlessness of zirs body and creativity. By constantly creating and revising characters and performing their antics, zie is building his professional repertoire in order to realize zirs dream of becoming a full time performer. In addition, zie wants to recover abjected bodies – the excessively, eternally pregnant

body, the socially awkward nerd body, the eccentrically effeminate male body – from scorn and re/produce them as agents of joyful subjectivity (Kristeva, 1982). Furthermore, zie wants these bodies with their unlikely performances to make people re/consider their own awkwardness or other apparent social defects as places of possibility and sites for re/creation. And yet, there is something more at stake here.

When turning this question of Johnny’s characters over in my mind, the quote that has been repeating in my brain for months without resolution suddenly became significant in a whole new way. In response to what Johnny wants audiences to get from his work, zie said:

Mostly I want them to laugh. I want them to laugh joyously, rather than laughing at someone or something, rather than laughing at another's misfortune, I want them to laugh with a deep joyfulness that permeates the rest of their day, that leaks into their lives. If everyone was able to bring a little joy into their daily lives, there would be so much less strife in the world. Sometimes I worry about how useless I'm being, just getting up on stage and prancing around-- I'm not out fighting AIDS in Africa, or even making art that convinces people to go out and fight AIDS themselves, instead I'm just dancing around like a nerdy teenage boy. But then I think about how much more peaceful and beautiful life could be if everyone was just a bit more joyful (trails off into contemplative silence)

Creating art that inspires joy, that makes the world a more peaceful and beautiful place, is not a direct intervention on a specific issue. Instead, the promotion of joy is an attempt to reconnect people to a sense of joyfulness that Johnny seems to believe will inspire them to take the initiative to make some sort of positive change in their worlds.

Johnny's cavalcade of characters, the way that zie performs Johnny with/in this multitude of bodies and experiences, is a realization of Kelly Oliver's claim that "love is an ethics of difference that thrives off the adventure of otherness" (Oliver, 2001).

Johnny's performances are a vibrant, ongoing and dynamic adventure of otherness that zie invites audiences to witness. I use Oliver's concept of witness here as an engagement with difference that enables difference (or, others) to not just be seen and acknowledged, but to be invited into dialogic relations in which their responses are met with responses that in turn open onto increased possibilities for moving beyond systems of oppression and domination. Oliver (2001) notes,

vigilance in elaborating and interpreting the process of witnessing – both in the sense of historical fact and historically located subject one the one hand, and in the sense of response-ability opened or closed in the performance of bearing witness on the other – enables working-through rather than merely the repetition of trauma and violence. (p. 18)

Johnny's performances open the possibility of bearing witness on the other (notably, not to the other) by working through gender dilemmas in order to create the conditions for new responses. Johnny's direct engagement with the audience through eye contact and soliciting audience responses puts the audience in the position of seeing, of being an eye-witness, to whatever the character experiences. By presenting zirs characters' assorted crises in a stylized way, Johnny gently presents a set of circumstances that requires a resolution. Zie sometimes solves the problem and sometimes does not, but Johnny always makes the audience role in the possible resolutions plain. In this way, Johnny makes the audience both responsible and response-able.

Because our only in person interaction occurred at IDKEX, I have not had the pleasure of seeing Johnny perform live. During our interview he showed me several of his performances that are archived under the name TheJohnnyBlazes on the video sharing website YouTube. The performance Check One Please, Part I exemplifies Johnny's approach to gender performance multiplicity. It also helps illustrate how his work transforms watchers into witnesses. Check One Please, Part I was created and performed for the Femme Show 2008, a local ensemble of femme identified performers who presented literary, dance, burlesque, performance and other performing arts pieces on femme identity. Johnny participates in this show each year partially because zie identifies as femme and partially because zie "came to drag through burlesque" and maintains connections with other femme and female bodies performers. I will describe this performance below by referring to the solo performer as a person because the character in this performance is unspecified. The performer is Johnny Blazes.

Check One, Please: Part I

Visualize a large stage with rich, red velvet curtains. Two large, wooden boxes approximately as large as medium sized moving boxes are downstage, roughly 3 feet apart. The lights start up and stay up. The music begins with a sound of up tempo, synthesized horns and an electric drum beat. I watch the boxes and listen to the music for 20 seconds before a figure comes from backstage left. The figure is short, slim, female bodied, and, based on how well I can see the outline of zirs breasts and vagina, apparently naked. As the figure finds zirsself downstage with the boxes, I can see zie is wearing a bandeau top and dance briefs the color of zirs skin. A wild, curly golden fauxhawk crowns the face, a pixie balance of fine bones, bright eyes, wide smile, and

quickchange expression. Noticing the boxes, the figure draws in a deep breath and makes an ecstatic face. These boxes are going to be fun.

What I did not realize until I watched the video a second, or third, time is that the figure is keeping time with the irregular beat of the music. Walking downstage and striking an excited pose are simple enough, but this person is transforming this simple enough blocking into a study in precision. This person knows how to *walk*. Zirs walk is articulated from the top of zirs forehead down through the face, radiates through the bilateral symmetry of the balanced body and sends energy out of the exposed toes of this figure. Zie simultaneously acknowledges the audience with exuberance and is committed to zirs motivation. Zie is utterly present. When zie walks, zie does so with such purpose, grace and vigor that the audience giggles with anticipation. When zie arrives at the inevitable, predictable, stopping place before the two boxes, zie is so present it seems incomprehensible that such a moment could be rehearsed. The audience inhales with glee as if this is utterly delightful chance. We are all invested in the fully invested body before us.

The figure peeks excitedly into each box before choosing the one downstage right. Zie climbs into the box and marches lightly with an expression of ecstasy reminiscent of gypsy-attired Lucille Ball sensuously stamping a vat of grapes. Looking down, the figure performs a lithe forward roll, articulating the roll and stretch of each vertebra with the kind of perfect balance and fluid movement that a fellow movement practitioner will recognize as the result of flawless technique. Reaching down, zie pulls a white, cotton corset from the interior of the box, and rolls zirs spine back up. Wrapping the corset around zirs slim waist, the person pretends to struggle to get the corset fastened

at the middle. With an elaborate inhale and sucking motion, zie actually slightly distends zirs rounded belly while continuing to struggle with the corset. Finally, after a second suck-in-and-distend process, zie manages to fasten the lowest fastening. The audience laughs in solidarity with this struggle. Zie then actually exhales, contracts zirs belly, and quickly finishing fastening the perfectly fitting corset, which emphasizes the curves of zirs body. Zie strikes an elegant, pin-up pose and blows a kiss at the audience. Zie then gives zieself a predatory once over and nods at the audience with an expression that suggests zie is objectifying zirsself along with us. We recognize that zie is in the “feminine” box.

The now corseted figure takes a step out of the box in the direction of the other box. Zie gets one foot on the ground, and then lifts the other foot out. Zie begins to walk toward the other box, but halts for some reason. Zie turns to face the audience with a look of exasperation. The audience hoots and laughs because they can see that the corset laces are actually affixed to the inside of the box. The figure plants zir upstage leg in a lunge position as if to gain leverage to move the backstage leg and yank zieself free. This move proves futile. Turning to confront the laces, zie tugs once, then again, then clowns a series of tugs, some of which involve zir body shaking violently. All of these moves are executed in perfect rhythm with the rapid, irregular drumbeat. No matter how much the figure tugs, the laces will not release and the box will not move. Again, while the figure is not covering much ground in zir movement, zie is constantly dynamic. Zirs movement and expressions recall the exaggerated kinesthetics of silent movie actors. In fact, it is zirs dynamic embodiment that makes the stage conceit of the static box and the unyankable strings believable. The figure clearly has a problem.

Undaunted, the person rhythmically undoes each button with the attitude of a petulant child. Although the soundtrack to the undoing is the same we've been hearing, I can almost hear "nyah (pause) nyah nyah nyah (pause) nyah nyah nyah" in time with zir movement. Once freed of the garment, the figure takes exaggerated strides over to the box that is downstage left. When zie arrives at this box, zie again steps in and spends a moment squishing the contents between zir toes. Looking down, zie spies something delightful. Zie picks up what appears to be a ski mask, and discards it with disgust. This causes the audience to burst into surprised laughter, as if discarding clothing is the most unexpected comedy they have ever experienced. Next the figure produces a pair of battered, black combat boots. Zie holds the boots next to zirs torso in a vaguely sexual way, then quickly lifts each foot to place it in an unlaced boot. Zie assumes a military bearing, throwing back zir shoulders and almost swooning with pride. Zie then strikes a coy, flirtatious pose while batting zir eyelashes at the other box. We recognize that zie is now in the "masculine" box.

Once again desiring to relocate, the figure lifts zirs left leg out as if to exit the box. The booted foot gets pulled down as if it is attached by very stretchy glue. Obviously perplexed and dismayed, the figure again attempts to get zirs foot out of the box, to no avail. A third try results in the figure disgustedly taking the boot off and casting it back into the box. Lifting zirs leg out with a perfectly pointed toe, the figure's foot finds the floor with exaltation. The foot feels around, as if looking for directions, in perfectly choreographed franticness that again makes time with the drumbeat. The foot does not quite reach the other box, so zie arches zirs body towards the box, trying to reach it without success. Zie looks around, looks down, and looks suddenly thrilled. Zie

folds down into another forward roll, and pops back up holding a wrench. The audience squeals and cheers with delight. Screwing a determined look on zir face, the figure walks zir free leg out as far as possible, then stretches zir torso mightily while using the wrench as a prosthetic to extend the arm. Zie cannot quite grasp the box, but zie is able to fish a long, burgundy boa from the box, which zie shimmies using zirs wrench.

Giving the audience a devious and delighted expression, the figure drops the wrench and the boa. What I did not notice until the second, or third, time watching the video is that throughout the previous montage the figure has been ever so slowly and almost invisibly using the foot outside the box to drag the foot inside the box closer to the other box. At this point, the figure's legs are spread such that zirs naked foot is closer to the feminine box while zir combat boot shod foot remains in the masculine box. There is roughly one and half feet of distance between the boxes, a separation the figure clearly wants to overcome. Zie turns towards the masculine box and pulls out a pair of oversized trousers. Zie tries to pull them up the leg in the masculine box, but they keep falling down. In addition, that boa on the floor keeps distracting the figure, and zie looks at it longingly. Finally, zie drops the pants, which bunch down at the opening of the box, and picks up the boa. Zie uses the boa to mime a vigorous tug-of-war between zirsself and the feminine box, and manages to pull the box even closer in the process. The audience laughs, cheers and applauds. Zie puts zir foot into the feminine box, and pulls a crinoline up to the same height as her pants on the leg in the feminine box. Zie looks proudly at the audience, which cheers.

With one foot squarely in each box, and an item of clothing falling off each leg, the figure proceeds to cast various clothing items and objects from their previous hiding

places onto the stage. The items exit the box in perfect tempo with the xylophone music that is not part of the soundtrack. The figure looks blissfully happy. Tucking each item of lower body clothing into the edge of zir skin toned dance briefs, the figure (at first, gingerly, then confidently) takes one foot out of the masculine box, then the other out of the feminine box. The instant zie is standing before us in zir outfit with both feet on the ground, the drumbeat builds into a furious crescendo and zie convulses zir clothes off with a look of panic. Even once the clothes and shoes are off, zir body continues to jerk in agitated motion that moves zie downstage right from the boxes. Clearly upset, zie surveys the scene, then begins to pick up random clothing items, holding them close and scowling at the audience. Zie throws the clothes into the masculine box, climbs in, and squats down. Zie picks up a few close pieces of clothing, and gives the audience a hurt, betrayed expression. The audience continues to laugh. Scowling again, zie reaches out for the feminine box, and places it on top of the masculine box, leaving only a sliver of openness between them. Zie is now utterly contained within these boxes. The music ends and the stage goes dark. The audience cheers.

Love and Fabulousness

Johnny describes Check One Please, Part I as, “a simple visual metaphor for the dilemma faced daily by trans, genderqueer, and other gender variant people: which box do I check? I use humor, props, and vibrant physicality to position Femme as part of a larger, complicated identity.” While this is certainly an apt description of the performance, it does not adequately represent the complexity of what I witnessed, or the impact it seemed to have on the original audience. Reading the performance along with this description suggests that the femmeness of the piece is somehow about Johnny’s

female body or the feminine aspects of both the female and male box. I think this is perhaps accurate, but the deeper implication is that femme is somehow deeply imbricated in fabulousness. Johnny's performances are truly fabulous in the queerest sense of the word: rich, textured, dangerous, sexy and playful. Zie's work seduces the audience and we follow Johnny's ambiguous lead. The clothing zie uses is so persistently clichéd. How could a corset and crinoline be anything but feminine? How could boots and trousers be anything but masculine? How could combining them represent anything but gender confusion? In the context of this performance these articles of clothing are immediately recognizable not just as objects, but as gendered artifacts. Am I to find it hilarious, or poignant, that this person is struggling mightily with such an obvious problem of wanting both kinds of items?

What I argue is that Johnny's purpose is not to have me (as an audience member) settle the question of what these particular clothing pieces mean for the character on stage, but rather to consider why they are literally pulling zim apart. What are the internal, external or hidden forces that make clothing your body such a hazard? How can getting dressed be even more vulnerable than being unclothed? This piece seems intricately connected to Johnny's own genesis as a performer. According to Johnny, many of these artifacts have transformed from "just costume pieces" to clothing with subversive potential through performance. Johnny owns these pieces because zie "went to all my proms in drag, so I had tuxes, zoots suits, and all of that stuff." Because zie was also a dancer and stage performer who wore female clothing and costumes, Johnny had feminine clothing as well. Before college zie considered the clothing "just costumes." When Johnny attended zirs first drag ball in college zie had enough costume pieces to

“walk the runway” and compete in the drag costume contest. After that experience Johnny began performing by “mixing burlesque and drag unintentionally, but then someone told me I was “edgy” and it became a more conscious choice for me.” Although this mixing of gendered artifacts is something that Johnny describes as “completely comfortable” for zim, the struggle represented in this piece simultaneously echoes Johnny’s claim that zie “fits nowhere”.

The most compelling aspect of the performance to me, as a remote audience member re/viewing (over and over) an archive of a night I will never experience, is that while Johnny usually performs as a character, zie seemed to perform this role as zirsself. Granted, it is a stylized version of zirsself articulating movement and emotion using a complex, comical gestural vocabulary that zie did not (fully) exhibit in person. Rather than filtering zirs performance concept through the personality of another character, Johnny put the performance of zirs ongoing experience of feeling checked by having to check one box or another back into zirs own body. In the end (of the performance), zie is unable to enjoy a satisfying conclusion to zirs struggle and instead creates a kind of void to hide within. The void is an undifferentiated combination, a problematic *bothness*, represented by the dark, nearly airless space of female (box) atop male (box), with the outer edge of the boxes just slightly askew to permit survivability. When the music ends, zie is both hidden and hiding while I (we) witness.

Through aesthetic mastery, Johnny’s painfully legible performance conceits transform us from watchers into witnesses, into people who cannot not see what is (not) before them (Oliver, 2001; Schechner, 1985). As audience, we do not have to struggle to understand what is unfolding before us. The plot is relatively clear. We might even feel

taken care of, as if this performance were created for our own comfort and pleasure – even the somewhat uncomfortable moments. In some ways, we are returned to Sedgwick and Moon’s open secret because we think we might know something about this person that they do not (yet) know (1994). This person is struggling with gender. We as audience members expect to see the figure sift through options for doing gender and choose a composite identity comprised of some female attributes and some male attributes. By watching the dramatic physical monologue, an audience member might feel that they know more than the “character” can know and can anticipate a resolution. The open secret seems to be that the genderqueer person is a mixed gender person who should be allowed to express their bothness. However, the figure will not be satisfied with a compromise that forecloses any of zir’s performative options. Johnny breaks the open secret open by revealing zirs desire for something more than both; zie wants *all*. The audience can see the wounding moment of comprehension when the figure’s face changes from a comical frustration to a melancholy defeat. The figures eyes look imploringly at the audience, bewildered and betrayed. Realizing zie is denied all s/h/ze takes refuge in the symbolic bothness of the two boxes, literally figuring zirs body as liminal, as in a state of betweenness. Zie hides from the audience in plain sight (where, indecently, the performer remains until the end of the show).

That Johnny re/embodies the incongruity of zirs sex and gender as a repeated failure to be officially recognizable as zirself suggests that this piece is too personal, and too universal, to filter through a persona. Because Johnny’s other personas have their own performance lives and histories, complete with their own struggles, performing through them might make this performance about their character arcs. Putting this act

into zirs body serves as a gently brutal reminder that the genderqueer/trans body has no official location. To be given access to the two predominantly accepted genders is not equivalent to being affirmed as is. Johnny's performance leaves zirs gender unresolved, and does not have an obvious resolution. If the audience previously thought zie was going to settle for a compromise, we now know we have to wonder what will satisfy zim.

However, zie makes it abundantly clear that to be trapped within a two gender system is suffocating for zim and people like zim. Considered slightly differently, Johnny performs performing (the failure of) performativity as a figure that is and is not zimself. This differs from Butler's notion of performativity because the performance seeks not a legible gender performativity, a place from which to be recognized and then naturalized through even an innovation in repetition. Instead, Johnny's performance is asking for another option, and not coming out until zie gets it. During this final arc I am pierced by the figure's wound, the wound that is/not (not) mine. I become witness to s/h/zie's pain and displacement, and the anxiety of wanting to pull the figure from the box. I think "I know the feeling" even as I know I do not know these precise feelings. I am affectively charged with the responsibility to make this person response-able.

In this act Johnny performs an aesthetics of subjectivity that requires us to move beyond recognition, to go from watching to witnessing. As watchers we might be able to distance ourselves from zirs experience by limiting knowing to a recollection of what was seen and done, or by acknowledging only the parts of another that we recognize in ourselves. As witnesses, we must take responsibility for our agency as subjects by opening into an affective encounter with Johnny, with another, with difference, in a way that initiates a co-response and correlating responsibilities. Oliver (2001) writes:

Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others - what I am calling witnessing. Insofar as subjectivity is made possible by the ability to respond, response-ability is its founding possibility. The responsibility inherent in subjectivity has the double sense of the condition of possibility of response, response-ability on the one hand, and the ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others born out of that founding possibility, on the other. (p. 15)

Johnny's performance is the founding possibility, a response that makes other responses possible. The performance hails the witness to her/his/zirs ethical obligation to respond, and when responding to enable others to also respond. What might an affirmative response to such a performance look like? For me, the response is not simply generating enthusiasm for another's subject position, a "you are okay" kind of response, because this is too easily collapsible into a rhetorical celebration of diversity that homogenizes difference and is of minimal use in making social change. Instead, a witnessing response is instead an "ok, you are" that is a somatic ethical obligation to be with another in the presence of difference and commit to the hard work of dynamic intersubjectivity, of dialogue and action, that can make social change.

The Pronoun Game

I have asked everyone I interviewed about their pronoun preferences. Surprisingly, Johnny was the only person who wanted to be referred to with gender neutral pronouns. When I asked zie about this, Johnny responded, "Using zie/zir is mostly about me, because I am not a *he* or a *she*. I am something else and that changes." Johnny cited zirs women's studies courses as the place where zie learned the difference

between sex and gender. While Johnny is similar to many of the folks with whom I spoke who think this should be more common knowledge, he is the only person who spoke of educating people about it on a regular basis. Zie seemed relieved I already knew the difference, which may have put a damper on an interesting line of conversation. Interestingly, despite this genuine concern for pronoun usage in general, and regarding zimsself in particular, Johnny never asked what pronouns I prefer. Instead, zie (like everyone else I met at IDKEX) assumed that I am female and prefer female pronouns. In addition, zie used only gender-neutral pronouns when referring to other genderqueer people zie knew. Johnny seems primarily dedicated to spreading gender-neutral pronoun usage for persons who may identify as their sex, but not the traditionally correlative gender.²³

The previously discussed performance also seems like a response to Johnny's ongoing battle both within and beyond the queer performance communities around pronouns. Johnny self identifies zirs sex as female and considers zirs gender identity to be a "genderqueer trans fagette."²⁴ When zie is dressed only in tiny underwear the same peachypink as zirs flesh, as zie is in quite of few of zirs performances, zirs female secondary sex characteristics are prominently displayed. When performing "basically naked or in almost no clothes" Johnny considers zimsself to have an "obviously female body" and yet is pleased when audiences are "surprised I am not a male." When Johnny performs in masculine attire he looks like various examples from a spectrum of

²³ Unfortunately, I did not follow up on this in our interview, but when I realized this gap in the interview, I visited zirs site and found zirs blog which is discussed in the next paragraph.

²⁴ A fagette, an identity originated by Katz of the Athens Boys Choir, is a female bodied trans person who is omnisexual, not medically transitioning, and plays with a range of genders. For more information, please see the lyrics to Fagette from Athens Boys Choir/Katz in appendix A.

masculinity from “gay hooper Swizzle Stix” to “the nerdy, teen aged white boy” that is Jonathan and a range of characters. In everyday life, Johnny is frequently read as male, but zie says people are not too surprised that zie is actually female either. Zie said zie rarely receives a bad reaction to either zirs perceived or actual sex, and even zirs gender expression. However, no matter how accepting they are of zirs identity and self-presentation, they attempt to discipline zirs body into being what it allegedly *really* is by demanding, or ascribing, a gendered pronoun to zirs person.

Johnny’s position on this matter was eloquently stated in an April 2009 letter zie sent to Stuff Magazine Boston in response to an article wherein zir was referred to with female pronouns. After thanking the magazine for writing such a positive review of zirs performance work, Blazes spent the remainder of zirs letter to the editor explaining how much of a violence it is to Johnny to call zie a she. Zie wrote that, “existing in a liminal space between masculinity and femininity is a reality that I live every day, all day, and my choice of pronoun reflects that and empowers me by giving a small amount of definition to that place where my gender resides” (website). Johnny’s self-description of living in a liminal space of gender, a perpetual state of betweenness, as giving zie a place of definition is compelling because it reveals the inherent instability of gender as a *location*, as a place to occupy, to be occupied, in the name of a foundational reality of gender. Gender liminality is not simply a betweenness that implies a spatial location that is middle ground, or compromise, or (as I said earlier) some of this and some of that. Instead, claiming gender liminality creates the possibility of gender as (a) dynamic, always on the move, unfixed. And *yet*, if the claim to gender liminality gets claimed as a

definition of who one is, does that inevitably return gender legibility to a categorical indexing, to a location on some sort of spatial map?

Johnny seems to be articulating the very conundrum of gender liminality as gender identity because zie (and the rest of us) cannot fully escape the desire for a subjectivity that is articulable in a social grammar, but zie does not want that to be tied to a location that reinforces spatialized being or linear becoming. As discussed earlier, too often genderqueer bodies are read (or expected to be narrativized) as a temporary coordinate between two fixed poles of female and male. The progression has a valuation. Based on my understanding at the time of this writing, I would schematize the progression from least valuable identity to most valuable identity as transfemale-female-genderqueer-transmale-male. In the case of female-bodied genderqueer persons, the expectation is a linear movement from femininity to transmasculinity (or, possibly, just masculinity). Johnny's performances resist an understanding of genderqueer as a middle coordinate and instead advocate for an ephemeral betweenness that manifests its materiality in the unique individual who embodies it. The "story" of this gender(s) is constantly in the process of being created. Perhaps to be gender liminal is to accumulate inconsistent performances of gender that consolidate variation rather than sameness and consistently challenge normative narrative structures and expectations with *performances*.

As Johnny goes on to explain, ze is adamant that zirs use of pronouns is not a "performance gimmick" or a matter of something that can be taken on or off like the costumes zie uses in performance. Instead, it is about denaturalizing language in order both to highlight and to unsettle the normative socialization of bodies embedded in casual

pronoun usage. To refer to Johnny, or any trans or genderqueer person, by the gender that traditionally corresponds with their sex is to “mis-pronoun” them. **Mispronunciation** is gender mispronunciation. To **mispronounce** someone is to speak a person wrong, possibly to (attempt to) performatively discipline a non-conforming body with/in the disciplinary regime of language. It is to inscribe non-conforming body-subjects into and with given social grammars, thereby forcibly mis-recognizing them – denying them witness. A **mispronunciation** disciplines an unruly body at the site of embodiment by suggesting there is a baseline gender (that which goes with sex) that can be seen, or at least discovered, irrespective of what one performs on top of it. **Mispronunciation** suggests that if all the trappings of gender non-conformity were (forcibly?) removed, then the naked truth of gender would quite literally be exposed, and it would definitively prove that sex is gender.

In this way, pronouns are performatives, sayings that are doings (Austin, 1975). To refer to someone as he or she is to declare that person male or female, or, more socially significantly, masculine or feminine. While pronouns are not usually classified as performatives, I suggest a critical examination of these pronoun usage reveals them as a kind of performative, as a way of saying people that is also doing their gender, or hailing them to do their gender. Consider how frequently pronouns are used to (unreflexively) lump people into one of two gender categories so we can quickly do them as gendered, and therefore know other things about them. Even as the correlative features of what a he does, or what a she looks like, might change and expand, there are still a series of (conscious, unconscious and semi-conscious) expectations for hes and shes. Like other performatives, these pronouns are citational and derive their authority

from prior, effective utterances (Austin, 1975). Contemporary *hes* and *shes* are authorized by a history of *he-ing* and *she-ing* that precedes them. What do I think I know about a *s/he* that I no longer know about a *zie* and why does it matter? Butler writes that gender legibility is a pretext for humanness, and asserts that as social beings we (continuously, unconsciously) assess people's genders in order to assess how to interact with them, indeed how to even know them as human (Butler, 2004). Our impulse to put someone into a gender category is so deeply ingrained it feels natural. As a result the pronouns we use to reflect that categorization seem like innocuous discursive markers, merely descriptive, instead of as the strategic discursive operatives, as performatives, they are. Pronouns performatively redo a person's gender by consolidating enumerable assumptions the *he-ness* or *she-ness* of someone else's life. What can I expect from *zie-ness*?

For Austin, performatives are generally secured by a witness who certifies the event. Austin's certifying witness is a very different figuration than Oliver's loving, responsive witness. The Austian witness is a disciplinary figure whose certification makes the performative take. When I pronoun someone I assume my performative gesture is certified by the phantasmic witness of entire social body. The performative power of pronouns is grounded in and supported by the powerful and pervasive ideological discourses around gender that (re)produce the categories of *he* and *she* as reality (Foucault, 1977). A person creating a new performative pronoun, in the case the gender-neutral pronoun, cannot assume a certifying witness. Instead, *zie* must perform in such a way that constitutes a certifying witness. By requesting, or even demanding, to be pronounced with gender-neutral pronouns, Johnny is interpellating others into becoming

that certifying witness. In this way, Johnny is locating the certifying witness as the body of authority that pronounces him into existence. Here the distinction between Austen's witness and Oliver's witness begins to blur. If I certify (witness) someone's gender through a gender-neutral pronoun, I testify (witness) to the experience of gender liminality and co-create the conditions of possibility (witness) for genderqueer subjectivity. Johnny's authority in this relationship is less obvious. Zie's request (or demand) performs as if zie were requesting an original witness that lays the foundation for future citational performatives of the gender-neutral pronoun. However, Johnny's claim to gender-neutral pronouns as a parallel performative in balanced relation with he and she not only avoids the skewed relationship between gender-neutral and normative pronouns, but also seems to deny that normative pronouns are always already in hierarchical relation to each other. In this way, Johnny seems to be denying witness to the performative inequity in normative pronouns that is arguably at least part of the incentive for finding a way to mark female bodied persons as something other than (and potentially greater than) she.

Pronouns are intimate performatives. To pronoun someone is to put other people's genitals in my mouth, to declare their sex as gender through a familiar movement of lips, tongue and teeth. Forming my lips, tongue, teeth, into "zie" or "zir" is not physically difficult except that I no longer know exactly what is in my mouth. Although making my mouth say 'he' or 'she' is not necessarily easier physiologically, I have been trained from birth to speak ourselves and others as he and she. I have learned that to accidentally he a she or she a he is to commit a deeply wounding offense. Even as a person who has had non-normatively gendered friends and lovers I have always been able

to analyze the person's clothing and gait in order to guess accurately a person's preferred pronoun without having to ask, as if asking were to imply an instability that equals offense. Most of the time I determine and guess without even consciously processing it. Picking pronouns is such a deeply embedded habit that it feels natural. Saying 'zie' or 'zir' does not feel as natural and thus disrupts my hailing of others into their *he*-ness or *she*-ness. When I use a gender-neutral pronoun, I might stumble over my words, attempting awkwardly to speak the unfamiliar. This is partially about linguistic unfamiliarity, but it might also be that when I speak a gender-neutral pronoun, I hail unknowing. I speak a person without knowing exactly how I am doing zirs gender.

Why, if I might admit a range of possible gender expressions for she and he, do I become so unsettled by the gender expression that prefers zir? Is it because I cannot declare them, and because I am implicated as potentially undeclared? To what extent does my (or anyone's) citizenship in the human family come into question when someone else declares zirself as gender neutral, and/or do we suddenly, uncomfortably realize that these others, these people who refuse to just play along with the quotidian gender game, are actually being denied their full citizenship for no good reason? While I do not have a definitive answer for any of these questions, I do think there is something about how we performatively **pronounce** each other that links deeply to human citizenship, and to declare gender neutral pronouns is to admit gender fluidity into our lexicon of not only discursive gender, but also gender embodiment. To create performances that demand new pronouns, that demand previously unrecognized bodies to be accurately and ethically **pronounced**, is to deeply affect both individuals and culture.

Personally, I find myself frustrated by gender-neutral pronouns. Some of my resistance is mere habit. To speak or to type differently requires me to rewire some well-worn neural pathways in my body. Even as I write this I keep tripping over my fingers, searching for the right keys. However, even more significantly, I am not sure I am ready to surrender the idea of using gender as a form of interpersonal shorthand. I am guilty of thinking the solution might just be category creation. I am complicitous with putting people into a between or a middle that secures the ends because that is part of how I, as a cultural subject, organize the world. As someone who has settled for *she-ness*, even during times when I felt distinctly other than *she*, I can understand the desire to be hailed by a category that feels closer to where my gender resides. And yet, however fluid my *she-ness* has been, I take pride in the category. Pronouns are how I connect with other “shes” and distinguish myself from what I experience as the distinguishable “hes.” While intellectually I understand how mispronouncing someone does violence to their personhood, part of how I feel a human connection with others is by (however problematically) instinctively “knowing” their gender.

I realize my affinity for pronouns is neither natural nor politically neutral. As someone whose experiences of being gender disciplined do not include ever having been mispronounced, I enjoy pronoun privilege that I never fully considered about until this project. And, when this project began, using gender-neutral pronouns in addition to gendered pronouns seemed like an inclusive solution to the problem of address as I understood it. However, as this project has continued, I have come to understand gender-neutral pronouns as anything but neutral. They do not neutralize address or universalize subjectivity. They are not even as user friendly as the polite gesture of referring to “one”

or the grand, royal “we”. Rather, these particular formations alienate my gut sensing of personness from the pronouns I use to refer to it. In addition, these pronouns do not disappear into a written or spoken sentence, alleviating the reader/listener’s desire for gender recognition. Quite to the contrary, they maddeningly contort language making it rise where it should fall, causing stops and minor crises in the passage towards the end: the period. This form of mis-mis pronunciation is not “neutral.” Instead it consistently and repeatedly calls attention to the otherness of another, quite possibly preventing recognition or witness by continuously alienating the person being spoken about from gender.

I am not, however, most perturbed by my concerns around perpetual alienation. I am most vexed by the way I perceive gender-neutral pronouns as perpetuating the legacies of institutionalizing gender difference and ascribing hierarchal power to them that they (supposedly) seek to undermine. Speaking from within the social/performative apparatus of gender and sex, I am also aware that gender neutrality tends to be linked to “objectivity” in long histories of preference identified with masculinity. In other words, the problem with gender-neutral pronouns is that they smack of male generic language the way male reference was assumed to be humanly generic, and as such is effectively exclusive. No matter how many other ways I also understand it, I feel that in this equation, anyone who might be a she loses – I lose – because they continue to put the feminine and the female under erasure. We have not yet come to a place in our shared social grammar where she carries equal power with he. Could a radical claim to she become the power pronoun of a gender liminal revolution? No, because the bodies that want to the gender neutral pronouns are seeking release from she, and not accepting he

does not neutralize their rejection of she. For me, gender neutral pronouns default into male generic pronouns. In the language of gender-neutral pronouns, she is subordinated to he, and (in practice) to zie. I do not accept this resolution. So, with all of this in mind, what can I do – and perhaps what can Johnny do – to respond differently (Schneider, 2002)?

CHAPTER 5: The “Community” is Silent: Performing Unrecognition²⁵



(Image 9: IDKE) ²⁶

IDKEX

Since 1999 drag king performers and (more recently) other gender performers have been travelling across the country and to different parts of the world to attend the International Drag King Extravaganza conference, or IDKE. Now called the International Drag King Community Extravaganza, this annual event draws hundreds of performers, their friends and partners and other folks interested in gender performance.

²⁵ The title of this chapter is derived from the fact that when the IDKE board changed the name of the conference to include “community” they did not change the acronym. I suggest that this implies a hesitance to define who gets included in community, as well as who gets excluded.

²⁶ Image credit: <http://www.myspace.com/idkex>

In 2008, the conference celebrated its 10th anniversary by reconvening where it began in Columbus, Ohio. I heard about IDKEX from Vanessa, whom you will meet in Chapter Five. When I asked if it might be a place where I could interview some folks for this project and otherwise get a sense of the drag king scene, she said “Oh, yes!” IDKEX draws “everyone” in the drag king world. I wanted to go home and immediately register for IDKEX but the information was not available until late August. By then, I was feeling the pressure of my semester commitments and concerned about expenses. I determined that attending the conference was too extravagant to pursue. No matter how informative or fun it might be, attending IDKEX seemed unnecessary for a project primarily focused on local performers.

Three days before the conference opened I was of a different mind. The local performers with whom I had previously spoken no longer seemed interested in the project. When I tried to make contact, my emails went unanswered. I expanded my attempts to include some people I did not actually know, or had not met in person, but who lived within a reasonable driving distance. My efforts did not yield any interviews, although I did have a few folks suggest I get back to them at a later time. I had seen a lot of shows, and had a number of casual conversations, but I only had one recorded interview. I was feeling rather desperate. Even though the conference was only a few weeks away I had pretty much forgotten about it. However, apparently the information was lodged in my brain somewhere because when I awoke in the middle of the night in yet another dissertation related panic, I remembered the IDKEX bookmark in my dissertation folder. I got up and reviewed the information. I still could not afford to go, but I also felt I could not afford not to. After all, I considered, this might be my only

chance to secure enough interviews to finish the project. Thus, I made the last minute arrangements for my partner Katy and I to attend the event, loaded the car and made the nine-hour drive to Columbus.

I had never even heard of IDKE before the summer of 2008, so I knew very little about the conference. I knew the schedule of events would be fairly standard for a performance conference: an opening keynote speech, several meet and greet events, panels, workshops and performances. Fortuitously, because this was IDKE's 10th anniversary, the founders had prepared a retrospective photographic exhibit of the past ten years that was available for viewing throughout the weekend. The exhibit included this brief commemorative history of IDKE:

The First International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE) took place on October 15-17, 1999 in Columbus, Ohio, and was founded by Julie Applegate (Jake), Shani Scott (Maxwell), Sile Singleton (Luster/Lustivious de la Virgion) and Donna Troka (dj love), in conjunction with H.I.S. Kings, Fast Friday Productions, the Kings Court, and many other Columbus community members. It was a first-of-its-kind event in that it was a collaborative, non-competitive gathering of drag kings, their fans, and the people who studied, photographed and filmed them.

In October 17-19, 2003, its fifth year, IDKE realized its true potential as a traveling annual conference with its move to Minneapolis, Minnesota where it was produced and hosted by FTM Productions. IDKE 6 took place in Chicago, Illinois from October 14-17, 2004, and was hosted by The Chicago Kings. IDKE became truly "international" in its seventh year, when it traveled to Winnipeg,

Canada from October 20-23, 2005 where it was hosted by the Gender Play Cabaret. Without a doubt, IDKE has grown to be a huge national and international event. To date, participants have hailed from such countries as the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, England, Germany, Sweden, and Ireland.

The fact that IDKE has begun traveling as the drag king community continues to grow has demanded two important things: an IDKE Steering Board & an evolution in focus for the events. The IDKE Steering Board was established in 2001 to identify a host city for IDKE 5 (2003). Along with the tasks of soliciting proposals from host cities and choosing the city best suited and prepared to host IDKE, the Steering Board also provides support and guidance to host cities. For more information, go to: www.idke.info.

And while IDKE was a gender-based event that was originally created in 1999 to focus on drag king culture, our king community has grown over the years. In 2001, a Bio-Queen Manifesto (that was presented to the community during the Saturday afternoon conference) requested that IDKE become more inclusive of all gendered performances. This movement continued for three years and a request to expand the focus of IDKE was again presented and discussed during the Town Hall Session at IDKE Chicago in 2004. A vote was taken at the end of the discussion, and as a result of that vote, the event's name was changed to the International Drag King Community Extravaganza (still abbreviated as IDKE). Finally in 2005, IDKE evolved to become a more all-encompassing gender arena where all forms of gender expression are welcomed and nurtured. In 2006, the

IDKESC voted to rename itself the International Drag King Community Extravaganza Board and began the process of applying for nonprofit status.²⁷

As this history reveals IDKE is a grassroots performance movement that has continued to grow thanks to the dedication of not only the founders, but also the folks who attend year after year and have gotten involved with the structure and governance of both the annual event and the ongoing organization. IDKE is deeply rooted in drag king performance, and a majority of the conference attendees and performers continue to be drag kings, transmasculine performers or genderqueer, masculine presenting performers. The 2001 Bioqueen Manifesto has resulted in female-bodied female performers performing femininity, although they comprise a relatively small portion of the conference attendees. At IDKEX all of their performances were scheduled for 11 pm or later and in venues that are not a part of the main conference. Also, as I learned at IDKEX, conference organizers and attendees are still trying to figure out how to make the conference more racially diverse as well as more accessible for folks with physical and/or cognitive disabilities and limited (or non-existent) financial means. Although this history clearly advocates for a spirit of inclusion, the reality is that the conference is still experiencing some growing pains and has not quite figured out how to fully accommodate all gender performers.

For drag kings and transmasculine folks the conference provided a rich and seemingly supportive environment in which they comprised a comfortable majority. Most folks were dressed in masculine attire, although what that constituted varied from the young hipster masculinity of black skinny jeans and punk band t-shirts to the aging

²⁷ www.idkexi.com/idke-history/

hipster masculinity of cowboy shirts paired with thrifted dress pants to seemingly age neutral hip hop styles of saggs and oversized t-shirts and sweatshirts to the euro-chic look of a tailored, all black ensemble with colored plastic glasses. In my experience, queer communities cling to recognizable codes of queer dress as a way to make themselves visible to other queers. As in other subcultures, or even mainstream culture, clothes are some of the artifacts that visibly link people who might share identifications or positionality. Queer folks have a long history of using clothing signals to mark themselves as queer in a way that other queers would recognize, but which would be less visible to non-queer folks. In a queer environment like IDKEX, those clothing codes can be used with more precision to help visually identify someone with a similar personal style, taste in music, or even gender presentation. As I repeatedly saw, being able to connect over an appreciation for vests or a t-shirt depicting a particular concert tour provided a social opening to begin a conversation.

Clothing had another layer of signification at IDKEX as well because most of the folks at IDKEX embodied their gender performance identities for most of the weekend. They dressed in a way that their persona, or character, or alter ego would dress on stage. For some folks, the way they dressed at IDKEX is consistent with how they dress in everyday life. I got the impression that for others IDKEX was an opportunity to perform their stage persona as an everyday life persona. I do not mean to imply that stage and everyday identities are always either integrated or separable, but rather that IDKEX allowed people to present as they preferred, and most people seemed to prefer their performance self. The accessory of the conference nametags compounded these clothing performances. Each person could fill out his/hir/her name tag with a preferred name and

pronoun. A vast majority of the people present used the name and pronoun of their stage persona, thus marking themselves as that person(a). Several sessions included self-introductions, so (as I suspected) I learned that while some people use their preferred everyday name as a stage name, many others go by a different (usually given) name in everyday life. The ongoing performative process of self-naming and self-fashioning for those in attendance struck me as a powerful dynamic of people performing themselves performing a part of themselves. What sorts of selves were being created that weekend? What are the implications for individuals and groups who witnessed each other in this process?

At IDKEX, a person's social power seemed directly proportional to how long they had been performing, the regions in which or troupes with which they performed, how many IDKEs they had attended, and how popular they were on the national (or international) scene. Some performers seemed to earn bonus social points for being particularly outrageous or rude. For example, a performer named "Uncle Haywood" would consistently enter sessions with a sneer, take a seat in one of the most visible chairs, and slide down so that his neck was on the edge of the backrest and his legs were splayed open. In this way, he usually took up at least three seats. During introductions he would recite his extensive performance resume in a superior, yet utterly bored tone. He described himself as "your creepy, 70s loving uncle in a leisure suit" and made a pedophilic joke about how much he enjoyed his nephews. He also liked belching while others were talking. For reasons that are beyond my comprehension he nonetheless collected acolytes all weekend. He was just one example of many people who used their

bodies, stories or attitudes to assert themselves as a person of significance in the gender performer popularity hierarchy that became evident throughout the weekend.

However, most people were simply trying to form friendships, make connections and promote their work. When entering sessions folks would often sit next to someone who looked similar to them or whom they had seen in a previous session or performance. Folks made small talk, discussed what other conferences they had attended and who they knew in common. Sometimes folks would exchange contact information or plan to meet up later. Despite seeing some of the same people over and over again, I never ended up in one of these conversations. As a newcomer observing these fairly standard practices for socializing at a conference, I felt far more like an outsider than I anticipated. I knew that people would know each other from other conferences or events, but I did not anticipate how cliquish an environment this would be. People seemed to socialize with the goal of meeting specific other people or members of troupes that were similar to their own. I did not know how to break through the phantasmic membrane of unrecognizability that separated me from the nuclei of activity I could so closely observe.

Before arriving at IDKEX, I anticipated that I would have to adjust to the rules and norms of this world, but I felt excited about it. I have participated in a variety of queer lifeworlds, and have generally been able to slightly adjust my own presentation and interactional style to suit the environment (Buckland, 2002). In addition, I have been involved in other the gender variant performance scenes in Boston and Washington D.C. as both a performer and a community member. I anticipated that the conference would be a more densely populated and more diverse version of those communities. However, what I discovered was that this particular community was quite different than any I had

ever inhabited. As soon as I walked into the registration space I felt like I had crossed into a world where I was not welcome. Registration took place in a warehouse that smelled of wet wood and burnt coffee. When I walked in the door I saw an exhausted futon poised half open, as if yawning, drooling hastily constructed pamphlets from the left corner of the frame. To the left of the futon was a table covered in junk food and reading material. Music I did not recognize was playing. The room was cold and uninviting, but it was not the décor or the freezing weather (unregulated by heat) that seemed to be the problem. I was instinctively on alert. I felt strangely threatened. To the right was the line for registration table.

More potent than any other feature of the room was the thick atmosphere of masculine energy. As I veered right, I was eyed suspiciously by the line of masculine presenting persons trudging, one set of heavy black boots after another, to the registration table. People were looking intensely nonchalant, avoiding eye contact while still trying to observe others and be observed. If someone they knew entered the room, they would break the silence with a greeting and a combination handshake slap on the back. If I had not known better I would have sworn I had walked into a local dive bar populated by men born men. I braced myself, and got in line. Feeling ill at ease, I scanned the line, trying to find someone with whom I could make a human connection (I had not yet realized that smiling would mark me as irreparably female). Someone I knew as a woman, who is now a man, locked eyes with me. We recognized each other. I smiled and tried to speak, but he quickly (nervously) turned away and began speaking loudly to the person next to him. I was surprised, but I justified his behavior by determining he might have been worried that I would compromise his current gender presentation by using his former

name or female pronouns. This moment would be emblematic of the myriad times I interacted with someone at IDKEX, only to be rendered an utter stranger at the next meeting or panel, no matter how recently I had met or spoken with the person. In this space, my location on the circuit of recognition was hardly worth re/visiting.

I was puzzled by the challenge of in/significance throughout the weekend. At IDKEX I experienced a repeated unrecognition that functioned as an inverse of the pattern of recognition others seemed to experience. In other words, each time I was seen again by the same person I was unrecognized, new, performed into illegibility from a position of legibility and now suspect normativity (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The accumulated episodes of unrecognition consolidated my unrecognizability over time. During my first few hours at the conference I was concerned that the unrecognition would hamper my efforts to meet potential interview partners. If I interacted with the same people more than once, and they unrecognized me each time, then how would I ever “convince” them to speak with me? I realized that being unrecognized was surfacing my innate struggles with worthiness. Ironically, I was waiting for someone who may or may not be considered legible in other arenas to use their subjectivity to hail me as a subject. I was not existing to myself and utterly dependent on the circuit of IDKEX recognition for self-being. My realization made me angry. When two flesh and blood people stand or sit next to each other six times in a few hours, and have exchanged names twice, they can recognize each other in a first step towards acknowledging a common humanity. I was at the bloody event because I believed the weekend was a gathering intended to enlarge the parameters around who is recognizable as a person through performance. I did not realize that folks at IDKEX would be so invested in

marking the boundaries of inclusion through precise exclusion as they seemed. As a result, I felt the sting of the kind of marginalization, even personal annihilation, I had come to address.

On the other hand, waiting until I got recognized to speak with anyone was not going to get me anywhere, so I had to figure out how to activate my in/significance. Being performatively unrecognized by other people allowed me to enter and exit spaces without acknowledgement. Instead of being upset that I could sit or stand next to someone without being addressed, even in the most basic way, I just started sitting and standing next to people. I walked into break out sessions about performing masculinity in which I was the only person not doing masculinity and sat down.²⁸ Several people I had previously met were already seated and saw me walk in. They did not acknowledge me, and I did not acknowledge them. We were mutually not-not recognizable, which seemed to neutralize the significance (and perhaps the threat) of normativity I embodied. In one such session the facilitator (whom I had met twice) actually asked me if I had the right room, to which I replied yes without explaining further. He did not look convinced. A minute or so later he asked if I did “*male drag*” in a tone that suggested I did not, and therefore should not be present. Again, I said yes. He looked irritated, but it was time to start the session. He avoided eye contact with me the rest of the time. When I made a thoughtful contribution to the conversation, he looked genuinely surprised. After my comment, I enjoyed the first and last direct look *in the eye* from someone I met five times over the weekend. Something I said helped him think through a performance idea, and

²⁸ To be clear, I entered sessions where I might not have been especially welcome, but I did not enter any sessions that were meant to be closed spaces for an identity with which I do not identify. For example, I did not go into any session labeled “transmen only” because that would be an ethical violation.

when he shared his realization he looked me directly in the eye. We were not having a conversation, but we were engaged in an exchange of ideas and eye contact. When I smiled in response, the connection was broken and the conversation resumed.

After the session, I began rethinking the significance of how I kept being performed into and co-performing my unrecognizability. I had already gotten over my hurt feelings and was trying to make sense of the situation. The purpose of the conference was to promote gender in performance and gender as performance, especially masculinity. Knowing this, and having already encountered uneasiness in the registration line, I chose not to wear the traditionally masculine clothing I packed for the event. I felt undecided about whether or not I could legitimately embody my own masculine attributes and artifacts in that setting. Would I be falsely portraying myself as masculine-identified when I play with a variety of gender presentations? Looking back, I wonder if I was assuming a consistency about other people that limited my ability to recognize them in their complexity. None of it felt particularly personal. People were recognizing other people whom they had previously met, or who looked like them, or who they had seen in a performance or film or breakout session. Still, how much other unrecognizing might have been happening all around me?

Unrecognizing is active. A few things were unarguably happening. I repeatedly met people who acted like they had never met me before. After the first few times this happened, I stopped reminding people that we had met because that did not spark any recognition either. Other people were meeting and greeting each other – forming new relationships and making friends. In addition, I was not invisible. My body could be seen. In fact, as the reaction of the facilitator suggests, I was highly visible as someone

not corresponding to the various expectations for self-presentation at this particular event. But, I do not think it was my look alone that made me suspicious. He and I had spent a solid twenty minutes the previous day discussing his work with burlesque dancers, my work around burlesque and our shared interest in intersections of transmasculine performance and burlesque performance. Was it my admission of performing femininity that made me incongruent with who he expected to be in the session? Or, was he unrecognizing me by *not not* recognizing me (Schechner, 1989). In other words, I previously felt like I was being treated as a stranger, as unknown, but this interaction suggests that instead I was instead being interpolated as someone who did not belong. Considered this way, the unrecognition had less to do with who I was, or at least who I was perceived to be, than who I was not, or perceived not to be.

Un/recognition also functions as an exercise of power. Coming together in a critical mass under a rubric of shared identities or experiences generally intends to “empower” people, to help them not only *feel* more powerful, but *enact* the privilege that accompanies power (Foucault, 1976). A process of empowerment is an invitation to a performance of power. Irrespective of how much power an any individual may or may not experience or perform outside of the conference, as a group gender transgressors generally face resistance and/or opposition to their performance(s) of gender. Because a consistent and socially acceptable (i.e. legible within existing social norms) gender performance is often linked to other forms of power, those who perform transgressive gender experience reduced access to individual, social and institutional power(s) in ways that make everyday life more challenging (Butler, 2004). For example, people who are legible within normative gender standards are more significantly more likely to know

which public restroom is designated for their body and significantly less likely to wonder if their gender presentation will threaten the other people in that restroom or put them in danger. They are unlikely to avoid going to the restroom altogether for fear of harassment or violence against them. The IDKE conference is constructed as an oasis from the challenges that gender transgressors might face as they perform gender off stage. In response to the common difficulty of restroom safety the conference organizers (re)constructed half of the restrooms as gender inclusive by taping up signs with a female, male and transgender symbol on them. In this way, they were literally creating a space where an individual could find a safe restroom by including a symbol that folks whose sex and gender may not correspond *can recognize* as including them. In other words, they see themselves recognized by the signs and whoever made them.

When I consider how the male/female symbol system works to categorically separate sexes as they perform the universal functions of excretion, I am reminded how deeply sexed restrooms imply absolute genital difference between “men” and “women” that makes sharing a restroom unthinkable. Entering the wrong restroom is meant to be mortifying, so I imagine entering this heavily coded space when your sex/gender do not correlate to the stick figure on the door is cause for intense anxiety. IDKEX alleviated that anxiety by expanding the restroom symbol system to include all bodies irrespective of their sex/gender correlation. And yet, they did so by creating an excess of signification, by explicitly resignifying the symbols, by covering over and elaborating the signs already there. These hand-drawn signs introduced an element of parodic recognition and a playful recognition of the body space. What might have happened if they took all of the signs off of the bathrooms? Would people have stopped peeing altogether

for fear of using the wrong restroom, or would we have just used the facilities without stopping to consider whose genitals go where in the proper order of things? The organizers likely did not deface the property out of respect for the space. However radical the gender politics of the event, the attendees were still trying to be recognizable as cooperative university guests. These signs were about temporarily speaking truth the power. What possibilities might the conference organizers have opened up for the University of Cincinnati community members if the alternative signs had stayed up or the permanent ones were taken down?

IDKEX provided a space of alternative recognition for conference attendees. Accordingly, it explicitly constructed a space for identification by persona. The performative power of un-recognizing lay in diminishing, even to the point of invisibility, (perceived) normative presence. In this temporary inversion of the social order, signification of the self could be manipulated to include multiple and fluid subjectivities. That itself becomes a point of pleasure and play, such as in the example of resignifying the restrooms. It also differently constructs the field of constraint within which gender performativities can or will be recognized (Butler, 1993). I am left wondering if recognition requires that some subjectivities be unrecognized. Put another way, is unrecognizing some subjectivities required in order to recognize other subjectivities? Or perhaps, is unrecognizing some subjectivities a way to confer value, perhaps even power, on the recognition of other subjectivities?

Unrecognized, I was enabled and in a sense required, to move *like a ghost* throughout the conference. As a ghost, I was both there and not there, a threat to some and a non-entity to others. My material body was present, but the continuous

unrecognition of my self was a reminder that materiality constitutes an object, but not necessarily a subject. Visibility does not belong to the object, but is instead a tactical, performative agreement that is constantly negotiated by subjects. The fragility of visibility is underscored when unrecognition denies your subjectivity to your face. My in/visibility caused me to wonder about the often central role of “visibility” in identity politics. How does a bodyself perform her/his visibility? Is the performance visible if it is unrecognized? Conversely, can a performance be recognized if it is invisible? Does visibility inevitably return us to the idiomatic, but often unfulfilled promise that seeing is believing? What does recognizing only what is visible obscure? As someone not there, consistently unrecognized, how could I possibly perform the responsibilities of witness?

Visibility is not the same as recognition. Visibility confers object status to that which is visible. Recognition is the effect of strategically earned and tactically accomplished intersubjective negotiations. Recognition facilitates subjectivity. In the context of gender variant performance, recognition helps consolidate their performances of a gendered self. Withholding recognition, or unrecognized, denies the subjectivity of the other. Through recognition these gender variant performers have the power to make or un/make another’s identity. However, when recognition is premised on visibility, and visibility objectifies, then how does recognizing visibility facilitate subjectivity? This subject, in his/her layered personae, disappearance into an alter self, into self-representational play, eludes recognition. The person cannot be pinned down as male or female, so although authenticity is in many ways prized it is also constantly put off, deferred or denied in favor of the unstable mix of transness. In this way, the spectacle of

visibility threatens the possibility of recognition and thus the potential for witness. And yet, these performers are recognizing each other, so perhaps in the end what is recognized is subjectivity as (a) *performance*.

CHAPTER 6: "THEY CAN'T BELIEVE I'D GO THERE!":
PERFORMING QUEERING



(Image 10: A1 1)²⁹



(Image 11: A1 2)

²⁹ All photographs reproduced with permission.

Al Schlong sure is one sexy guy! Born of necessity, forged in the fires of the dirty dirty, radical as street sex, delicious as southern peach melting on the tongue. Al is one drag king not afraid to express his feminine side: cuff links, suspenders and bankers cuffs all make him leak a little pre-cum. Al Schlong is sleazy; he's not the guy you bring home to momma; rather the one in the morning that made you feel like you'd stepped into a sleazy 70's movie as the judgment-challenged heroine. Just admit it, you know it, Al is a little bit of a hip shaking rock star!

It was a dark and stormy night in 2004 when the energizer bunny and the sticky sleez of 70's porn finally had their love child: Al Schlong! His black flowing locks and dark eyes will mystify you. You will dream of running your hands down his smooth muscular body and consuming his flesh like a soft ripe peach. Al is a southern man and his words drip sweet from his lips like the sap of a pecan tree. However, his super charged, bunny speed, pelvic thrusts send Al's huge signature cock in your direction, letting you know why we call all southern things "dirty dirty." Once you experience Al's throbbing, begging, erections you will feel that warm ooze you've been craving and may be unable to control your own urge to make it rain. Al is the perfect combination of glam rock and hard core, his performance is flawless and romantic in a back alley, I don't need your number but your beautiful, bad boy, biker, horney, uncontrollable energy, furry, oh my god what was that, kind of way. He is in love with himself and it makes it impossible not to love him. Get some extra batteries for that vibrator because

your going to need them after the show, Al is sure to turn all your switches on.

Al Schlong would like to meet: the movers, shakers, burlesquers, kings, queens, in-betweens, the gorgeous, the disgusting, penthouse living, street dwelling, mommas, daddys, boys, girls, puppies, pets, punk rockers, divas fantastic, and as always those who flag red on the left side.³⁰

(<http://www.myspace.com/alschlong>)

The Queerest of the Queer



(Image 12: Al 3)

³⁰ Flagging is part of the hankie code of sadomasochistic sexual behaviors where someone puts a handkerchief of a certain color in the back pocket of their pants (or otherwise affix it to their body or clothing) to indicate the kind of sex act you want to perform or have someone perform on/to you. To flag red on the left side means you want to be the receptive partner of vaginal or anal fisting. Al is offering to be the insertive partner in his biography. Asha will do either or both.



(Image 13: Al 4)

The first time I saw Al Schlong perform was a revelation. Until his performance, I was used to scenes that, while sometimes uninspired or amateurish, were technically competent. In addition, even the edgiest scenes (however problematic the messages) stayed within the bounds of such acceptably vulgar activities as partial nudity, or (where the question of consent is never fully resolved) simulated sex. Al was the first performer I saw who unabashedly engaged the grotesque through hyperbolic body performances that used things like oversized genitals, sadomasochistic artifacts/signifiers, wild costumes and unrestrained confidence. Perhaps more significantly, Al is the only performer with whom I spoke who seems utterly devoid of talent. The unexpectedness of his aggressive scene of sexual marginality paled in comparison to his arrhythmic movement and complete inability to lip sync. He could neither find nor keep the beat, and seemed to know only every third line or so of the song. Nonetheless, Al was incredibly enthusiastic. Not charismatic (which sometimes covers a multitude of

technical sins), but enthusiastic. He was thrilled with himself. Every now and again he would pause and grin as if to mentally high five himself for his excellent work. Yet, despite Al's technical imperfection, the crowd response was absolute frenzy. I, too, was unable to resist the revolting appeal of someone so rapturously committed to being just *awful*.

Before I introduce you Al (and Asha), or perhaps Asha (and Al), I must share the experience of seeing him/her for the first time. As part of my ongoing mission to attend as many subversive gender performances as possible, I went to a S.O.N.G. (Southerners On New Ground) benefit concert intended to raise funds for work around trans issues in local communities. Al was sharing the bill with several performers including The Cuntry Kings, the local drag king troupe, a slam poet and the local band Bella Fea. Not really considering the fact that shows run on queer standard time, which is to say always late, my partner Katy and I arrived for the show only five minutes late, but ninety minutes before the show actually began. In fact, when we arrived, only a few performers were present, and the stage had not yet been assembled. After volunteering to help set out folding chairs (selfishly motivated by the desire to sit somewhere other than the floor), we chatted with the performers present while the stage and sound equipment grew up around us. Most of our time was spent talking with a friend about an unfortunate women's studies class in which the lives of sexual minorities were regularly ignored or ridiculed. We all agreed that we needed more instances of queer visibility, such as this night of performance, but I in no way anticipated the spectacle of queering performance that was about to emerge.

Seemingly unaware of anyone around him/her (I did not know then), a short, round, lumpy person in a too small electric blue unitard with straining sequins and denim jacket came dancing out into the space. She was sporting a shiny pompadour, but no facial hair. Her dance-walking consisted of sliding on unlaundered socks while making hula-like arm movements. The exposed flesh of her generous belly (which included an ample “happy trail,” or trail of body/pubic hair leading to the genitals) bounced along. For 10 full minutes, the person gyrated with closed eyes and made wet mouth movements that approximated a baby eating strained peas. Every now and again s/he would assume a crucifixion pose, out of which s/he would immediately fall as if s/he had an inner ear imbalance. The person did not seem to notice or care about the three folks working around him/her to set up the space. S/he was totally (self) involved in a rehearsal that, incidentally, bore no relationship to the number actually performed. After completing what must have been four repeats of the warm up song, this person opened his/her eyes as if opening them for the first time ever, noticed the other people trying to work, and arhythmically sway-slid away.

After an hour and a half of waiting, a sufficient number of people and performers arrived to begin the show. Several performers did their bits, and then the emcee announced a performer whose name I did not catch. I did, however, recognize the slide-walk of the giant bunny that entered the “backstage” door and approached the stage. This person was now in a mascot quality bunny costume that included an oversized bunny head. This rabbit, however, was endowed with a proportionately large, candy apple red penis and testicles protruding from the outfit. This person was not dressed simply as a rabbit, but as a creature in the Anthropomorphic kingdom. The Anthropomorphics, more

colloquially known as the Furies, are a much maligned, but real and active, subculture composed of people who together to enjoy games, fellowship, education and sexual relationships while dressed as animals (both real and fantasy creatures).

Anthropomorphics are often depicted as an exclusively sexual subculture, but they participate in a wide variety of events as their animal alter egos (<http://www.furryweekend.com/about>). However, this particular costume choice located the performer's anthropomorphic identity clearly within the sexual realm.

As the bunny slid toward center stage, an extended remix of the song "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails (NIN) started pumping from the sound system. As an avid NIN fan I immediately understood why this perverted woodland creature chose the song. The chorus is "I want to fuck you like an animal. I want to feel you from the inside. I want to fuck you like an animal. My whole existence is flawed. You get me closer to God (Reznor, 1995)."³¹ The rest of the song describes an intense, disturbing sexual relationship in pulsating electronic beats well met by lead singer Trent Reznor's strangled, straining song voice. Many gender variant performers choose to create acts that very literally perform the words of the song they choose, even to the extent that the performer recognizes that the original artist probably intended the song to be more metaphorical than literal. Al's choice of songs made the ensuing action inescapably material by rendering the simile of fucking "like an animal" resoundingly literal.

The basic scene Al performed is almost indescribable, but I shall try. As a bunny, Al first mimics sexual dancing with a stuffed animal. A scene of bunny on bear seduction might be slightly less disturbing if the two were equally matched, but the slight

³¹ For the full text of the song please appendix A.

size and worn textures of the clearly much loved bear made the vision uncomfortably pedophilic. Perhaps the apparent power imbalance was meant as a nod to the consensual “daddy/boy” queer sexual relationship model in which one partner (of any gender) assumes a “daddy” role as sexual master and the other partner (of any gender) assumes the “boy” (or, less frequently, “son”) role of sexual servant, which would make it less disturbing. Irrespective of what pragmatic or symbolic meaning the bear had, when Al slowly removed the bunny head to reveal poorly applied mascara simulating facial hair and a gravity defying, swirling pompadour, the scene instantly became creepier yet. With his face exposed, Al’s inability to properly lip sync the lyrics became clear. His face, alternately leering at the crowd and appearing sexually excited by his own “singing,” was a study in sweaty intensity. However, I would perhaps be forgiven for not noticing his marble mouthing because I was simultaneously mesmerized by the clunky strip tease that removed the rest of the graphic bunny suit. The crowd went wild, screaming and clapping.

After skinning his bunny flesh, Al’s different, too small unitard (now: purple with spangles) and red men’s bikini underwear (featuring huge, phallic bulge) were visible. Al gyrated and bounced all around the stage, alternately cupping his bulge and sodomizing his stuffed bear while the song continued. He continued in this manner until an older-looking African-American woman came up waving a dollar bill. He stopped lip-syncing altogether and sauntered over to her. She screamed with an abandon usually reserved for mainstream boy bands, and tucked the money into his underwear. He made a lewd gesture using his two fingers and tongue (simulating cunnilingus) and returned to his scene utterly undaunted by having missed the chorus. At this point he picked up

some streamers and sparklers, waving the streamers and inexplicably not lighting the sparklers. Next he simulated masturbating with a large flashlight, and appeared to go down on himself from a bit of a distance. Finally, he put different, pink bunny ears and a white cotton tail back on, laid stuffed bear on the floor in front of him, and humped the poor creature while simulating orgasm face. The interminably long humping kept going and going until, finally (and horribly), his crotch exploded (with a popping sound) into a paperstorm of confetti and glitter. Participating all along, the crowd also erupted at this point with riotous screaming, cheering, and clapping. The song was not quite over, but Al stood up, removed the ears, and alternately leered at the audience like a raincoat clad pervert and grinned with the innocent joy of a child who has just learned his behavior causes people to react.

The performance was gross, and deeply disturbing. I turned to my partner Katy, who was equally horrified, to confirm that we had both just witnessed the same event (even if we experienced it differently). The performance was also just *bad* – poorly executed. I was utterly horrified by the act, yet I was fascinated with Al. I remember thinking, *who does that?* And by that, I meant not only who performs the specific gestures of the act (which were in some ways not so extraordinary), but who does so in such a resoundingly unskilled, and yet unself-conscious, fashion. My impulse to gain distance through intellectual critique was met by my desire to understand how this person could perform in a way that was so weirdly, creepily happy. The crowd's reaction confirmed that my curiosity was not merely fascination with the abomination. If people gathered in the name of peace and social justice lost their marbles when a perverted woodland creature was on stage, what was happening? Personally, I get wildly upset

when I see images or performances that even vaguely endorse a positive erotic linkage between children and violent sex acts. I was also grossed out by his fursona.³² His performance was *not okay*. I simply had to interview him.

In this chapter I will explore two sets of questions that concern me, one specifically having to do with AI and the other with the overarching concerns of this study. Among those question I wanted to address to AI were: with all due respect, *what* are you doing? What are your goals for your performances? And without being precisely sure how I would ask the question, I wanted to better understand what inspires AI to perform as he does. More generally, “his” performance raises and underscores these questions in relation to my inquiry into the nature and meaning of performance in the trans-queer community: what are the aesthetics of the awful? How is femme identity in/extricable from gender variant performance even among drag king and transmasculine performers? What is the significance of queering the grotesque, the monstrous, excessive body, with/in gender variant performance (Russo, 1994)? Through Asha I will explore how one performer challenges the subculture of gender variant performance by claiming a space for femme and queering existing expectations for drag king performance.

Finally, I will argue that AI’s grotesque performances produce divinity effects, a sense that the way he embraces his abjection as a fierce form of subjectivity is what makes not

³² Anthropomorphics originated in the 1970s as a subgroup of people at comic book and fantasy novel conventions who dressed up as the anthropomorphic animals in those texts. Due to the critical mass of people interested in dressing, acting and interacting as these characters, they formed their own community, called either Anthropomorphics or, more colloquially, Furies. I have always been uncomfortable around sex play that involves human as animal/pet scenes, but the fact that Anthropomorphics focus on fantasy animals makes it a little less disturbing to me. The double fantasy of embodying fictive animals who were created with human characteristics, even in fur suits, has fewer problematic implications than embodying an animal with animal qualities and designating one or more other humans sexual “ownership” of you. That said, the Anthropomorphics still make me squeamish, and I do not (and likely cannot) understand the community.

only him, but also anyone with the courage to actually embody their convictions, divine (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993).

Finding Al, Meeting Asha

The fans are very passionate! The fans love Al! The ladies want to have sex with him. Folks come to shows and leave dirty messages on his Myspace or solicit Asha for sex with Al ... I love the fans, but I don't want to have sex or play as Al. I think it's a little fucked up that people approach me for Al when Asha is right in front of them. Men are already valued over women in our world. It's just a little heteronormative to have masculine women valued over femme women in queer communities. I'm generalizing a little, but really there are whole cities/regions where femmes are just not valued as the cornerstone of the queer community they are.



(Images 14 & 15: Asha 1, Al 5)

Unfortunately, although I tried to catch him after the show, Asha/Al apparently left with a friend. At the time, I knew neither his/her performance stage name or everyday name. I was unable to ascertain who s/he was or who booked him. I repeatedly

scanned the internet for traces of him/her. I watched many drag kings performances of “Closer” on YouTube, but I never found this performance. After months of searching, I finally saw Al (and Asha) at the 10th Annual International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKEX). During the first night of performances, Al took the stage as a creepy, giggling Satan in yet another ridiculous, gross and technically flawed act. He did not receive as enthusiastic a reception by the crowd, but he certainly had his fair share of adoring audience members pushing dollar bills into yet another too tight unitard with midriff cut-outs. I tried to find him off stage, but I lost track of him in the crowd. The next day Asha and I happened to be in the same breakout session on intersections between race and gender. I was surprised to discover Asha is a high femme queer female-bodied female person who does not identify as masculine in her day-to-day life. She was dressed in an off the shoulder white t-shirt airbrushed with her personal slogan “Plus Size 4 Life,” a cornflower blue micro mini-skirt and glittery, high heeled platform sandals. Her made-up face included heavy black eyeliner, bright fuschia blush, cotton candy pink lip gloss, and the smudgy residue of Satan’s goatee from the night before.

I finally caught Asha’s name during the introduction portion of the panel. As she later told me during our interview, Asha does not “let Al out” during the day, and Al “does not know Asha” so I was lucky to have heard Al’s name the night before. She left the panel early, and I could not find her again that weekend. I tried to let that be the end of it, but I was haunted by Al/Asha. Al’s graphic, terrible, and (to me) humiliating performances grated against the emphatic politics of visibility and inclusion she discussed in the panel (a discussion I cannot reproduce here due to the confidentiality requested by the panel’s facilitator). I remember thinking, *is this why revolution and*

revulsion share so many letters? A few months after returning home, I decided to search one last time and found Al's profile on the social networking site MySpace. While I had ostensibly completed my fieldwork, I could not miss the chance to talk to this person. I figured the data was already chaotic, and one more person could hardly make it worse (ha!). I requested an interview from Al only to learn that Al is not allowed to interview, so instead I chatted with Asha online in February 2009.

As with every other participant, the first question I asked Asha was about her preferred name, age, gender identity/expression and preferred pronoun. She replied, "asha leong, al schlong, 31, complicated, like pronouns to match my gender presentation." Asha made it very clear that she was the person interviewing. As our conversation continued, she talked about Asha as I and Al as Al. She wrote "Al is most def his own person now" and yet she answered for him as Asha. Sometimes I asked her questions, and sometimes I asked her to answer questions about (but not as) Al. I found it remarkably easy to move between she and her "character that has really become an alter ego" because the line of demarcation is a strategy of femme visibility for Asha. The way she keeps Al and Asha separate helps her make the point that her femme queer self should be as welcome and acknowledged in queer spaces as her drag king self is. The fact that Al can be considered a celebrity in queer spaces that tend to be femme negative is a driving force in Asha's performance work. Very early in the interview Asha told me that part of what keeps her performing Al is that too often her "masculinity is desired, sought over my femmeness" which makes her feel "not just invisible, but erased" from queer spaces. For Asha, queering drag masculinity for queer audiences is a way to keep transmasculinity and drag masculinity from becoming to naturalized in queer spaces. She

hopes one of its effects will be to help promote femme visibility and acceptance. “Al likes to push boundaries – ALL of them!”

Before I discuss Asha/Al much further, I will briefly attempt to define queer femme identity. When I became part of my first queer community in 1997, I understood femme to mean a female-bodied female person who does feminine gender through her pronouns, clothing, grooming and feminine communication styles. A queer femme often, although not always or exclusively, partnered with female-bodied persons (of any gender). A femme’s queer sexuality and legitimacy in the queer community was most easily secured if she partnered with a woman who identified as butch, or a female bodied female person who presents as masculine. A femme’s queer sexuality was most suspect when she partnered with other femmes. However, a femme could gain more legitimacy for her queer sexuality if she had sexual encounters with other femmes, but had a butch primary partner. I was told about gradations of femmes from the hyperbolically groomed, super sexed, dominating high femmes to the unshaven, unmade up, but still passably feminine (by way of not being masculine) low femmes and everything else in between. For a dyke novice, femme was confusing. Much of what I saw felt like the limited heterosexual world from which I had just recently escaped (and to which I would return before ultimately figuring out how to be with people on my own terms).

Despite having just shaved my head and thrown out all of my skirts, I was informed that I was femme, and thus decided to be a capital femme. Ever the mimic, I looked around to see what precisely that meant. What seemed to distinguish enlightened queer femmes (and those who compartmentalized them) from their unenlightened heterosexual counterparts was their performative awareness. Supposedly, femmes

understood the artificiality of femininity, and so their embodiments, behaviors and relationships were exempt from critiques that might be applicable to heterosexual women who do femininity because they do not have another option and/or who are, following Butler, repeating stylized corporeal acts out of buried ideological commitment (Butler, 1993). Looking back, it was an obnoxious distinction, but my desire to fit in far exceeded my desire to point out any hypocrisy in the system of identifications. If I did femme, then I had a clear place with my butch/trans primary partner in a female-bodied gender variable sex community. I buried my disappointment at having to stay *the girl* by using the (relative) freedom to explore radical sexuality among my new cohort.

Now, around twelve years later, I am able to look back at those days and see that my initial reservations had some merit. Femme, like other identity categories, is impossible to define comprehensively because it is different for every person. The femme I learned is not the same femme I would have learned in a different community among different folks. However, something that seems to pervade femme communities is the way that sexist responses to female bodies perpetuate a social hierarchy within which the feminine, and therefore feminine women, are devalued. A framework for complex and contested role of femme in queer communities is helpfully articulated in the introduction of the anthology on femme identity Visible: a femmethology (Burke, 2009). Jennifer Clare Burke (2009) writes:

Femme means I won't compromise on complexity ...Femme isn't linear. My femme refuses to occupy a circumscribed place. Femme means hard won energy. Sometimes femme means ambivalent but strategic gender enactment. Femme is a place where I can still exist on the margins and where I can use

ambiguity as a salve for all the gender-related questions I live daily. Femme has never been a definite location on my map.

As a frustrated femme situated in more than one queer community, I have chafed against the practically codified definitions and constrained scripts I've encountered. I have experienced the effects of misogyny and sexism within my queer communities. These ugly shortcomings strongly informed my selections for Femmethology. I chose essays that stretched the parameters of femme and called the queer community to be tolerant of complex identities and the life situations that may contribute to such identities.

Femme means I don't have to make it easy for you. It certainly isn't easy for me (emphasis added). (p. 11)

As this excerpt from the introduction makes clear, femme is complicated. I chose this particular book because the three femmes interviewed for this project each have an essay in the volume, and felt this introduction accurately reflects their experiences. Femme identity is becoming more complicated in queer communities of female bodied, variously gendered persons (a social group that could have been called a dyke community in 1997). I have had both experiences and conversations with other queer folks that support my impression that many queer communities valorize transmasculine identity as revolutionary, but (continue to) minimize the political significance of femme identity. Female-bodied femme identity is often discredited because it (usually) involves performing gender in a way that approximates (even if it reinvents) normative expectations for the femme person's birth sex. Female-bodied transmasculine identity, which might become mixed bodied or male-bodied transmasculine identity, is revered

because it (usually) involves performing gender in a way that confronts normative expectations for the transmasculine person's birth sex. The extent to which transmasculine identity also conservatively reproduces the very traditional masculinity that obscures femme visibility is rarely discussed. For femmes, doing what feels "natural" is somehow rendered less performative, or more in support of traditional gender binaries, while for transmasculine folks doing what feels "natural" is more performative, and always already explodes such binaries. I wonder; if transmasculine men "prove" that *all* gender is performative, then what is the political value of queers continuing to devalue the femme contribution to the embodied strategies of gender revolution?

I raise the preceding question not to suggest that femme identity and transmasculine identity are constituted in conflict with each other, but instead to introduce a tension currently circulating in the gender variant performance scene. As Alison, aka Cherry Poppins puts it, femme performance is diminished because "most of us – myself included – perform a different femme expression than we might in 'real life'. But, even though I kind of think I came out as femme through performance because I got a chance to find Cherry, other people see it as just being me on stage. But it isn't." The challenge continues offstage for those folks who identify as femme in everyday life because, while they value transmasculinity, they also want to preserve their own precarious legibility in queer spaces.³³ Asha is particularly vexed because, as someone who performs masculinity, she lives the differential valuation of femininity and masculinity in these spaces. She does not want to perform femme, but she does want her performances of

³³ The issue is especially complicated for femme women whose trans partners are becoming men, and therefore identifying as heterosexual. What happens to a femme's queer identity when her partner becomes a man is beyond the scope of this project, but is certainly a flourishing area of discussion in and beyond queer communities.

masculinity continuously to interrupt expectations for queer masculinity in order to keep the possibilities for queer femme/ininity (as well as masculinity) open to re/interpretation.

Asha considers herself “born queer” by virtue of her ethnic heritage, and has a history of making herself visibly queer through spectacular self-presentation. She began her life as a reluctant tomboy whose gender presentation was controlled by a “multiracial, immigrant mother” who did not want her to conform to standards of femininity in the United States (Leong, 2009 70). Her New Zealand born Chinese mother sought gender-neutral clothing, toys and books with strong female characters for Asha, her Chinese-Indian- Irish child. Asha liked dressing in those clothes and loved her books, but she also wanted to experience the pre-teenage and teen fashion of her peer group. Already self-identified and out as multiracial, queer, working-class and fat by middle school, Asha sought a kind of femininity that borrowed from, but did not hope to approximate, white, heteronormative, thin standards of beauty.³⁴ Instead, she created a “trashy, but cute, kind of look” that included make-up, a bra and the kinds of “girly girl clothes” available to her in the local Wal-Mart. For Asha, a critical part of her femininity was embracing her fatness, which did not come with “the normal curves” of either large breasts or a substantial ass, and was therefore not what is usually considered voluptuous. She accepted herself, however, and so her fashion was about celebrating the curves she did have, wherever they might be located on her body.

Despite her profemme experiences, Asha’s experiences in college made her believe that queering her looks through “androgynous” clothes and half-shorn, multicolored hair was required for dyke identity. She never identified as butch, but she

³⁴ Asha cites her uncomplicated self-acceptance, combined with her family acceptance, as key for her willingness to explore gender performativity. Asha is the only participant who has enjoyed an uninterrupted and supportive relationship with her family of origin.

strongly identified as a “dyke” – so much so that she shaved the word into her head.³⁵

She left college thinking that dyke androgyny was the ideal of out, queer, female embodiment, but soon changed her mind. Like other femme participants, she now sees her androgyny as a phase in her femme coming-out process, a strategy of overcompensation for her femme desires. However, as she writes in her essay for Visible: a femmethology, a trip to Wal-Mart that resulted in “a pair of red, strappy sandals [finding her]” reunited Asha with her femme-ness (Leong, 2009, 71).

Reclaiming femme Asha felt queerer than ever, but others began reading her as heterosexual. Moving to Atlanta exacerbated the problem because other queers read her as straight or as in the butch/femme community, which she perceives as an anachronistic relational model that too closely resembles heterosexual gender dynamics. She undertook a practice of verbally outing herself “as femme, but not butch/femme femme” and forming sexual relationships with variously gendered queers to gain visibility and attract playmates. Then, she created Al.

Femme women have been part of the drag and gender variant performance scene since its inception, but they have only recently joined their king counterparts on stage. When I began this project, I did not anticipate speaking to any female-bodied female femmes. I knew some transmasculine folks identify as femme (a complex subjectivity that I briefly address in the chapter featuring Johnny Blazes), a fact that I initially understood as a positive step for femme visibility (which, arguably, it is). However, as I became more involved with the gender variant performance scene, I noticed that the

³⁵ Like femme, the meaning of dyke varies among different people and/or communities. The San Francisco dyke march website provides a representative definition of “DYKE IDENTITY [as] include[ing] those of us who are questioning and challenging gender constructs and the social definitions of women, and who are gender fluid.” (<http://thedykemarch.org/pages/identity.html>)

acceptance of genderqueer and/or transmasculine claims to femme did not necessarily translate into an acceptance of female bodied, female gendered femme people as gender performers. As a queer woman with femme tendencies (which have increased exponentially in performative response to the sexist, misogynistic, masculinity I have experienced in this project), I need(ed) to know more. At IDKEX, I met some very popular femmes, only to discover they often perform much (if not all) of the organizing, publicity and other grunt work for drag king troupes. To be fair, ensembles that follow a collective model seem to value the contributions of their femme members. That said, those femme members (generally one femme for every ten to twenty kings) are still the person(s) doing a majority of the dirty work behind the scenes.

Some femmes have earned a place on stage by first performing as kings, thereby gaining acceptance as performers, and then slowly introducing their femme performances into the ensemble's repertoire. That the femmes had to earn their femme performance credibility through the successful execution of masculine performances suggests that femininity is ancillary to masculinity, even when both are staged. For example, Cherry Poppins began performing with her ensemble in male drag even though she is strongly femme identified. Within one month of joining the ensemble, she was the director/stage manager/publicist/make-up artist/costumer and mother figure for the whole group. After serving a year in this capacity, which (again, to be fair) she says goes with her bossy nature, she finally pointed out that it was unfair that the ensemble expected her to perform in men's clothes in order to qualify as drag while the folks who present as masculine in daily life also got to call their masculine performance drag. After some processing, the group agreed, and she was allowed to introduce some femme performance

into the group. She felt vindicated, but nonetheless acknowledges that femmes are still struggling to gain acceptance in the drag king/transmasculine performance scene.

In my observations, this femme performer and the other femmes I met serve a primary visual function as a performance enhancer for king or trans masculinity. They are the sex object or metonymic objectified (or abjected) orifice that boosts the virility of the king and functions as an ever available (if not always willing) repository for his abundant masculinity. Even when femmes are the protagonists of a scene, they somehow always end up as the object of lust or derision. I have only seen a selection of performances, so I have no doubt that this particular phenomenon bears further investigation. However, what I can say within the scope of this project is that these kinds of femme performances have increased the acceptance of particular femmes, or certain kinds of femme identity, on and off queer stages. Asha's response to this inequity is to stage AI in a way that challenges the often surprisingly traditional masculinity and anti-femme bias of women's drag spaces. Thus, in order to make "the queer community" a more welcoming place for all kinds of gender, including femmes, she uses the stage a place of critical queering where the authenticity of gender will not be settled – or settling.



(Image 16: AI6)

Al Schlong, International Super Star

I would love to see Al be an international superstar. I'd like to take my craft to the next level. Go on tour, get known outside Atlanta. But in truth I probably won't work hard enough for that to happen. Asha Leong

As my earlier description details, Al's performances defy expectation, good taste and common sense. Yet, at least at the SONG benefit and (according to Asha) in his home community of Atlanta, Al has incredible crowd appeal. I certainly saw how he generated infinitely more crowd appreciation than the other, more technically proficient, less marginal performances featured that night. Without a doubt, Al challenged any notion of performance disappearing because the numerous showers I have taken since that performance have yet to wash the icky memory contaminant of it away.³⁶ Why does Al make such an impression? The answer goes beyond the convergence of so many taboo topics or the sheer bravado of performing with so little expertise. Al is unforgettable because of his style. He is utterly unselfconscious in everything that he does while he relentlessly pursues Asha's mission to "give the audience my energy and something they have never seen before, to make people laugh, [and] to take something 'normal' and queer it." At the benefit, Al tore open the immediate circumstance of a drag

³⁶ Here I am responding to the notion that performance disappears and cannot be preserved in writing, the implication of which seems to be that the performance can do something that the memory or recollection of the performance cannot do as well (Phelan et al). For Phelan, writing about performs "alters the event itself" and is less impactful than the live event (Phelan, 1993, 148). While I agree that watching a live performance is substantially different than writing about it, I resist the notion that the memory of the live event is less impactful. Watching Al's performance was undeniably potent, but for me recalling his performances, or having them burst from my desire to forget into sudden recall, re-presents the work in a way that increases my sense of awe, admiration, disgust and excitement. Every time I read this chapter I am moved to consider how profoundly queer the courage to engage in subversive body performances of multiple outsider identifications is. Al's joyful queering of the queer makes his proclivities seem less like oddities and more like revolutionary behaviors. For me, Al's performances continually re-appear as a challenge to *queer more*.

performance on a makeshift stage in an acoustically challenged meeting room and created a liminal space in which conditions of existence so unspeakable as to be reduced to crude jokes or furtive whispers became a galvanizing moment in queer, drag, fat performance.

Initially, I perceived AI as an example of grotesque, but soon this proved an insufficient (although not incorrect) assessment. Russo describes the female grotesque through various theorists as the body in opposition to the classical body. It is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque and with social change” (Russo, 8). The grotesque body is a deviant body and a feminized body (even if it is not necessarily a female body). The female body is always on the verge of spectacle, of becoming grotesque by deviating from social prescriptions of what the feminine should be. According to Russo, there is a cunning array of these grotesques, and so while we might enter any discussion of the grotesque through the carnivalesque or even the freak show, a critical point for Russo is “in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive – dangerous and in danger” (Russo, 60). However, when femininity is put on as a mask, as a deliberate choice, then it can become “femininity with a vengeance” because it “suggests the power of taking it off,” of making choices about embodiment that expose the performativity of gender (Russo, 70). This grotesque is a feminist subversion.

Russo helps ground my understanding of the grotesque body, but considering this definition in relation to AI requires me to follow his example and queer it. Russo richly describes the agency of the *female* female grotesque. Specifically, I relish her suggestion that deliberately deploying the mask of femininity is “femininity with a vengeance.”

There is a power that is not just redressive (vengeance for a past wrong), but is also enabling (excess, forcefulness, energy). In addition, I am so moved by the question she asks at the end of chapter 2: “Why are those old hags laughing” (Russo, 1994, p. 73)? In a way, Asha (as Al) is that laughing old hag. S/he is open, protruding, irregular, secreting (etc.) and she takes everything too far. S/he performs both femininity and masculinity with a vengeance. Here I want to extend Russo and argue that a grotesque has performative agency in that the grotesquing with a vengeance isn’t just leaking in front of people – it is putting some power into the leak and spraying instead. This queers the grotesque by doing something unsettling with the unsettling so it ceases to be a relief or release from the status quo and instead dramatically confronts status quo with embodied possibilities for living differently. Al queering of his (her) grotesque body *grotesques* by thrusting, prancing, rubbing, grabbing and even laughing with and through his performances of gender with a vengeance.

Al’s “combination of abjection and defiance” produced with/in him a “divinity effect ... a compelling belief that one is a god or a vehicle of divinity” (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993). Sedgwick and Moon identified the divinity effect during a shared essay discussion of affective bonds between fat women and gay men. For Sedgwick and Moon, fat women/gay men most excessively and lovingly converge in the body of late film icon and John Water’s muse, Divine. They read Divine, a corpulent, “cross-dressing” male born sometimes female-bodied sometimes male-bodied person, as the personification (or perhaps embodiment) of the “open secret” of both fatness and homosexuality. In their words, the open secret is that the fat person knows s/he is fat, and the queer person knows s/he is queer, but the outside observer who judges the fat/queer person to be fat/queer

thinks they know something about fat/queer person that said fat/queer person does not know. Divine ruptures these open secrets through her/his lascivious relationship with the dregs of taste, including contemporary signifiers of an irredeemable relationship between waste and fat and the ways that queerness rubs up against other sexual taboos. Working from the rupture, Sedgwick and Moon suggest the divinity effect is rendered truly divine by someone transforming their abjection into a fierce subjectivity and a force of (counter) production. Instead of performing abjection in a way that seeks to minimize difference and to cultivate a subjectivity that might be palatable to normative tastes, Divine amplifies difference into a grotesque, hyperbolic tastelessness that refuses to collude with any (open) secret. The effect of Divine's divinity produces her/him as more human, even excessively human, in a way that seems sacred or sanctified through performance beyond normative measure.

According to Asha, Al's power comes from her "not trying to be a perfect male impersonator or nice little drag king" and instead "trying to subvert gender, queerness and expectations" for everything from gender to sexuality to what constitutes a masculine icon. As previously stated, Asha is not content to work within the boundaries of the "acceptably" deviant themes that other drag kind performers might engage. Asha has a sense of humor about what Al does in performance, but for Al the performance completely sincere. Asha queers through Al, but Al's queerness is all Al. Al perceives himself as a sexy, talented and provocative man. For example, in one act that he performs in order to creatively resist "normal drag or male impersonation" he "teabag[s]: doing something unexpected with my genitals."³⁷ I strip.dance.sing. During second song

³⁷ Ironically, John Waters, the director who made Divine famous and therefore help make the concept of divinity effects possible, invented "teabagging" for his 1998 film "Pecker" about a

village people ‘milkshake’ I hang my balls out of my undies and teabag people. It totally plays on the fact no one thinks I have ‘REAL’ genitals. They [the audience members] are surprised I'd go there.” S/he does not want to just imply that she has male genitals by having a bulge and performing sexually suggestive dance moves. Instead, s/he visually and physically assaults people with oversized play genitals. Al’s hyperbolic engagement with erotic taboo and extreme sexuality produces divinity effects because he utterly transforms his abjection – his fat, queer, mixed race, sexually deviant body self – into a ferocious subjectivity that exudes power, confidence and joy. Almost as an echo of another Nine Inch Nails lyric from the song Sanctified, Asha is “justified/purified/sanctified inside” Al. Asha has no limits on what she is willing to let Al do because s/he is fully committed to the transformative potential of *putting everything out there* with such ecstatic self-adoration that I cannot *not* be changed.

Asha observes what is happening on drag stages both in her current state of Atlanta and across the country when she travels to perform. She is concerned with the way(s) in which performances of drag and transmasculinity may reinforce not only heteronormative signifiers of gender, but also emerging standards of queer normativity, by which some performances of gender are read as acceptable and become particularly popular. She does so by twisting the expected, by “tak[ing] a tradition and warp[ing] it” so that rather than simply fulfilling an audience’s expectations for what a drag king show is she challenges the possibility of what a drag show can be. To grotesque the made up

perversed young photographer. Teabagging is when a person bumps his or her exposed testicles onto someone’s forehead. I attended a John Water’s lecture at Duke University in October 2009 during which he talked about coming up with the concept and thinking people would know it was a joke. However, to his surprise and delight, people assumed he just named an existing sex practice (which perhaps he did) and since then he has been invited to judge teabagging contests in different cities across the country. I did not ask if Asha knows about the origin of teabagging or not.

act of teabagging is to amplify the possibility of grotesque that John Waters films enable whether or not they actually feature Divine. By queering a grotesque performance, Asha further unsettles what is already unsettling. In this way, Asha manages to queer the queerness of grotesque. Al's active doubling and tripling of queering explodes the open secrets of abjection and makes the grotesque resoundingly present with the effect of forcing a reckoning with the already existent (and infinitely expandable) possibilities for how we do gender, sexuality and embodiment.

As promising as Asha's intentions for Al are, Asha was unable to articulate precisely how her performances advance her femme visibility politics. When asked directly about the link, she responded by describing a way she surprises the audience through her aesthetic choices instead. For example, when asked about the messages she wants to communicate to the audience, she described how she wowed the audience by having phenomenally large external male genitalia attached to her cowboy costume. She never drew any clear lines between her performance choices and her political intentions. I was disappointed by the lack of specificity. However, as I have read and reread the transcript of our conversation something emerged for me. The exact link does not matter. Al's power does not come from his clear messaging. Instead, Al's power, and the powerful affective energy he seems to spark in other people, comes from his unintelligibility. His fabulousosity is not the studied fabulousity of impeccable queer eccentricity, but instead a form of undifferentiated affirmative engagement with the world that knows no boundaries or borders. In addition, it cannot be overstated that Al's love of Al is so pure as to be contagious. Al's unique blend of awfulness and joyfulness produces a fabulousness that makes divinity accessible to anyone.

As a performer who often suppresses potential performances because they are not yet perfect, or because of some (real or imagined) flaw in myself, I experience Al as permission to be fully fabulous under any circumstances. Al wants “people to GET SOMETHING out of my work.” What I have gotten out of Al’s work is not simply that there is no “one true way” of drag, but that there is no one true way of queer performance. Or, considered slightly differently, the only persistent truth of performance is that a committed performance produces more possibility than a constrained performance. Al just goes there. Al “finds the cracks in society, identity, and politics. He exploits those areas for an unexpected reaction” (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993). His aesthetic, technical and even arguably political shortcomings cannot constrain his commitment to reveling in his own hyperbolic subjectivity. In turn, Al nourishes Asha’s queer femme identity. For Asha, “part of pushing gender is that there are unexpected combinations. “When I’m all femmed out and say I’m a sexy drag king the look on some people’s faces is priceless... and offensive.” All reactions fuel Asha/Al’s desire to perform. S/he believes that through performance s/he can help create a world where people can explore genders while still claiming a consistent everyday gender identity.

Watching Al makes me question what the hell my problem is. If s/he can do what s/he is doing on stage, in front of everyone, then certainly I can (insert activity I thought I could not previously do here). What does watching someone like Al make possible for a person who is consistently and continuously marginalized? Like Divine, Al’s “unsanitized drag” and “fiercely aggressive performances do not conceal or disavow what a dangerous act drag can be, onstage and off” (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993). When Al takes the stage and performance as if no boundary could ever be pushed too far I am

reminded that queer gender performance can be a revolutionary tactic that challenges the strategies of gendering individuals face in so many other aspects of their lives (Berlant and Warner, 1999; DeCerteau, 1984). In Al's case, performing a drag that "flings the open secrets of drag performance in the faces of the audience" is less about creating a negative confrontation with audience members and more about cheerfully flinging heretofore unimaginable options at them (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993). Watching him makes me so uncomfortable that I start to question the value of comfort. Al's grotuesquing is a utopian mode of critique that produces divinity effects for him and for those watching him, increasing the possibilities for pleasurable engagement with self, other, and the world. Watching Al finally leaves me thinking, if he can do that, what *can't* I – or anyone – do?

CHAPTER 7: “We Just Put Out These Seeds and Wait for Them To Grow”:
Performing Politics

The Cuntry Kings fashion feminist anti-racist drag performance from the raw material of pop culture, Southern queer experience, and national disgrace. The fifteen-member troupe is based in Durham, North Carolina, but has been spotted strutting on stages across the US and Western Europe. Blending an intersectional analysis of oppression with campy Broadway choreography, their cuntry cookin' is sure to satisfy (<http://www.cuntrykings.com/>).



(Image 17: Dickie 1)

Vanessa/Dickie Jaxx

Vanessa is a drag performer known onstage as Dickie Jaxx. She is a founding member of The Cuntry Kings, a drag king performance collective whose work is dedicated to increasing social justice through activist art. Vanessa is a 30-year-old mixed race female who identifies as genderqueer, but also as a woman, and therefore is comfortable with female pronouns. She is roughly 5'5" with short, black hair that frames her heart shaped, symmetrical face. While she says that she often passes for white (like her father), she also has the almond eyes and olive complexion that highlights her Filipino heritage (like her mother). Vanessa has an athletic build that she complements by wearing somewhat masculine, somewhat androgynous clothing such as the t-shirt and cargo shorts she wore during our interview. Unlike some of the folks with whom I spoke, Vanessa's everyday appearance is distinguishable from that of her stage persona. Jaxx's hair is slicked into place, and he sports a neat, black goatee. In the above photo, he is wearing a white button down collar shirt, with the sleeves rolled up, a navy blue dress vest and a maroon silk tie. He meets the camera's gaze with a confident expression, head cocked toward one side, a cigar poised in an open mouthed bite. On stage, Jaxx may look like he does in this picture, or he may be in a costume more specific to the narrative of the scene in which he is performing.

I first saw Jaxx perform as one of the opening performers for the Hedwig and the Angry Inch show discussed in the introductory chapter (Mitchell, 1999). Jaxx's number, one of the better executed and more thought provoking of the various acts, was a send up of then president George W. Bush's increasingly conservative policy decisions around homeland security, war, and reproductive rights. Dressed in a suit and wearing a George

W. Bush Mask, Jaxx took the stage to the opening strains of the song, “Lose Yourself,” by Eminem³⁸. He paced the edge of the stage gesticulating as if he were making an impassioned speech while questions from his barely perceptible mouth (under the mask) boomed through the speakers. *Look, if you had one shot/or one opportunity to seize everything you ever wanted/one moment/would you capture it or just let it slip?* Jaxx as Bush then walked downstage center and pointed a finger at the audience sitting stage left and dragged the pointed finger across the crowd all the way to stage right. Each of us was being pointed to as individually responsible for the *one moment*. At the same time, each of us could hide within the shadows of the audience or the anonymity of the crowd and *just let it slip*.

Bush/Jaxx then walked with purpose towards a desk at stage right. The desk was a simple, standard wooden office desk. On the desk was a pile of white posterboard. While walking, Bush/Jaxx kept the base beat with his upper body by thrusting his neck out at the deepest bass note and allowing his spine to follow the wave in a fluid motion through his torso. When the wave reached his hips he snapped back into a military rigid upright posture. Arriving at the desk, Bush/Jaxx began the first of a series of 32 beat count microperformances. He picked up the top poster from the stack of posterboards and held it for sixteen counts. The text for the first sixteen counts was always an official statement issued by the Bush administration or a quote from then President George W. Bush about policy issues including the Iraq conflict, healthcare, the Hurricane Katrina response, reproductive rights and same sex marriage. He charged stage left and moved the sign around to stage right in the same manner in which he pointed to the crowd. He

³⁸ Full text of lyrics in Appendix A.

held the signs high above his head with both hands and every few beats would aggressively thrust them at the audience. I could not see a grimace under the perfectly composed masked face, but I could feel it in the intensity of the thrust. When the next set of sixteen counts began Bush/Jaxx flipped the same sign over and displayed statistical information or other reports that counter the official statement. When he flipped the script, as it were, he lowered the sign so that it was in front of his torso. He reversed course, moving from stage right to stage left, displaying the sign while pulsing it towards himself every few beats. As Bush/Jaxx pulled the information close to his core I could not see, but could sense, his look of earnest urgency under the perfectly composed masked face.

One example of an official message from the administration was the sign that read “Mission Accomplished.” This statement was a reference to the 2003 publicity event in which then President Bush visited the flight deck of an aircraft carrier to congratulate a representative group of soldiers as a (premature) celebration of the end to major combat operations in the Iraq conflict (<http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/05/01/bush.carrier.landing/>). On the bridge of the deck was an enormous, prominently displayed banner that read “Mission Accomplished.” The televised speech Bush made on the flight deck implied that the “Shock and Awe” military blitz the US forces inflicted upon Iraq had resulted in success (although precisely what success meant was unclear). The implication for many was that the military had completed its mission to quash terrorism and would be returning home. In reality, while a certain strategic portion of the conflict had ended, the actual conflict continued, and forces continued to be deployed to the region. When Bush/Jaxx flipped

the script on this official statement he showed statistical estimates on how many soldiers and civilians had died thus far in the conflict, as well as the cost to date. I can no longer recall those estimates, but they were staggeringly high for a conflict that was purported to be finished more than three years prior. This is just one example of how Bush/Jaxx used each 32 count of the music not only to reveal the disconnect between official administration messages on issues of critical importance, but also to implicate the audience in responsibility for knowing about the resulting political, social and economic dissonance.

If there was any ambiguity for the audience about whether or not these messages were meant to imply a personal responsibility on the part of each audience member to get involved, the last segment of the performance clarified that duty. As the voice over the loud speaker and under the mask continued his rant about seizing your opportunity to do something with your life, Bush/Jaxx put down the last two-sided poster and picked up a single sided poster that read “Know The Facts.” He moved more quickly stage left to stage right, holding the sign over his head and pumping it towards the crowd in a crescendo of energy. Even though the sign was about knowing and not doing, the energy and movement of the command implied that knowing would compel you to do. He returned this final sign to the desk and ripped off the Bush mask. The crowd screamed uproariously in appreciation. *I've got to formulate a plot or end up in jail or shot. Success is my only motherfucking option, failure's not.* During the last lines of the song Jaxx rapped directly to the audience, coming downstage and dancing with the beat while pointing to individuals in the crowd. He closed his eyes and dropped the final rhymes *You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow. This opportunity comes once in a*

lifetime, yo. He ended by opening his eyes and directing the final line to the audience *You can do anything you set your mind to, man.* The look on his face implied the dare, as if performatively rewriting the line as *I dare you to do anything you set your mind to, (hu)man.* In a surprising inverse of male-generic language, the raw intensity of Vanessa as Jaxx as Bush shattered “man” as male generic language and diffused the performative power of the dare onto everyone. We were simultaneously implicated as witnesses to the dare, as people who could certify that were indeed responsible for *anything we set out mind[s] to.* Considering the night was dedicated to increasing trans awareness, the responsibility to set our minds to improving conditions for trans people was clear.

This performance represents the kind of work that Vanessa, through the vehicle of Dickie Jaxx, now performs. As a stage persona, Jaxx’s explicit purpose is to use performance to make social critique and inspire social change in order to help create a society where all people, no matter what their identity or experience, enjoy a livable life. Vanessa’s goal, which is also Dickie’s goal, is to use performance to challenge people to rethink their attitudes and actions, and potentially to make different choices, in order to improve the conditions of living for people currently at risk. Vanessa believes “at the core [the other Cuntry Kings and I] all believe change is possible and that the stage is a format for making that change.” Vanessa describes how performance leads to social change as “the individual making a better choice when they can whether they know it or not, whether they remember the performance or not.” In addition to having a good time at the show, she hopes:

if, or when, [audience members] think about the performance they understand something differently than they did before. They see how they

connect to the issues, you know? Like, they might just understand the issue or they might understand how it fits into a bigger picture and they make a better choice, or they just do something! Something good, of course.

Like Johnny Blaze, Vanessa's performances are designed to transform audience members watchers into witnesses, although she has a more deliberate sense of what sort of responsibility, response-ability and actual responses she wants from those witnesses (Oliver, 2009). Her style is message-driven. Her/his politics are directed towards more conventionally public issues, such as the continuation of the war in Iraq – issues that as conventionally “public” are also conventionally masculinized or “owned” by men.

Another layer to Vanessa/Jaxx's performance is the destabilization of the gender-coding of politics itself. In addition, as the above quote begins to describe, Vanessa undertakes this work with a profound sense of hope in the possibility for the stage to enable engagement with a “bigger picture” of social issues, relations, and values with an implication for their enlightened choice.

In this chapter, I will explore the motivations and challenges around “political” performances in the drag king community represented with/in Vanessa's 10 year drag king journey. I will describe several key points during Vanessa's journey from being an entertainer to a political performer. Her experience serves as a representative example of how a drag king performer might (and how many do) become politicized and start doing more politically aware performance work. Key to this examination is parsing the terms “entertainment” and “politics” as they have emerged imprecisely during ongoing discussions of identity and representation. A major portion of this discussion will revolve

around issues of race in performance as I heard them engaged in interviews (primarily with Vanessa) and at IDKEX. Within this discussion I will briefly address the way Vanessa in particular uses the power of witness to help others “reconstruct subjectivity” by “reconstructing notions of self, self-reflection, relationships and love” (Oliver, 19). Finally, I will discuss ways in which this interview and her aspirations inspire my hope for the future of drag/gender variant political performance.

The Evolution of Dickie Jaxx

Well, [the reason I do drag has] changed over time, because I started as Ricky Martin, male impersonator, to make money. Because I was poor, I was twenty something, and I needed the money and it was fun. Now, I feel as though Dickie Jaxx is more of a stage name and less of a stage persona. In fact, I think of it more as a crowd persona and less as a stage persona. So, I will dress like Dickie and get in that space before a show, but the performance is fluid, so whatever I need to be on stage, whatever Dickie needs to be on stage, he will become that, whatever the number needs to convey. Whether it is a business person or a coal miner or a pig or a tree, whatever it is, Dickie will become that.

Dickie Jaxx, Vanessa’s “stage name,” did not begin as an agent of social change. In fact, he was an incarnation born somewhat of circumstance, and based in a desire for self-preservation and the pursuit of pleasure. In 1998, having come out as queer during her first semester in college, Vanessa lost her parents’ financial support. She left her home state of California and moved across the country to Asheville, North Carolina, a place known for having a thriving lesbian culture. During the day she worked at the housewares emporium “Bed, Bath and Beyond” and at night she hung out with her new

friends in the local queer dyke community. She and her friends would dress in masculine clothes and have drunken dance parties together that included making up and performing choreographed dance numbers until a new participant spurned a new form of alliance:

And then we met Zeke, and Zeke has been in a drag troupe in Florida. I met him at a party and he said, “yeah, we should definitely start a drag troupe.” And A and I, my friend Able, and I were like, “What is that?” Because we did not know there was a name for it. And, we were definitely dressing up in our clothes and they were masculine, but they were our clothes. We were making up dances, sure, but as us. Like it wasn’t drag to us. So then we literally right then had a meeting at Vincent’s Ear, and then Zeke was like, “I think we should put on a show at Hairspray.” And, we definitely wanted to be creative, and I had time, but then we also realized we could make money. So, we did it.

For Vanessa and her friends meeting Zeke, who encouraged them to organize relationships already defined by expressive trans play into a commitment to an emerging genre of performance, was life changing. From that moment, Vanessa has transformed what used to be a recreational activity into a passion for drag performance that has in return become a passion for gender variant performance that makes social change.

Asheville already had a thriving drag queen and female impersonator culture, so it was reasonable to assume that a drag king troupe would be a fun, potentially profitable venture. Vanessa and four of her friends spent two months preparing for their drag debut. She adopted the stage name Dickie Jaxx and christened the troupe The Daddy Kings. As Vanessa makes clear, The Daddy Kings were a troupe, not a collective. Over the course

of this project I have heard other gender variant performers distinguish performance troupes from performance collectives in the same way. A troupe is a group of performers who work together because they love performing, but do not necessarily have a cohesive mission statement or work for a given platform for social change. A collective, on the other hand, channels their love of performance into performance for specific forms of social change, and generally works together under the unifying vision of a mission statement. A troupe generally gets together to rehearse steps and organize a well-executed show, but they do not necessarily talk about the social or political implications of their performance. A collective will first process the concept and intentions of a show, then work together to craft acts that communicate specific social or political messages. The Daddy Kings, like the Asheville drag scene in general at the time, were focused on quality lip-syncing and well-executed dance moves, not conscientiously crafting a message or intending for their work to have any impact beyond creating a sensation on a given night. Nonetheless, as soon as they started performing Vanessa “was hooked. I just found my place. I knew this was exactly what I was supposed to be doing.”

After their successful stage debut at Hairspray, the local drag queen club, The Daddy Kings became the establishment’s house drag king troupe for two years.³⁹ They drew huge crowds of up to 400 people from North Carolina, as well as from other southeastern states, who wanted to see this “new” kind of drag performance:

³⁹ Vanessa and I lived Asheville at the time, but we did not know each other. However, because it is a small queer community I am familiar with the dynamics of the area at the time. I had moved from Asheville before this performance took place.

It was good and it was bad. It was good, but not really, good, well, a major issue was that it was a coke house.⁴⁰ And it was run by [deleted] and she was crazy. So, that was bad. It was a really, really bad atmosphere. But it was good because we had to perform every week. I had to keep coming up with new material. So, I just did what was easy. I was ‘being’ Ricky Martin to Ricky Martin songs. But I didn’t, like, think about it. I just did it.

In other words, she engaged in imitation without a critical frame. Although performing as Dickie was part of Vanessa’s queer identity, she was not particularly politicized about either queerness or kinging at the time. This is not to suggest that these performances were without political resonances, but rather that any political messages communicated were unintentional. For Vanessa, the pleasure was in the imitation, as well as in the local celebrity and income that came with it. For the Daddy Kings, these performances were intended to open access to an escapist world full of flashy costumes, well-executed dance moves and sexual innuendo without “real world” consequences.

I argue that a small group of young dykes performing “as men” cannot not be political. Whether they realized it or not the fact that the Daddy Kings combined their gender dissonance and love of dance into an ongoing, semi-professional engagement at a local club is a political act of survival and visibility. I argue that drag kinging is always already political because the performance pushes the boundary of normative gender embodiment. However, it does not follow that all drag is what I (or Vanessa, or others) consider politically progressive. A drag king performance can be just as susceptible to

⁴⁰ At that time Hairspray was known as a club where you could get cocaine and other illegal drugs.

re-enacting the racist, classist, misogynistic, heteronormative pop culture paradigms as any other art form. This is especially true when performers want audiences to read their performances as exemplifying mainstream cultural ideals for masculine power or sexuality. For example, even though Vanessa never intentionally performed ethnically insensitive or otherwise exploitive acts, she acknowledges that at the time she and her fellow kings were not considering how their performances might entail an ethics of representation. Vanessa did not consider the ways that performing Martin, a native Puerto Rican, might demand a deeper reflexivity about performing ethnicity or sexuality.⁴¹ Like many drag performers past and present, the Daddy Kings copied the kinds of masculinities they saw represented in popular culture without thinking about the political implications of such impersonation. Their focus was on entertaining audiences, and at that time “entertainment” was a sexy, fun and liberating event where, as a performer, you could be whomever or whatever you wanted to be.

Vanessa and I did not discuss precisely what the Daddy Kings thought political performance was at that time, but the implication is that it would be unsexy and boring. This is consistent with a recurring colloquial distinction between “entertainment” and “politics” in performance that I heard in interviews, conversations and at the IDKEX conference. In this dichotomy, entertaining performances focus more on creating an aesthetically pleasing act and either do not consider or disregard the messages (positive or negative) they might be conveying. The result might be can range from harmless

⁴¹ At the time, Ricky Martin was a very popular performer. His image seemed carefully crafted to simultaneously fulfill stereotypes of the hypermasculine and hypersexual latin man and keep him sexually ambiguous enough to appeal to his sizable queer male following. While a full analysis of how Ricky Martin’s media image was created in a crucible of race, gender and sexual politics in the mid 1990s is beyond the scope of this paper, that Vanessa could successfully perform “as him” without considering the representational implications reveals that they just were not perceived as relevant.

performances in which performers “do something silly, or just put on a show, with no real point” and little impact to performances whose pleasure comes from redoubling are racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise problematic dynamics already embedded deep in cultural practice. An example of a harmless performance is when four of the Austin Kings performed the popular dance number featured in the movie “Napolean Dynamite.” The number was like cotton candy, fun, sweet and light. The purpose seemed only to be the dance and the pleasure it gave the performers and the audience. An example of deeply problematic performance(s) happened “the year IDKE had an act in *blackface*. **Blackface!** Seriously! And that was the year that, like, eight out of ten performances were Michael Jackson. *White* Michael Jackson.” According to Vanessa, these performances were not social critiques or parodies, and the performers (including the one in blackface) thought what they were doing were perfectly ok as “entertainment.” The latter performers were somehow disconnected from the way their performance reanimated the shameful history of blackface as a degrading racial performance that demonizes and dehumanizes black people. The performers who intended to perform tributes were well intentioned, but were nonetheless ignorant that they were appropriating racial identity as if it were a mutable attribute without a social history.

According to this dichotomy political performances, on the other hand, prioritize the message over the aesthetics. The resulting performances may be deep and thought provoking, but they may also be heavy-handed or too obtuse to be understood by the audience. An example of a thought provoking performance might be the “Lose Yourself” performance I described in the opening of this chapter. The number uses a popular song with a driving beat. Eminem is a controversial cultural figure because of his

misogynistic, homophobic and violent lyrics, and using his song helped clarify similar qualities in the Bush Administration messages that Jaxx was debunking. Vanessa's strong, sharp movement and aggressive style added intensity to the pounding beat and impassioned lyrics of the song. Even before the final dare Jaxx as Bush's fervent energy challenged the audience to respond in kind or risk being overtaken by the obfuscating rhetoric of the masked figure. In the next beat, like a very temporary reprieve, a new message with vital information was thrust forward. The subtext of the changing text demanded a response from the audience. The question seemed to be: will you accept the challenge to seek the truth or will you look away. As a group of people facing the same question in each others' presence, we were made witnesses to the performative challenge that it would be up to us to meet. I did not see or even hear about a performance that was too political to be understood, but the specter of such a performance was a threat that seemed to shadow discussions of political work. For example, when Syd Duecer (an FTM performer) and I discussed the politics of his work he insisted that his work was not political, but "careful. I can be political if I want to say something specific, like about elections. But, I don't want to be *political*." This answer illustrates what seems to be a pervasive belief that "political" relates to Politics as in directly relating to the three branches of government or identity politics. When I asked what "*political*" meant he did not answer directly, but instead replied that he "likes to give the people a good show." This reply again suggests that there is a threshold of political that, once crossed, is no longer entertaining.

In retrospect, Vanessa realizes that her very early performances were not "just" entertainment. Some of the content in the Daddy Kings performances was

unintentionally reinforcing the racist, sexist and otherwise problematic messages that mainstream popular culture, especially music lyrics and videos, proliferate (Jhally, 2007). When she first began Vanessa admits she “did not have a clue. Like, I had *no* idea that what I was doing might not be ok.” Like many performers who have not been exposed to political performance, Vanessa initially thought political performances were boring. “I remember when I first heard about political performance and I was like, yeah, whatever. I wasn’t interested.” But, once confronted with the implications of what she was doing, Vanessa began her evolution into a political performer. She recalls:

I can remember a time when me and four other performers worked out this number to a gangster song. And, it’s really interesting because we are in our first year of performing [as the Cuntry Kings]. So, we are trying to figure out – and, I mean of course you have that whole clique mentality too, so that’s a nightmare – so we are trying to figure out how to relate to people and what people like. And like, we just didn’t think about it. Me and the other four people doing it are laughing and having a great time and enjoying it. We didn’t see the problem. But then, like, three or four other people came up to us and said, “but you’re not black.” And we were like, “yeah, but does it matter?” Because we thought that we were just having fun. But that started the conversation and of course, *of course* it matters. Now I get it. ”

This experience sensitized Vanessa to the reality that what she does on stage has impact(s) on how people view themselves, each other and the world. Performing “black” to a “gangster” song perpetuates racial stereotypes that the most masculine black men are

violent criminals. In addition, these performances proliferate other racist performances by example. Vanessa realized “people notice what you do on stage. It matters.” At that point, she took responsibility for making performances that accounted for the subjectivity of other people.

As a long time performer and then a performance scholar, I have certainly heard similar echoes of this distinction between entertainment and political performance. In my experience “entertainment” is also often applied to work that might be considered low art, or accessible or enjoyable to a variety of audiences, while “political” work is considered the exclusive domain of high art, or geared towards appealing to people with refined sensibilities. To be fair, the extreme ends of the dichotomy can be found in frivolous performances and/or performances that are impenetrable or overbearing. I suggest that most gender variant performances fall between the extremes of this dichotomy. With some exceptions, performers want to appeal to their audiences without perpetuating negative stereotypes. And yet, many performances do perpetuate negative stereotypes by recreating what they see in popular culture, much of which is infused with racist, sexist, classist (etc.) assumptions. I argue all performance has political implications (however faint) whether or not the primary purpose of an act is meant to communicate a message that might be understood as “political” in this sense of directly impacting how people understand themselves or their world. The people with whom I spoke both invoked these distinctions and believed, to varying degrees, that aesthetics and politics could work together to make appealing, purposeful entertainment. As I learned, the ethics of race and representation is one “political” issue that has particular resonance in relation to the entertainment/politics continuum among gender variant performers.

Representation and Revelations

Like Vanessa, many performers involved in the drag king and gender variant performance scene have realized that what they do in performance matters. At local shows, as well as regional and national conferences, performers are becoming sensitized to the ways their performances might explicitly or implicitly reinforce a variety of oppressions filtered through popular culture. In the last few years performers have started “calling each other out on our racism, or sexism, or whateverism” in order to stop reproducing oppressive messages and norms and start critiquing them instead. Initially, performers might think that becoming more consciously political will compromise their performances because, as Vanessa recalls:

When I first mentioned doing more political stuff no one wanted to go there with the political aspect because ‘its not sexy’ or ‘its not funny’ and it isn’t unless you work at it and challenge yourself. But, it can be both [political and entertaining]. [The Cuntry Kings] do it. You just have to make the effort.

As more performers start “working on it,” i.e. thinking reflexively about representation in their performances, they are realizing that they can make fun, aesthetically pleasing, “entertaining” performances that still have a “political” message or are careful about how they represent various identities or experiences.

This evolution was illustrated by Vanessa’s assessment of the IDKEX showcase, the final night of performances that just a few years ago included blackface. She said, “It used to be just us and maybe the Chicago Kings doing political stuff, but man, this year? This year there were so many groups doing what we do, the political stuff. It was

awesome.” Vanessa thinks this is part of “an awakening. Drag is becoming more political now because I think people realize that it can and it can still be good.” Vanessa has been to many IDKEs and other performance conferences, so she knows the conversations about representation have been happening, and she identified the acts in the IDKEX showcase as proof of a major shift in the ethos of the community. However, this does not mean that all of the tensions or issues are resolved. As is already apparent in the examples I provided, at the time of this writing raising political consciousness and making genre wide changes around performing race is the most frequently intersection of representation and ethics in the drag king community.

My experience at IDKEX helped illuminate the issue of race in performance and how that relates to the increase in political performance among gender variant performers. As I learned, IDKE organizers included the first formal panel on race in performance that had ever happened at the conference in 2006. Apparently after six years of conferencing some performers were feeling frustrated with the representations of race they saw every year and decided to submit a panel about the issue. Since then each conference has included more than one panel discussion of issues that come up around race in gender variant performance, and individuals at the conference seem to have become more comfortable discussing the issues with each other between sessions. However, based on what I saw and heard at IDKEX, as well as the numerous shows I attended, the drag king community continues to be dominated by white identified, able bodied, post-secondary educated and working or middle class members. I estimate that roughly four fifths of the IDKEX attendees were white identified and roughly half were current college students. There are an increasing number of troupes that feature all black

or all Asian performers, and some have more non-white than white performers, but a majority of the groups are either all white or have very few non-white members. Nonetheless, the racial make up of the scene is increasingly being diversified. I attended a conference-sponsored panel on black, queer female masculinity in performance during which part of the message was that the drag king and gender variant performance community needs more “people of color” to raise awareness of issues of race in representation.⁴²

For the organizers of two “impromptu” concurrent sessions on race in performance in the drag king community the conversation has not come far enough fast enough. These sessions, one “people of color” and one for “white” people, were organized by three conference attendees who wanted to create same day panels not submitted to the IDKE organizers in advance.⁴³ According to one organizer, these impromptu sessions were organized because they were concerned that a conference attendee might leave the conference without ever participating in a critical discussion of race in the drag king community. In addition, they wanted people who might want to participate in such a discussion to have that opportunity without having to miss any other panels of interest (Stephanie Cooper aka ThisWay/ThatWay, personal communication). Finally, the organizers of these panels thought it was important for similarly identified people to be in a private space so they could talk more openly about the issues (Krista Smith, aka Kentucky Fried Woman, informal communication). The formal conference

⁴² The latter panel was more of an educational session than a critical discussion and therefore I will not discuss it in this writing. However, I will say that the session reminded me of how prevalent racism is in representations of queer culture, and made me realize that any further study of this topic must include a more thorough exploration of race.

⁴³ Whether someone identified as “of color” or “white” was left up to individuals.

panels on race were open to anyone no matter how they identified. Another organizer whose name I did not learn felt that open panels or sessions cause people to feign anti-racist sentiments or act “politically correct” while creating separate sessions “forced” people to “get honest” with each other about race.

The panels were promoted by word of mouth and handmade signs taped over the signs for previous planned sessions. Like the bathroom signs, this effort suggested that the organizers were trying to inject the feeling of radical organizing into the otherwise structured conference environment. The signs suggested a revolutionary occupation of the conference space. They informed readers that the two different groups would “take over” an empty space at the appointed time. Their guerilla spirit was somewhat undercut (at least for me) when I overheard a conversation and learned that the organizer had not only planned these sessions in advance, but were also working with conference organizers to ensure there was an empty meeting room that they could use without disturbing anyone. Other people seemed to know this already, and ultimately it did not matter. These panels energized the conference attendees. They were packed with attendees eager to participate in these conversations. I attended the impromptu panel for white identified people.

While the exact conversation that occurred in the session cannot be reproduced here due to the confidentiality I agreed to as a session attendee, I can say that an ongoing problem and consistent critique of many white gender variant performers is that in an effort to perform masculinity, they often choose to embody hypermasculine, exoticizing stereotypes of black masculinity (Johnson, 2003).⁴⁴ Most prevalent are the

⁴⁴ Gender performances, especially new drag kings, also include other forms of cultural appropriation, but imitations of black masculinity are by far the most common. They are most

gangster/hustler or the hypersexual player/baller. Often, these performers perceive themselves to be honoring their idols: hypermasculine black male rappers or hip hop artists. They unreflexively lip sync lyrics that range from egregiously misogynistic, violent and homophobic tripe to incisive social critiques without seeming to recognize the difference. They wear clothes that approximate the style of their favorite artists, and imitate the dance moves. Like other kinds of “entertainment,” sometimes these acts are simply reproductions of choreography and outfits while, more frequently and problematically, these scenes include simulated rape sequences, violence and gang imitative behavior. Some of these performers, even those present in a session on race in performance, defend their choices by claiming they are simply choosing the best music and performing like the men they want to emulate. They seem to believe neither the original performer, nor their imitation of that performer is perpetuating any racist, sexist, classist and homophobic social constructions. No less than three different performers responded to critiques of their work by claiming that what they are doing is entertainment and they want to do “fun” performances, not “politically correct” ones. In effect, they neutralized the political critique through the “just a joke” defense.

The only participant who speculated at length about why they think stereotypical imitations of black masculinity are so prevalent was Johnny Blazes, whom I actually met

often performed by apparently white performers, although I have also seen some folks who did not appear to be either white identified or black identified (African-American or otherwise). I also heard stories of horrendous appropriations of Asian and Hispanic culture in performance, especially in California, but I did not see any during my study. The African-American performers with whom I spoke (formally and informally) who performed the music of white performers did not feel as though they were performing a race different than their own.

at this session.⁴⁵ Paraphrasing zir's readings on the issue, especially the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Johnny said:

If we think about various stereotypes for identities, of any race or gender, we can think about how they are created in the media, how they are propagated in the media, and why. How does it serve the powers that be to keep certain groups attached to certain identities? From the beginning of slavery, it was in white men's interest to portray black men as wild, virulent, needing to be tamed, violent, etc. Images of black men's rampant sexuality, and their hunger for white women, were useful propaganda in maintaining fear after slavery ended. Maintaining an image of Black men as "players" who shouldn't want only one woman also helps the powers that be keep families split up and decrease their power. On top of that, portraying black male sexuality as virulent, etc. helps to exoticize black bodies and keep them "othered". So for these reasons, and many others, black maleness has come to be equated with hyper-masculinity. And of course, of you're a white boy and want to be seen as masculine, you probably want to go to extremes, which means hyper-masculinity, which means black masculinity. Likewise for drag kings.

In other words, drag kings (and here, it tends to be drag kings, not trans performers) use black masculinity as a kind of cultural shorthand to signal to others that they are "real" men. Trans performers do not, which suggests that their status as undergoing social and/or medical transition authorizes their masculinity and eliminates the need to use racial appropriation to augment it. Some drag kings, on the other hand, either do not

⁴⁵ Zie also made similar comments during the session which is part of why I chose to reproduce this portion of our interview here.

know or do not care that these portrayals contribute to perpetuating harmful stereotypes. By performing this form of hypermasculinity, they performatively override the gender assumptions that might accompany their female sexed bodies and bypass racial critique.

I would also argue that these performers appropriate rap and hip hop fashion because the loose fitting, oversized clothing and multiple layers obscure their feminine secondary sex characteristics (or any kind of curve). Wearing layers both literally and performatively buries the female body in clothing, creating the impression of a bulkier, broad shouldered masculine body with a trunk-like torso and legs that extend straight down from the hips. This look is complimented by either excess weight, which helps fill out the clothes and allows breasts to be bound in a way that looks like developed pectorals, or by extreme thinness, a less curvaceous initial shape that provides a more neutral scaffolding upon which to create masculine body type(s) through strategically layered clothes. No matter what the beginning body type, wearing layers of oversized, loose clothes gives the impression of bulk, thus suggesting physical strength, power and domination. That performers use clothing as prosthetics to create the body with/in which they want to perform is expected. The problem is that these particular types of prosthetic enhanced body/selves accumulate signifiers along with size. In this case, these signifiers combine to perpetuate a stereotype of black masculinity as uncontrollably hypermasculine. When these hypermasculine figures are animated in scenes of hypermasculine performance, including often violent and sexually aggressive displays of power and domination, these performers become readable as “men”. In addition, they continue a cultural legacy of white people presuming their racial neutrality, and therefore feeling entitled to “put on” any racial identity they choose as if it were a costume. In this

case, they put on an already problematic stereotype. Racial stereotyping is thus primarily a stepping-stone on the way to masculinity and whatever excesses it may entail are excused by genre or written off as “entertainment.”

The conversation in the impromptu session was dominated by a small percentage of people, many of whom spoke more than once. Of those who spoke, almost all made passionate arguments for critically examining the way race is appropriated in drag and gender variant performance, but how to do so remains vague. Some participants recommended “getting educated.” Several suggested that they perform for their non-white friends and ask them to evaluate numbers for racist content. The operative assumption that it is the natural function of a non-white person to educate white person on racism, and that non-white people have not internalized any racism themselves, did not seem to be a concern. Many folks said that as gender variant performers it was their responsibility to confront other performers who might consciously or unconsciously do racist performances. They argued that drag kings and gender variant performance have a responsibility to be political, which in this case means being anti-racist, i.e. confronting and overcoming your own racism and challenging others to do the same. Several also made thoughtful comments about how “political” performances, like “entertaining” performances, are only as good as the people who craft them.

One person spoke up and said that his/her performances were tributes to the artists that other people enjoyed. S/he “just wants to be an entertainer.” In other words, s/he derives not only his/her masculinity, but also her/his identity as an entertainer, from masculine entertainers to whom she pays homage by imitation. I have not seen her performances, so I cannot speak to her individual work. However, in general I would

argue that any performer aware of the potential problems with racial appropriation in performance who believes her/his fandom inoculates him/her from perpetuating oppression through performance is either naïve or in denial. If a performer decides to perform racial imitation then s/he must navigate the thin line between homage and exploitation by deeply considering what it means to perform race as if. In response to this particular person, several people told moving stories of their journey from thinking their performances were “just entertainment” or all in good fun to realizing they were performing in racist ways. Like Vanessa, each included an experience of being confronted by fellow performers, friends or audience members. Someone asked how to initiate such a conversation and several folks offered tips. A few performers shared suggestions to help individual performers craft respectful performances. Some suggested only performing to songs by performers of your race. Others suggested that while that might help avoid some representational pitfalls, the only way to truly overcome racism is to use performance to critique racist social formations. Still others suggested that, as performers, we can access all kinds of cultural artifacts as long as we are mindful of when, where and how we use them, as well as what those artifacts might mean in relation to our own power and privilege.

All of the interview partners who spoke about racial and ethnic representation in performance agreed that gender variant performers should be performing for more equitable treatment of all races and ethnicities. Vanessa considers issues around race/ethnicity in representation in all of her work. She explains, “everyone has to deal with it in their own way, but as an individual I will never do a solo that is not of my own race.” Both Vanessa and Asha talked about consciously performing numbers that

confronted stereotypes of Asian masculinity. Asha strongly identifies AI as a “sexy API [Asian Pacific Islander] man.” She considers AI’s predatory sexuality a way to combat stereotypes of Asian men as feminine or sexually inferior. Johnny performs zir’s whiteness in a number of ways that critique zir’s resulting privilege and power, and when ze uses popular songs by non-white artists, ze does so in a way that is respectful and avoids co-opting the race or ethnicity of the original performer. Other performers with whom I spoke described similar patterns of being careful or contrarian in performance. With the exception of Syd, the one African-American identified performer with whom I spoke, each performer described a process of confronting their internalized racism as part of how they cultivated a more political performing style. Syd, on the other hand, “is black” and therefore does not perceive himself as performing race. He does, however, specialize in performing “gentlemen” like Michael Bubl  (a white crooner) or Ne-Yo (a black hip-hop and R&B), singers whose songs focus on positive messages about romance, women and living life to the fullest. In this way, being “the genderbent’s gent” avoids problematic stereotypes and clich s and has a politics of feel-good entertainment.

As I listened to the conversation, and reflect on it now, I experienced alternating responses. I felt inspired by how willing people were to confront their internalized racism, impatient with people whose extreme performance of racial sensitivity seemed like an extension of (rather than an antidote for) racism, frustrated with people totally unwilling to confront their racial privilege, and concerned for folks who simply did not have the information or critical thinking skills to keep up with the conversation. I wondered about the effectiveness of a format in which people already educated about the issues dominated the conversation. At the same time, this seemed like a productive place

to begin to have a conversation that might continue after the conference closed. Many of the people that spoke seemed sincere and genuinely interested in using performance to directly and indirectly combat racism. After this session I asked participants more direct questions about race and ethnicity in performance than I might have otherwise. And yet, there is so much more potential that must be mined in this situation. A critical question that remains unanswered is how to move past taking care not to offend anyone and directly combating race stereotypes and racist discourse. I feel theoretically inadequate to engage in a more thorough discussion of this issue. For now, I want to mark it as a direction for future research.

A Different Political Awakening

Vanessa over the next several years continued to perform frequently and to move regularly. It was after returning to her current home of Durham, NC in 2003 that she began to reconsider her motivation for performing. Vanessa attended her first International Drag King Extravaganza. The experience “blew [her] little drag mind.” It was at IDKE that Vanessa witnessed a performance that changed her as a person and as a performer. Vanessa, like many other drag kings, was embodying her alter ego Dickie Jaxx throughout the night. As Vanessa mentioned, for many people “their drag personas are also their life personas, but they are more amplified when they are onstage.” Drag kings are often in drag during the entirety of a drag event whether it is a night or a few days, so in a way it was Dickie watching the show. Over the course of the weekend Vanessa had seen many acts some of which were thoughtful and interesting, but not particularly moving, and some of which included of problematic content or (in retrospect) even offensive content. However, one number dramatically deviated from the usual acts

by performing their lip syncing, boy band dance combination around a decidedly troubling topic: incest. Vanessa remembers that the number “was just brilliant. It was like [the Cuntry Kings] perform now. It used pop culture, this music, this stupid summer song – something you’d heard a thousand times. And it was just – oh, uh, god – it was just devastating.” The performance was devastating due to the odd juxtaposition of incest and the common elements of drag king performance, such as a “stupid summer song” and synchronized dance moves. The effect was to embed the trauma “in the arms” of familiar/familial drag performance – almost anticipating the performance of comfort into which Vanessa was then drawn. This performance transformed Vanessa from watcher into witness because she not only recognized the truth of the situation performed from her experience of similar trauma, which was deeply upsetting, but also because she felt suddenly calibrated with an anguish that exceeded her own experience and connected her with similarly situated others (Oliver, 2001).

Stunned and crying, Vanessa started to walk away from the crowd. A drag king she had seen around over the weekend but not actually met approached her and “literally just held me while I cried.” The drag king talked to her until she calmed down. He soothed her by saying, “We [drag kings] are a family. If you broke down somewhere between here and North Carolina, you could call me, and I would come help you. And I know you would help me.” In that moment, Vanessa realized the drag world was more than just the sum of its kings. Instead, drag kings are a community of people affectively bonded, for better and for worse, by their passion for (drag) performance. “Being all together like that (pause) it can bring out the worst in people, but it can bring out the best in people.” The “profound connectedness” is not only a way to organize experiences that

support and proliferate the gender variant performance community, but also a way to invest a subculture with a sense of responsibility to and for its cohorts, to challenge performers and audiences to use performance to make social change.

The incest performance might even be understood as the performance to which all of Vanessa's subsequent work is responding. Through this experience Vanessa came into a critical awareness of the way a carefully crafted performance that combines "politics" with "entertainment" can deeply effect those who witness it. Without minimizing the emotional devastation that she experienced during this scene, I also want to note that the experience did not shut her down. Instead, she responded to this response-enabling performance with an increased sense of responsibility to create performances that not only represented the unspeakable, overlooked and underserved, but also reconnected people whose subjectivity has been damaged by trauma and/or who are currently living under conditions of threat to their own agency. Furthermore, she hopes her work will also compel those agency may be less compromised to realize that they have an ethical responsibility to improve the lives of those who are hurt, in need or otherwise marginalized. She does not create performances that manipulate others into response, but performs with a kind of honesty and intention that entrusts others with the power of witness.

Vanessa's current work, including her deeper explorations of race in performance, performs an ongoing witness to the performance of incest/trauma that so deeply affected her. For instance, I saw her perform a piece entitled "Half-Breed" at the same SONG (Southerners On New Ground) benefit where I first saw Asha/Al perform. In this performance Jaxx came on stage in a gi, a traditional Asian long, belted jacket and pants

outfit. Jaxx lips synced to a song (that neither he nor I can remember) while going through a series of slow motions that are at once something like a demonstration of martial arts moves and something like a dance. As the song continues, his face becomes increasingly anguished, as if he is going through a very difficult struggle. At times, his fluid movements seem like he might be fighting someone off or asserting his power in combat.

A screen behind Vanessa begins to show a slideshow of pictures from Vanessa's trip to meet her family in the Phillipines and pictures of her U.S. family. The images follow the same tempo as Jaxx's movements. The pictures appear to be candid shots, but the pictures from the Phillipeans show a laughing, smiling Vanessa in a state of ease that contrasts with her tight smile and rigid posture in her U.S. family photos. Jaxx moves on a diagonal with his body turned slightly stage left, but the screen is flush with the audience. The images – Vanessa's huge smile and excited face as she poses on a small boat with other smiling Filipino faces, Vanessa's tense smile when seated between her stern countenanced white father in his Navy issue dress whites and her Filipino mother in her flowered housedress (whose faraway expression bears only the shadow of a smile), Vanessa with her arms around a young looking woman who appears to be part of her Filipino family, Vanessa with her arms around her U.S. born, mixed race sister, images of the Philippines, images of San Diego – slowly fade in an out.

Finally, against a slide that I can only remember as verdantly, tropically green (were there faces or buildings?) Jaxx stops. He unties his belt while holding his robe closed. Slowly, mortally slowly, as if moving after sustaining a fresh injury, he opens one side of his jacket. Even more slowly, he opens the other side of his jacket. Now all

of the letters can be seen: I AM. The capital letters are hand written in black marker ink on a white ribbed tank top. In that moment I saw the slide behind him: HALF BREED. With his jacket open, Jaxx turns his body slightly stage right so that he is now facing the audience straight on. He lets the jacket fall from his arms and raises them on both sides in a crucifixion pose. He puts his head back and finishes the final chorus of the song while prominently displaying the message on his chest: I AM. When the music stops, there is a slight delay before the audience breaks into applause.

Vanessa has performed this number only a few times, but each time it has a significant impact on both her and the audience:

That is the single most personal number I has ever done. And it really talks about something I really struggle with with being bi-racial and living in the U.S. and wanting to claim a heritage even though I pass as white in many circles. But also having visited the Philippeans, which is when I came up with that number, but really feeling like an American-Asian and not an Asian American. And I wanted to claim some homeland, but then I came back to the US and I realized I do have a homeland. It is the US. But, not that its that simple, not that its that black and white. I think it was cathartic for me, I think I really needed to do something like that. I think it had been inside me and I needed to get it out.

Vanessa has not performed the number often, and a lot of the feedback has simply been that the number is “powerful” or “important.” Her own collective members think the number is “really important, and strong, but that is all they say about it.” These responses suggest that the vulnerability of performance is palpable, and the message of

race related personal strife cues the audience that something significant has just happened. They perhaps feel implicated in knowing more about the mixed race identity. However, the non-specificity of most responses also indicated a hesitance to directly engage the subject of mixed race identity, and a possible lack of awareness about how growing up a mixed race child of a Naval officer and Filipino woman born shortly after the end of the Vietnam war implicates a host of related issues about individual identity in relation to national identity.

For a smaller group of audience members “Half Breed” seems to be as transformative for them as the incest/trauma number was for her. She has been approached by people who either responded from their own closely related experience, or from a place of awareness about the issue(s). They were able to witness something that enabled them to respond. After one performance a woman who had grown up being called “half-breed” while being beaten and who experienced her heritage primarily through trauma thanked her for “putting it out there.” She was crying. For her, Vanessa’s performance had revealed a powerful truth and in the process gave “part of her back to herself.” As the child of a Naval officer, I spent several years living on the same base where Vanessa’s father was stationed. My brother David was born in a red-light district city near the city Vanessa’s mother lived in until she came to the U.S. During this performance I grieved for the for my brother’s painful struggle as “the brown one” in a family of “pink ones.” We have such a different, and yet shared, experience of my family that I want to learn more about and that he might want the invitation to discuss. Through her performance, Vanessa created a scene of witness that allowed this woman to become response-able for a lost part of her own subjectivity. I was made responsible

anew for the response-ability for the struggles of my own brother. The scene was “beyond recognition,” a moment of witnessing something familiar in a way that enabled response. For this woman, witnessing a familiar scene of not just oppression, but also overcoming and reclamation of a self, helped restore a part of her subjectivity (Oliver, 2001, p. 19).

The Audacity of Performance

Energized from her experience at IDKE, Vanessa realized that performance was a way not only to communicate with audiences about issues, but also to create the kind of world in which she wanted to live, even if only for the duration of a song. She began rethinking her past, and seeing herself as part of a larger queer history of struggle, activism and slow, but steady, change (Case, 2009; Munoz, 1999; Roman, 1998). Vanessa began thinking intentionally about how to create performances that modeled a world of radical inclusion for people⁴⁶ whose gender, race, sexuality or other aspects of identity might not fit within existing structures of inclusion, or even recognition. As a result, she began reconsidering performance as a way to “show the blind spot in the representational real,” the places where people were subsisting under conditions of threat, to help others see a way to “redesign the representational real” to include those people (Phelan, 1993, p. 3). She decided to make performances that clearly demonstrate how to make life more livable for vulnerable populations by not only representing injustice, but also presented ways to think and act that improve the conditions of livability for at risk people.

⁴⁶ Through performance and other forms of activism Vanessa has also come to believe that human rights and animal rights are inextricably linked. Therefore, she and the other Cuntry Kings include scenes of animal advocacy among their performances. However, we did not discuss this aspect of her work, so this writing will focus on her performances about human rights.

As a founding member of the Cuntry Kings, Vanessa helped lead their group through the difficult conversations that transformed them into a feminist collective. The early days of the collective were an encompassing labor of love for Vanessa. “The Cuntry Kings took all my time, you know? My life *was* the Cuntry Kings. It – was – ex – *hausting*. But I loved it.” The CKs performed once a month. In preparation for their shows they spent several days a week at meetings that transformed into “processing sessions that would seriously take, like, eight hours.” During the meetings the collective members proposed scenes for upcoming shows, then the group would *process* it to determine whether or not it fit into their mission. Queer processing is never simply talking (if there is such a thing). Instead, it is a charged, embodied practice of dissecting a subject by pulling it apart and examining it from every angle. For the Cuntry Kings, processing what acts to include in their repertoire is a complex negotiation of identities, issues and intentions considered against overlapping fields of signification. To create a performance that up to fifteen people will endorse requires intense processing, especially because those participating in the review neither have the same experience of the world they inhabit, nor the same vision of what an ideal future would look like. They do agree that the steps to a better future can be taken through performance, and that is why such extensive processing is a necessary step between the conception and execution of an act.

Vanessa found the rigor of the process both draining and exhilarating. She credits these meetings for transforming her from “a self-centered jock to a political minded dyke.” Vanessa educated herself about feminism and other social justice issues through a variety of channels including talking with other Cuntry Kings, reading, and getting involved in different kinds of activism. She became deeply politicized around political

and social justice issues that matter to her. As she changed, Dickie Jaxx changed. She describes his maturation process as “an evolution” that somewhat paralleled her own. Where she had previously considered Jaxx her alter ego, a figure closely aligned with the hedonistic aspects of her personality, she began seeing him as more of a vehicle for saying the things she wanted to say from a position of power. “As a drag king, I feel that I have the responsibility to talk to the issues as a male. To, use that to use that male gender almost exploitively, (laughs) if that is a word.”

Jaxx’s role in the troupe evolved as Vanessa’s political consciousness developed. Over time, she reframed Jaxx as:

A pre-performance mode because its definitely not day to day. If that persona were around in my everyday there would be more bravado, the more amplified version of my personality aspects, which are not always my best aspects. These aspects definitely were more macho, more about sex appeal [when Vanessa was first performing as Jaxx], because that is how I make more money. But, now something else matters. The message is really important. What happens on stage is the point.

As a pre-performance mode, Jaxx is a liminal space in which Vanessa transitions from her everyday self (and those performances) to her stage self, and the prospect of engaging alternative performances of “self” from audience members. On stage, Jaxx becomes a tool of subversion, a man who uses his social, legal and cultural power to re/form the injustices of white heteropatriarchy through performance. Jaxx’s performances are a radical critique of the way that dominant ideology suppresses and subjugates difference, as well as a demonstration of how to act differently.

Vanessa realizes that change is more likely to occur when the people who represent power, usually white upper middle class men, endorse the kinds of changes that would make the world more equitable. She also thinks it is rare indeed for those folks who occupy some of the most powerful social positions to recognize their responsibility for “bringing other people up.” As “a woman in a patriarchal society,” she not only experiences, but also understands, how power is unevenly distributed in society. Vanessa interrupts the transmission of messages that privilege white heteropatriarchial norms by “using that [masculine] gender identity to expose the patriarchy.” She critiques all channels of transmission, from the media to education to religious dogma to political races, for the ways in which they perpetuate discourses of disenfranchisement for vulnerable populations. When I asked if she thinks she might be reworking Audre Lorde’s adage by using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, she laughed and replied, “that IS the point, really.”

Vanessa uses Jaxx to assume the body of power. As Jaxx, she moves between the “me” of her social location as a mixed race, queer, woman from a working class background and into a space of play where she performs the “not me” of an white, upper class, heterosexual male that through performance is a “not not me”, a performance “as if” she holds all of the same socially sanctioned power (Schechner, 1989):

What we do is we use the stage as a realm of play, but within playing we try and articulate aspects of society that maybe could use some improvement. To create those situations in ways so that they can change, or create those situations in a way to expose them for what they are but then put them into a utopic ideal.

In a space of play, Jaxx is the body of power. He becomes a kind of trickster figure “playing with social order, unsettling certainties” and thereby “intensify[ing] awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions” (Conquergood, 1989, p. 84). In other words, through play Jaxx performs the performativities that we might otherwise assume are fixed categories of identity: gender, race, class, victim, survivor, etc.

Through Jaxx, Vanessa not only occupies the seat of power, but also diverts that power toward her political ideals. The play is compelling because Jaxx’s body is not Vanessa’s body, but it is not not Vanessa’s body as well (Schechner, 1985). The performativity of gender comes into sharp resolution when Jaxx is on stage whether or not you can see Vanessa with/in him because s/he performs as a drag king. No matter how convincing the performance of masculinity, the genre prevents Jaxx from being read as exclusively male. Thus, the power that Jaxx commands can no longer be understood as exclusive to male-bodied male persons. Because I know Vanessa, I am more likely to recognize her in Jaxx than I am to see Asha in Al or Elizabeth in Johnny Blazes, but the more relevant point is drag king and trans masculinity is ultimately not reducible to a gender. When Vanessa *plays* Jaxx (who *plays* the role necessary for the scene or circumstance), the performativity of legible gender and the links between gender and power are *played*. What kinds of possibilities open up when we realize that power is mutable, transferable and perhaps more available to us than we previously thought?

For Vanessa, part of the power of this play is that she is able to address serious topics in a way that is fun. Like some of the performers referenced earlier in this chapter, Vanessa used to equate political performance with dry lessons that somehow functioned in opposition to fun. However, as she began making political performances she

discovered they can be just as fun, or even more fun, than less reflexive or intentional work. Vanessa muses:

Probably one of my favorite parts about it is that we do use that pop culture to do what we do. We do have fun. You know, when I first started talking about political drag, I felt like people might perceive it as boring. At first I thought it would be boring. Or for the THEatRE. And you know, I think it IS for the theater. But, I also think its funny, and sexy and interesting and provocative. And really fun. Even when it gets hard we have a great time.

Vanessa conveys the pleasure she takes in creating, dancing, entertaining and educating. However tough the content or process, the performance is relentlessly joyful. Vanessa also wants her performances to be fun for other people. Unlike Al, who seems to be gratified by his own seedy pleasures irrespective of the audience, Vanessa finds happiness and purpose when she shares her enjoyment with the audience. Performing to familiar, popular songs allows the audience to connect more quickly to the scene presented, while also challenging them to re/consider how the song lyrics might have different meaning depending on how they were represented in performance. Here fun means appropriating the terms of mainstream popular culture to create a world where currently marginalized people (especially gender non-conforming people) can access and enjoy everyday possibilities for friendship, love, success and happiness that are less available to them in the world outside of the show.

Although the fun is meant to be, well, fun, there is also another purpose to making pleasurable political performance. According to Huizinga (2007/1955), play has a “profoundly aesthetic quality” that results in fun, a condition of being that “resists all

analysis, all logical interpretation” and “cannot be reduced to any other mental category” (p. 138). Through the play of performance Vanessa aligns the ephemeral, irreducible quality of fun with a message about social change to create an affective connection between the audience member and the issue(s) at play. She hopes the affective connection will inextricably link the artifact of the song with the message(s) of the performance in a way that in/directly provokes audience members into ongoing contemplation of and reckoning with those messages:

One of the reasons that I love that we pick pop culture songs is because the next time they are driving in their car, or just listening to the radio at work they will hear it. Maybe it will spark something. Maybe they will start a conversation, or even keep it to themselves, but either way they will have a realization. They will understand the concept, the message, in a deeper way so it might help make change. The performance helps them realize it. Sometimes we do something direct where we ask them to take action ... but sometimes we just put these seeds out and wait for them to grow.

Vanessa innovates the mythical masculine reproductive imperative to sow their seed in as many women as possible by using her masculinity to plant seeds that will create changes in individual thinking and behavior that will, in turn, aggregate into larger social change. Just as she continues to witness to a life-changing performance that motivated her to take action through performance, Vanessa hopes to inspire people to make progressive social change in their day-to-day lives.

Speaking with Vanessa during and beyond this interview makes me hopeful performance may not just make people reconsider their beliefs, but also engage them in

action to make the world more livable for people whose lives are at risk. I began this project to better understand how gender variant performance can help make the world more just for folks who do not or cannot fit within existing mainstream standards of normal, which is what Vanessa does. Vanessa was one of the people who gave the mother of that gender questioning 12-year-old (who I still wonder and worry about) practical advice about how to not only seek help, but also to communicate love and support to the child. However, she does more than just provide comfort. She also uses performance to put oppression in a critical frame within which audiences can see not only how oppression is manifested in an individual life, but also how specific issues and the ways oppressions are linked, thus showing/reminding audiences that where one life is unlivable all lives are under threat. She then demonstrates how these circumstances can be changed in order to inspire people to change them. What makes me profoundly hopeful about her approach is that she is working not just to salve, or even to solve immediate problems, but also to lay the ground a more just future.

With Munoz, “I dwell on hope because I wish to think about futurity; and hope, I argue, is the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence” (Munoz,). For Munoz, hope “structures belonging.” It makes people who might otherwise be marginalized and at risk feel an affective connection with others. In alliance it seems that the world might just *not* end. Hope has a temporality and a corporeality that are always moving toward possibility, toward futurity (Munoz, 2006). For me, Vanessa’s work (in and out of performance) is profoundly hopeful because she wants her performances to make people feel as though they are part of a world that needs to be changed, and that they are responsible for changing it. She makes them response-able by

not only putting forth a vision of how that change might happen, but also by doing so in a way that is pleasurable. She makes futurity material, performing her ideal world *as if* it were in the present, thus linking futurity (as a palpable potentiality ready to explode) with the future (the time after the performance ends). Combining futurity with the future makes hope not just a dream of change, but a condition of possibility that begins to enact change.

Vanessa creates performances that model a progressive vision of what life could be for marginalized people in order to bring a just future into her community, a community that, as a structure of belonging, already enacts the possibility for change. Vanessa's "hope [is] that [the audience will] walk away with something personal for them, that the message isn't just about my experience, but that it can be about something personal for them. I want it to contribute to a common energy, to building on a common thread." By planting seeds of new possibility, and gently weaving threads of recognition of shared (and interdependent) subjectivity between and among people aggregated for a night in a temporary, affective community created through performance, Vanessa creates something "personal" and more than personal: she makes us witnesses to each other's struggle. As such, we may perform as witnesses beyond the fleeting parameters of the performance event, possibly identifying with a larger queer community, thus already changing social relations and holding out the promise of ongoing forms of witness (whether as a stage performer or not) and incremental change.

CHAPTER 8: Conclusions and Queer Transitions

In the preceding pages I have introduced four participants: Cole, Johnny Blazes, Asha and Vanessa. Their voices are strongly represented, but I have also included the voices and echoes of other participants, performers and experiences. I knew who would have to be included almost as soon as I started writing, although I was only genuinely thrilled about the work of one of those people. I could have chosen to focus on performers who were less challenging to me, both as a critical scholar and as a person. But, as usual, I found the discord and frustration of sifting through the more provocative conversations more compelling. These chapters became ways to structure conversations I continued having in my head after the interviews were complete. They were also an opportunity to ask the questions I wish I had asked, and sometimes to speculate on the potential answers. As much as I have said, I am also vexed to know that I have only scratched the surface of the astoundingly vast potential for this project.

When I began this project I naively thought I was going more deeply into a familiar place. I believed I would be working on a fairly local project and speaking with people who I would continue to know. Instead, I entered into new worlds that I did not know had been flourishing all around me. I was forced to push my limits in order to fulfill my commitment to pursuing the project. In the process, I have learned more than I imagined, not the least of which is that I have so much more to learn. I am forever grateful for each of the performer/participants who generously shared their stories, experiences and performances with me in order to facilitate the work that has happened

thus far. In conclusion, I will review some of what I have discussed here, consider some of the larger implications for this work, and suggest future directions that the research might take.

Summary

Cole, my first interview partner and the person with whom I have had the most ongoing contact, has facilitated my learning about trans performance, and indeed trans subculture, more than I ever imagined. Cole helped ground me in the foundational information about the “trans narrative” that helped frame the rest of the project. As I discussed, Cole’s goal to make performances that can be understood suggests a politics of legibility. He makes every performance into a story that is marked in order to be comprehensible within the terms of everyday life. By being thus legible, Cole is able to deliver clear messages about transitioning to the trans community. In addition, he performs transness as “something that is itself. Trans is not a lack of something, or too much of something. It just is.” Unlike Johnny Blazes, Cole does not struggle with figuring out what he is, but rather looks for a way to be true to who he thinks and feels is. Accordingly, he presents possibilities for trans agency that are less about proving transness and more about cultivating a personal form of transness. His claims to narrative are an interesting claim to his own story, to his prerogative to continuously produce work that is about him and stars him. And yet, ultimately, Cole wants to make a difference for other people. He simply seems to believe that retelling his story is the best way to do so.

Johnny Blazes helped me discuss the possibilities and problematics of genderqueerness that Johnny Blazes embodies. Through Johnny I explored genderqueer

identity as a site of resistance and struggle that creates the possibilities of expanding gender systems to include greater fluidity both within and among individuals. Johnny is an example of a performer who resists the linear narrative of trans becoming (introduced by Cole) that relies on gender as a polarized binary, a journey from she-ness to he-ness, and instead considers gender as an ongoing becoming with multiple options for expression. Zie is not the only genderqueer identified person with whom I spoke, but zie is the only one who perceives genderqueerness to be a kind of dislocation, a perpetual liminality. In addition, Johnny helped introduce a thematic exploration of witness that circulates throughout this writing. Johnny's advocacy around gender-neutral pronouns also facilitated an exploration of their potential power. I appreciate Johnny's position, and agree that gender-neutral pronouns create the possibility for new performative iterations of gender. However, I concluded that for me the claim to "neutrality" is undercut by an uncomfortable similarity between gender-neutral pronouns and male-generic language.

Through Asha/Al I finally experienced the transformative power of the grotesque. I learned more about why Asha, through Al, creates performances that explode the boundaries of good taste and even good sense. Al performs with a kind of abandon that implies he could not care less if anyone is watching – he is doing it for himself. While he is at times hard to watch, he is also inspiring. Al/Asha also helped me consider the significance of queering the grotesque, the monstrous, excessive body, with/in gender variant performance (Russo, 1994). Asha also served as an important reminder that femme identity is in/extricable from gender variant performance, and that queers who want to build queer community should remember that femmes are as important as FtMs.

In the gender variant performances I have seen femmes are cast in supporting roles both on and off stage. On stage, femmes often perform as recipients or repositories of a masculine exercise of virility. They are the seduced lover, the eager fan, the good girl turned bad by an even badder man. Off stage, femmes tend to do a bulk of the organizational and maintenance work that keeps the troupes going. They direct, book gigs, make costumes, police minors, provide emotional support and sometimes even physical support to keep “their kings” performing. One femme who performs these functions called herself a “queer community organizer.” Nonetheless, female-bodied femme identity is often discredited because it (usually) involves performing gender in a way that approximates (even if it reinvents) normative expectations for the femme person’s birth sex. Femmes are disparaged for their “easy” or “normative” performances of femininity instead of being appreciated as fellow gender performers whose stylized, performative femininity queers normative femininity through highly polished performance. Asha challenges the subculture of gender variant performance by claiming a space for femme and actively queering existing expectations for drag king performance. Perhaps most significantly, Al’s grotesque performances produce divinity effects, a sense that the way he embraces his abjection as a fierce form of subjectivity is what makes not only him, but also anyone with the courage to actually embody their convictions, divine (Sedgwick and Moon, 1993). I cannot wait to see what s/he thinks of next.

I ended this writing with Vanessa, whose 10-year journey from being an entertainer to a political performer served as a representative example of how a drag king performer might (and how many do) become politicized and start doing more politically aware performance work. Vanessa helped me parse the difficult terrain of the terms

“entertainment” and “politics” as I have heard them deployed in ongoing discussions of identity and representation. She also created an opportunity to address issues of race in performance as I heard them represented in interviews (primarily Vanessa’s interview) and at IDKEX. This is one of the most significant aspects of the project because further exploring the intersection of race and gender within gender variant performance is an imperative next step. Vanessa also helped illustrate another form of witness that charges audiences with a responsibility to make a politically progressive choice as a response to her work. Vanessa performs with a kind of confrontational rhetoric that makes her performance political in what I consider a radically purposeful way: she inspires people to take action around issues that matter to them, their communities and the wider world.

Why it Matters: Self/Other

I began this project to learn more about gender variant performers working to make life more livable for gender non-conforming people through their performances. As I repeatedly heard, most gender variant performers undertook performance in order to explore their gender identity. Through performance, they began to actively play with the gender scripts they were socialized to follow but from which (for the most part) they had already been diverging in their everyday lives. For Vanessa, drag kinging began to transform her personal and social gender play into fun and profit. Drag became both an outlet and a place of personal discovery. Over time Vanessa cultivated a strong foundation of self-awareness and purpose that permeates all aspects of her life. For Cole, telling and retelling his stories is a vital, ongoing project of self-making. He has a vision for who he wants to become, and through his performing work he is becoming that

person. For both Asha/Al and Johnny Blazes, performing is a way to continuously open up categories in order to create more space for fluidity and play. Al is dedicated to pleasure and turning the expectations for queer masculinity and sexuality inside out. Asha uses her alter-ego Al's on-stage performances to explore the extremes of her pansexual, queer, sadomasochistic, anthropomorphic sexuality to denaturalize masculinity through multiple queerings. Johnny's characters enable him to play with gender from multiple angles. Through performance Johnny keeps the category of genderqueer open enough to accommodate the fluidity he wants to enjoy.

As earlier stated, I heard many gender variant people describe their performances as a place for self-exploration and self-expression. Based on what I heard and read, drag kinging is often the starting point for either exploring masculinity as an aspect of identity or coming to terms with their transmasculine identity. This is not surprising considering I went looking for transmasculine or drag masculine performers. Several trans performers that I heard speak in panels at IDKEX describe the process of joining a drag king troupe in order to further engage their everyday performances of masculinity only discover that they were "really" trans. During an IDKEX session one former drag king who has become a transmasculine performer exclaimed that when he first saw drag kings "I could not believe what I was seeing. I saw myself. [The drag kings] became my idols. I had to do what they were doing." Trans, genderqueer and even drag masculine people are drawn to performance as a useful and habitable space of expression and alternative visibility. These performances are not generally virtuosic and the performers are not "actors" by skill, trade or training. Thus, the intense desire to "do what they were doing" is not a desire to become a performance professional, but instead to inhabit a space where

the performativity of self is revealed as performance, and therefore open to improvisation.

As a space of play performance grants gender variant performance the latitude, even grace, to embody aspects of their identity (or possible identity) as if. The play of performance allows for a working through of previously unexplored territories of embodiment and identity. In this play, performers can do the dangerous work of cultivating a non-normative body-self in the (relative) safety of an enthusiastic queer community. How might the spectacularity of gender transition as a staged event help ameliorate the trauma(s) of gender incongruity or transition in everyday life? Through drag kinging he met other transmasculine people and found resources and support for beginning social and medical transition. His story was just one of the moving stories of drag performers first coming out as trans in their performance work, then to their performance families and only then to others. In this way, drag kinging seemed to provide both a practice of doing gender and a community of gender non-conformists within which to make a key self-discovery. For many transmasculine people, I imagine this process of exploring, discovering or cultivating a self through performance in the drag king community is literally a life saving process.

Each of these performers represented here also works to advance gender variant/trans awareness in some way not just for themselves, but for others like them. Cole is deeply invested in being an active member of the transmale community. He wants to let other transmen know that they have choices about how they transition. The stories he has shared from his own life are clearly resonating with audiences. I can imagine his work will grow to include an even wider scope of experiences. Johnny is

deeply committed to exposing all kinds of audiences to the multiplicities and fluidities of gender. While zie claims zirs work is not overtly political, Johnny is passionate about performing zirs body as a site of possibility that awakens people to gender diversity. These performers want to make the experience of gender variance not only other gender variant or trans people, but also other trans and gender variant allies and advocates. Asha queers masculinity to constantly subvert the social power of masculinity in queer spaces. In this way, her work is in part devoted to helping make space for femme visibility, a queer subjectivity that seems to be diminishing in social power as trans masculinity increases. Finally, Vanessa uses her performances as a platform to address directly issues that matter for her and to promote activism. Gender variance is a key part of her larger social justice agenda. In these ways, each performer dedicates his/her/zirs work to improving conditions for gender non-conforming people in and beyond the context of queer communities.

Circulating throughout these examples, and this writing, are iterations of witness. I have relied heavily on Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of witness here as an engagement with difference that enables difference (or, others) not to just be seen and acknowledged, but to be invited into dialogic relations in which their responses are met with responses that in turn open onto increased possibilities for moving beyond systems of oppression and domination. The conditions of performance are the conditions of possibility for witness. Audience members are literally figured as an eyewitness. They see the event first hand. Oliver talks about "eye witnessing" as privileging vision. She suggests that the eyewitness testimony is often distilled down to facts as if what the eyewitness saw is reducible to a "experience that exists within itself" that can be "recognized" as true by

corroborating evidence or accessed through the recall of one or more eye witnesses.

Oliver then argues that witnessing beyond recognition is not simply seeing and recalling an event, but is instead “constituted and reconstituted . . . through witness.” Oliver writes, “what the process of witnessing testifies to is not a state of facts but a commitment to the truth of subjectivity as address-ability and response-ability.

When a performer performs their complex subjectivity, their “otherness,” they invite each audience member into an affective engagement with difference that enables the viewer (audience) to see the other (gender non-conforming performer) as a subject and enables them to respond as a co-subject (Oliver, 2001, p. 15). Johnny and Vanessa have different performance aesthetics, but both of them use their work to elaborate the everyday acts of oppression that they endure and that perpetuate social inequity. An audience member becomes an eyewitness to the experiences they articulate through performance. What I am clarifying here is that some audience members are eyewitnesses, folks who see Johnny or Vanessa (or those like them) perform, and recognize the performance as (only) a recountable series of moments that end when the performance ends. The eyewitness thinks of the performance as an event passed, but that can be returned to through recall. Nonetheless, I argue is that both Johnny and Vanessa do performance work that can and does create witnesses that see beyond recognition, who do more than just see “what happened” and instead have an experience that puts their subjectivity in relation to the performer’s (or other gender variant person’s) subjectivity. I do not think a witness always affirms the performer in the sense that they agree with everything the performer does or seems to stand for. However, witnessing is an affirmative response in the sense that it affirms the subjectivity of the performer. Oliver

talks about witnessing as a loving response, which can also be a critical response. The key to witnessing is the engagement with responsible (and response enabling) response to the performance and performer. I have argued that they are able to transform watchers into witnesses, by which I mean that they enable the audience see gender variant people as full subjects instead of as objects or as “other.”

I admit it is my hope that witness would be an almost inescapable result of performances intended to make social change. I want to acknowledge here that my hope is tempered for two reasons. First, not everyone accepts the invitation to witness. For any number of reasons, a watcher may be unable or unwilling to re/consider the subjectivity of a gender non-conforming person. Performance alone may be insufficient to move people to re/consider the way they engage gender in their own lives or in their social relations. Second, witnessing to one person’s subjectivity, or even the subjectivity of a group of people, does not necessarily translate into critical engagement with larger structures of oppression. As Oliver notes, witnessing is beyond recognition, so it is not simply about recognizing that gender variant people are “human too” or “just like everyone else” or even that we are all different. Instead, it is about realizing that existing gender norms are inhospitable to gender variant people and we just might need to rethink “gender” as a category system. These are two significant barriers to witness that must be acknowledged.

I also briefly engaged witness as it is figured in the Austinian performative in order to consider pronouns as performatives. For Austin, performatives are sayings that are doings (Austin, 1975). These performatives are citational and derive their authority from prior, effective utterances and are certified by a witness (Austin, 1975). I argued

that pronouns are performative in that they do *someone* as gendered through immanent citation of a history of effective pronoun performatives certified by normative expectations for gender. Using Austin's concept of witness I suggested that gender-neutral pronouns are performatives in need of witness not only for certification, but also to fortify the chain of citation that legitimates them. Fundamentally, I argue that, as performative utterances, gender-neutral pronouns cannot be outside of the citational referent of normative pronouns. Thus, contrary to the claims of "neutrality," these performatives invoke normative performatives and thereby the hierarchical relationship of these performatives. I have argued that gender-neutral pronouns are uncomfortably close to male-generic language that, under the claim of representing all people, actually exclude female-bodied female people. The certifying witness of gender-neutral pronouns may add a new strata of pronoun to the existing structure, but they are also (potentially unwittingly) reinforcing the subordination of female pronouns and by extension female subjectivity.

This brings me to another point of contention for me in this project: the way femininity is often subordinated to masculinity in gender variant performance. I briefly described my experiences at the Tenth Annual International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKEX) in Columbus, Ohio. As a perceived agent or representative of normative gender, I was repeatedly unrecognized over the course of the conference. I tried to activate my insignificance into a form of access. As I described, I was mostly treated as an interloper whose incongruity was performatively disciplined through unrecognition. After the conference I had a discussion with Vanessa about my experiences and she confirmed that I was not overreacting or being too sensitive (notably,

reactions that are considered feminine). She agreed that a problem with the conference is that it can bring out some of the worst characteristics of the group, which in my case meant excluding me not just as an outsider, but also as a perceived female and feminine person. Upon reflection, the personal unrecognition was unfortunate, but not a big deal. I am neither a drag king nor a trans performer. I am not the person for whom IDKEX was designed. Instead, what continues to bother me is the way that the environment valorized masculinity *at the expense of femininity*. No matter how non-traditional the masculinities circulating at the conference, the promotion of drag and trans masculinity still seemed to rely on a power structure that located non-masculine women at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Finally, I want briefly to review the ways that queer might be understood in the context of this project. Everyone with whom I spoke identified themselves as queer and as part of a queer community. I did not pursue discussions about sexuality, but for all of my participants “queer” seemed to be an implicit reference to being sexually identified as not heterosexual and also not in (or only interested in) what might be called “same sex” relationships.⁴⁷ In other words, queer seemed to be about a sexuality that was invested in sexual relationships that might involve a variety of sexes and genders, but were not traditional or normative. “Queer community” can be understood as a term intended to include people who are sexually queer, a gender non-conforming person of any sexuality or an ally of queer/gender non-conforming people. At this point, many “queer communities” remain sex segregated. Gay men and drag queens tend to socialize separately from lesbians and drag kings. However, anecdotally many of the performers

⁴⁷ Here I want to be clear that this designation applies only to the people with whom I spoke, not to all trans or drag king performers. Other performers may identify differently.

with whom I spoke discussed creating more hybrid shows that include drag kings, drag queens and trans performers in order to build stronger bonds among queer communities. From what I have seen in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area, hybrid shows have been a successful way to get a mixed group of queer identified people out together.

I argue the most important use of queer in this project is as a radical political tool for subverting normativity and structures of oppression. Each of the participants with whom I spoke mentioned queer, but Asha most explicitly discussed the ways she wants her intentional queering to continuously expand the possibilities for gender embodiment. Asha wants people to have more choices about how they do themselves, and (not to put too fine a point on it) each other. The other strong example of queering in this way is Vanessa's work. Her work queers the everyday activities we see all around us to expose intersections of oppression and inspire people to take progressive action. So one way queer could be understood here is as a way to remind people that they have choices about how they live their lives. Choices are not infinite – to paraphrase Butler we are all improvising our lives within a field of constraints. However, as Al and Vanessa show there are more options than we might recognize. Each day there are moments of choice that can reduce constraint and multiply our improvisational options. This, for me, is the political project of queer, and by extension queer performance.

Looking Forward: Future Directions For This Project

The audience cheers. The audience cheers. The audience cheers. During the last year or so I have participated as audience from a variety of physical locations. I have been in the audience at no fewer than fifteen live shows. I attended a conference that included multiple performances. I have watched recordings of performances on DVD. I

have seen three movies in three different settings: a crowded living room, a sparsely populated auditorium, and a packed auditorium. I have spent countless hours watching YouTube videos of various drag kings in performance. I spent an interview watching YouTube videos with the person who starred in them. I have coordinated and participated in two different events featuring trans identity in performance. I have read a series of zines. I have visited hundreds of websites. Over and over again I have put myself in the role of audience member. Over and over again the excruciatingly loud sound of cheering people has overpowered me. Other people were so enthusiastic that I was often shut down, silenced, and left feeling entirely outside of the experience. Perhaps I was over-committed to my role as researcher. Perhaps I am just getting too old to enjoy staying up late standing on concrete floors pressed against strangers watching performances that neither excite nor inspire me. Irrespective of the why I generally had to brace myself when *the audience cheered*.

Why was there so much cheering? Some of the screams related directly to points of tension or relief in the performance on stage. Some of the hollering was calling out the name of a particular performer or of performance troupes. Any sort of sexual gesture was bound to elicit whistles, screams, and possibly cash. However, these causal explanations cannot account for the unbridled enthusiasm generated by these performances. I wonder about these reactions. At some level, I get it. Performance is an outlet. Through performance, the erotic anxieties of gender transgression or non-conformity become fantasy moments of living “as if.” Performance creates an affective circuit among audience members that promotes feelings of connection and identification. Seeing your friend and fellow community members (local, national or international) stage gender

transgressions can elicit a powerful solidarity with other similarly situated people. In addition, the alcohol and other substances that tend to be present loosen inhibitions. But even with all of these possible explanations, I still want to know more about what precisely is happening in that audience/performer relationship. Why do people go to these shows? What is the nature of fandom in drag king/gender variant community? What do they go hoping for and what do they get out of it?

A related issue hovering around the margins of this writing is sexuality as it circulates in the world(s) of gender variant performance. With the exception of describing Al's performance, issues around sexuality have been tangential in my project, but they are quite prevalent in drag king and trans performance shows. Some numbers critique sexuality, but most of the performances I have seen are performances of the performer's sex appeal. Their performances seem intended to arouse those watching them. Audiences respond to the transgressive pleasures of watching a gender non-conforming person strut his stuff. Show atmospheres are often charged with sexual excitement and facilitate sexual encounters. IDKEX is a boisterously sex-positive environment that encourages hooking up and multiple-partner sexual activity. The giddiness around sex play forged the adolescent enthusiasm of making out with someone you might love forever, but never see again, with the cool bravado of sexual sophistication and experience to produce the affective register of a kinky summer camp. In one instance, a participant went through the whole interview because she thought I was "the Elizabeth" with whom she had drunkenly hooked up the night before. Sex (the acts and the biological category), sexuality, gender and gender identity cannot be fully disaggregated from each other in a study of gender variant performance. Gender variant

sex, queer sex and (potentially) non-normative heterosexual sex are built into the social structure of shows. The erotic economy of the shows is inextricable from any study that examines the audience/performer or audience/show relationship.

Where I have studied sexuality in relation to performance, it is not necessarily intended to produce sexual arousal, although it may use the grammars of sexual arousal to communicate more radical or sexually subversive messages. Performing the problematics of gender, sex and how they inform sexuality is hardly a new phenomenon. Women and queer artists have been especially influential in interrogating and altering what we “know” about the aggregates of sexuality through performance (For examples, see Diamond, 1997; Jones, 1998; Miller, 2006; Schneider, 1997). I previously thought that these performances would do more work to disaggregate sex and gender as they inform sexuality, and be a performative argument for gender, sex and sexual fluidity. I argue that sexual practice is in circulation in these performance events, and that sexuality is heavily showcased. I want to further explore the erotics of these events, perhaps, but not necessarily the way they link to sexual practices off stage. Instead, I wonder how sexuality is produced onstage. I am interested in the erotic tension of body-to-body transmission through performance. The act of sex might contribute to this tension (either to build it up or to diffuse it), but I am more interested in why gender variant performers so frequently use sexuality as a kind of “proof” of gender legibility.

As previously stated, a rich site for further exploration is the status of race in performance in the drag king community. The drag king community is becoming increasingly diverse. There are more racially mixed groups and groups formed around racial identity. However, as previously discussed, a majority of drag king performers are

white. More insidiously, there is still a common trope of appropriating race or ethnicity in performance, especially the frequent imitations of stereotypical hypermasculine black performance. The primary problem with both the appropriation and imitation is that they perpetuate negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. A secondary problem is that these performances reinforce a racist legacy of performing whiteness as race and ethnicity neutral and therefore free to access any other race or ethnicity through appropriation or imitation. Some members of the drag king community are already intervening on the issue of race in performance, but are experiencing some resistance from performers who consider their work either harmless or a form of tribute. The cross-community conversation is in a surprisingly preliminary stage, at least for white identified performers. I cannot speak to the experiences for the performers “of color” who were in a separate meeting.

At this moment, I understand intersectionality as understanding the ways in which the structures of race, class, and gender intersect in order to stipulate differences within what Michele T. Berger and Kathleen Guidroz call a more inclusive “sisterhood.” I am also interested in the way Berger describes intersectional stigma as a “distinct way that marginality is manifested and experienced” in *Workable Sisterhood*. She also describes it as “the total synchronistic influence of various forms of oppression, which combine and overlap to form a distinct positionality (Berger, 2006, p. 4). Intersectionality is potentially beneficial to my work because it would help me further explore how race and class inform the performance practices of individuals who are simultaneously performing a stigmatized gender (drag/trans) and a dominant gender (masculinity). The performances are intersectional in nature because all of these identity markers are present whether or

not they are foregrounded. An intersectional approach might help me better understand their motives, or experiences. It might help me better understand, for example, why Vanessa has the most comprehensive understanding and deployment of race, class, gender and how it connects to the wider world (animals, etc.) in performance while Cole is more narrowly focused on his experience and his world.

From my current understanding, I want to a few potential limits or qualifications on the potential use of intersectionality here. First, I cannot see social location written on the body. This becomes especially salient in the world of trans and drag performers where their performances of self are more deliberately cultivated than some other manifestations of social location. How to use someone's dress, for example, to help establish social location becomes complicated when they have strategically chosen their clothing to deploy specific messages (as, arguably, many of us do). Second, not everyone is conscious of the positions they are operating from. I can analyze intersectionality based on the information given to me, and what I observe, but I would need to further explore these points to do a fuller analysis. Finally, it is not just their social location/standpoint that might keep a performer's performances constrained by normative or mainstream gender norms, or even make performances powerfully subversive. A majority of these folks are amateur performers who do not have many performance tools at their disposal. No matter how much critical awareness they have about their positionality, they may not really have the knowledge or skills to make critical performances out of that awareness.

I keep in casual contact with one of the few people with whom I made a connection at IDKEX. She is the partner of a founding member of an all African-American drag king troupe based in Oakland, CA. The two of them have been

organizing performances and conferences for black drag kings, and have recently expanded to include other non-white performers. This could be a powerful form of organization for African-American drag kings, as well as other non-white drag kings. However, it is also an indicator that they do not feel at home in the existing drag king movement. As my acquaintance told me “off the record,” the mainstream (read: mostly white) drag community does not understand the full breadth of implications for what it means to be black, queer and gender non-conforming. In this way, the drag king movement might be echoing a fundamental oversight in feminist organizing by focusing on gender such that intersecting identity issues, such as race, get overlooked or underemphasized. Irrespective of whether or not white performers are performing in a way that is “non-offensive,” the community does not seem to be honoring the experiences or needs of non-white members.

The issue(s) of race in performance also focus the ongoing question of what constitutes a “respectful” performance in gender variant performance. Avoiding blackface, or any sort of racialized make-up scheme, is not enough. Learning just enough about the rituals and/or customs of a culture that you can explain why it is in your performance, but not account for how that appropriation might speak to issues beyond your performance is not enough. A critical examination of race in performance demands an engagement *with* the offensive reality of both historical and contemporary racism. Such performances cannot simply avoid or explain away offense. Instead, there must be a critical engagement with offense that opens up the claustrophobic boundaries of non-offensiveness. A “respectful” performance of race reconnects performance and audiences to a much larger and more complex history of racial performance in the United

States. The rub here is that engaging race at this level will also require performers to evaluate the ways the existing hierarchy of gender variant masculinity reinscribes racist paradigms. Considering race in performance reminds me that “respectful” performance does not deny one kind of inequity or oppression in order to demonstrate or overcome another. Instead, respectful performance works, however incrementally, towards an erosion of the oppressive structures that re/produce difference as a biological imperative rather than a social construction.

Despite the brevity with which I have described these emergent issues, I am aware that moving into an exploration of race and performance in gender variant performance is an overwhelmingly large field of exploration. I would need to do more theoretical preparation on race and identity. For me, opening that conversation must include some attention to other intersecting issues such as class, ethnicity, education level, access to services and other issues across race that might inform the way people understand and perform race. Thus, I might want to pursue further research in three possible ways. One way might be to follow the progress of race in performance as it is played out in conferences (regional, national and international). Another and more compelling way to pursue this line of inquiry further would be to work extensively with a collective that grapples with a breadth of issues that race in performance raises on and off stage. I would be especially interested in working with a race diverse collective that is already enacting critically reflexive performances and are challenging themselves to dismantle structures of oppression through performance. Finally, the most intriguing possibility for me would be to work with the group(s) in Oakland as they develop their current project. I want to know more about why they are organizing and what they hope will be the result.

An area that needs further refinement in future research is a distillation of the participant pool. When I began this work I mistakenly believed that trans performance and drag king performance were more similar than I now think they are. As I learned over the course of the last year or so, the drag king community and the trans performance community overlap but they are not precisely the same. Perhaps the most significant difference between drag kings and trans performers is that the former may spend a bulk of their off stage lives embodying a different gender subjectivity while trans performers tend to perform a more consistent gender on and off stage. As such, the subject of their onstage work may be different in form, content and intent. I do not want to imply that all trans performers are the same or drag king performers are the same. Instead, I want to acknowledge that even within these categories there is so much variation to explore that trying to span them both is an impossible task. To go more deeply into this work, I would choose to focus my research more narrowly. One option would be to choose either trans performers or drag king performers as an areas of exploration, and then talk to a variety of those performers. An option I would prefer is to focus on a specific troupe or collective in order to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of their praxis.

The future directions I have enumerated thus far are all ways to build on my research on gender variant performance. However, the last and perhaps most compelling future direction that has emerged in this research is a deeply personal one: refocusing my research and activism on issues that primarily impact female bodied female people. Quite unexpectedly, as I end this project (for now) I feel more like a woman than I ever have in my life. As I hope I have made clear, I have met some dedicated performers working to make the kinds of social change I want to see in the world. I have witnessed

performances that help carve out space for gender non-conforming people. I continue to want to help with this work. But I have been exhausted by the ways I have seen this work, and the people who enact it, reinscribe patriarchal gender hierarchy, heteronormativity, male privilege/entitlement, white privilege/entitlement and misogyny. I am concerned that the proliferation of female-bodied male people in the queer community is eclipsing the continued oppression that female-bodied female people, especially in the queer community, face. How can female-bodied people (among others) expand options for doing gender without devaluing the feminine? I have a renewed enthusiasm to work for women's rights in and out of performance. As part of this process, I will continue to demand better of my gender variant counterparts than stepping on the bodies of female bodied female people to achieve their own identity formation.

EPILOGUE: Transfabulous

“I’m a F-A-G-E-T-T-E/ A twinkle toes when disrobed got XXs in rows/Got gender troubles in loads/ I need a man that can handle what’s underneath these clothes/(WHY?)/ cuz I got a v to the a-g-i-n-a/but no p-e-n-i-s envaaaaay/ cuz for real tho/I got a dildo/I got two dildos/I got three dildos...”

Fagette, The Athens Boys Choir



(Images 18 & 19: Katz 1 & Katz 2)



(Image 20: Katz 3)

This entire project began with a night of performance, and I think it is fitting that it end with of two nights of performance. First, allow me to introduce you to Katz. Harvey Katz (who retains the legal name Elizabeth) is the Athens Boys Choir (ABC). He is a full time performer who travels the country promoting his “gender deviant, multi-media, spoken word/hip hop extravaganza.” His work is inflected by his particular experience yet also strives to represent more general trans experience while being anti-racist, anti-classist, multi-denominational, pro-fat, pro-sex, pro-feminist, mobility challenged friendly allegiances and practices. His performances are overtly political and include references to social issues, domestic policy, foreign policy, and our increasingly mediated society. His live shows are a combination of spoken word poetry, hip hop rhymes and beats, choreographed dance, multi-media in the form of films, sounds and a light show and lots of emcee banter with the audience. Katz’s work is a rich, queer aesthetic of excess, hyperbole, humor, technical skill and passion. He is truly *fabulous*.

Fagette is the song that symbolically bookends the yearlong research portion of this project. I have seen the song performed four times. The first was in the Cabaret

space at UNC in March 2008 and the last was at the Duke Coffeehouse in March 2009. My temperament was similar for both shows: exhausted, cranky, uninterested in queer posturing, and anxious about interacting with the performer. Nonetheless, I resolved to go the first time because I wanted a kickoff event that symbolically began my research process. Like every show I attended during the research process, the show began late. During the hour delay a cute, male-looking person guzzling the cold medicine Dayquil was running around the stage area checking the film projector and yelling commands at the two bewildered students in the sound area. He set up two projectors, a microphone with a very long cord, a film screen, a turntable, a large boombox and a cd player. After his whirlwind of testing outlets and barking sound and light cues, the performer suddenly announced “Ok, party people we are ready to *begin!*” The lights went down and the show began.

Within the first few beats of his number, the multi-media, hip-hop, interactive, Jane Fonda work out video inspired dance song “I Like You (But I Love Your Jazz Hands),” I was entranced. Katz went on to perform a variety of songs and spoken word poems about growing up Jewish, working class, genderqueer and ultimately trans in his home state of Georgia. From songs like “Tranny Got Pack,” a hilarious send up of the pros and cons of using a prosthetic phallus in everyday life, to “I’m A Mo-Fo Genius Because I’ve Got the Answer to World Peace,” a spoken word poem that suggests ending war by replacing actual violence with virtual reality, Katz was funny, poignant, honest, impassioned. As hyperbolic as this may sound, he shone with the inner light of someone who is doing the work his soul must do (Walker, 1974). Among the most powerful numbers was a spoken word poem about the unsolved (and often uninvestigated) murders

of trans people across the country. As he performed this poem a slideshow of photographs of the trans dead played on the screen behind him. Each picture bore the name, gender identity, birth date and death date of the murdered subject. Some included a brief account of how each died. Some included written loving commentary about the dead by their friends and family. I have only seen this number performed once, but like the gender non-conforming child with which this project began, the faces of these dead continue to haunt me. They remind me that there is a direct connection between gender variant performance and potentially literally saving lives.

I saw Katz again at the end of my research process. Before the final show began, I was feeling frustrated by some of the negative aspects of gender variant performance I had uncovered, and was uninterested in engaging in the social politics of a queer show. I was also getting sick. However, I needed a ritualistic end to the research process. After accumulating a mass of data so different than I anticipated I needed my faith in the process restored. I was *undone*. I showed up to this show almost two hours late and was gratified to have successfully missed most of the opening acts. Not too long after I arrived Katz took the stage with his usual microphone and film screen backdrop. He looked more road weary than when I saw him perform the first time, but that did not stop him from bellowing out “**TRANees** in the *HOUUUUSE!*” He performed a hilarious monologue about how he has “Jewish rhythm,” but had always thought he had rocked the dance The Electric Slide at his Bat Mitzvah. Apparently, he had recently found the film footage only to discover that he had done an awful job with the dance. This monologue launched into him into his song “EZ HEEB” which included a video he created out of this footage. The best part of the video was the opening featuring a recent shot of Katz’s face

followed by a series of photos of young Elizabeth Katz with the text: “In 2002 I Came Out As A Man But Before I Could Do That I Had To Become A Woman.” Like a fairy transfather, I witnessed (rather than, as my mood suggested, watched) Katz draw the audience (and myself) into a performance world that danced with temporality, embodiment, kinship and sexuality towards a radical politics of inclusion that promotes love and justice. The next song he performed was a rousing version of “Fagette” that included a sing-along portion.

When the song began I was sitting in one of the few available chairs in the coffeehouse. My limp body had melded into the chair’s sagging, uncomfortable shape, but it seemed better than trying to elbow my way to the front of the stage. As if on cue, when the first few beats of “Fagette” dropped I found myself nodding my head and bouncing up and down with the beat. When Katz ended the familiar line “I need a man that can handle what’s underneath these clothes” he added a spontaneous “Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?” I do not know if it was the ironic, lounge singer like baritone or my deep desire to answer that very question, but by the time he got to his “V to the A-G-I-N-A I was up and dancing. Having watched the video repeatedly on YouTube, I already knew all of the lyrics and beat breaks. Thus, I was able to not just physically follow the song through a co-performance of dance, but also improvise along when Katz performed the live improvisational variation that makes him so dynamic. His love and joy radiated from the stage, and my blood began to pulse along with a giddy excitement. Again, this sounds hyperbolic, but in that moment my spirited soared. My heart lifted in communal celebration of a life lived in the light of truth – messy, complicated, heart-breaking and hilarious truth. Performing this truth makes other lives possible by making

those lives too real to deny. When Katz invited the audience into the sing-along chorus, I ruptured into song.

When the song ended, I felt hot and dizzy. The energy of loving abandon I had dispersed into the crowd returned to my person in a sense of renewed faith. Although Katz is certainly a brilliant performer on his own, I was reminded that it is the countless hours, nights and venues for performance proliferating right now that (in a way) make Katz possible. Because of the drag kings and trans performers a gender variant (in this case trans) performer is someone to be. That the category of travelling, professional, full-time trans performer exists at all is a testimony to all of the performers making this work. The crowds keep coming to Katz's shows because he is a *trans celebrity* who makes the stories from his lives, and the lives of people he loves and fights for, the audiences' stories and (for some of us) the audiences' fight. I left the coffee house after that number because I had received what I needed. The performance reminded me that magic requires not extraordinary circumstances, but someone who is willing to work the everyday until something magical happens.

APPENDIX A: SONG LYRICS

Title: Close Up
Artist: Frou Frou

Is this a feeling of something about to happen?
Like snapping out of something
I didn't realize I was in.
Was I sleeping? What?
How can you be so sure?
If you've never been here before?
I don't understand, It can't be that easy
I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you
I can't keep my hands of you
I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you
Get back, get away from them
It's all wrong
Keep calm for a moment
Look in my eyes
Get back, get away 'cause
This could get ugly
If you think that I'll let you go
You're out of your mind
Oh my god, I'm not supposed to say this
'Cause I know that you're trouble but
Is that your real name and why are you doing this?
And how did I get here?
Ok no more questions, No worries
It's destination unknown
So dive in
The water's great
Listen I'm starting to speak like you
I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you
You can do no wrong
I love you, I hate you, I love you, I hate you

Song Title: Closer

Artist: Trent Reznor/Nine Inch Nails

You let me violate you.
You let me desecrate you.
You let me penetrate you.
You let me complicate you.
Help me.
I broke apart my insides.
Help me.
I've got no soul to sell.
Help me.
The only thing that works for me.
Help me get away from myself.

I wanna fuck you like an animal.
I wanna feel you from the inside.
I wanna fuck you like an animal.
My whole existence is flawed.
You get me closer to God.

You can have my isolation.
You can have the hate that it brings.
You can have my absence of faith.
You can have my everything.
Help me.
Tear down my reason.
Help me.
It's your sex I can smell.
Help me.
You make me perfect.
Help me become somebody else.

I wanna fuck you like an animal.
I wanna feel you from the inside.
I wanna fuck you like an animal.
My whole existence is flawed.
You get me closer to God.

Through every forest.
Above the trees.
Within my stomach.
Scraped off my knees.
I drink the honey inside your hive.
You are the reason I stay alive.

I wanna fuck you like an animal.
I wanna feel you from the inside.
I wanna fuck you like an animal.
My whole existence is flawed.
You get me closer to God.

Title: Lose Yourself
Artist: Eminem

Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted
One moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?

His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy
There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti
He's nervous, but on the surface he looks calm and ready
To drop bombs, but he keeps on forgetting
What he wrote down, the whole crowd goes so loud
He opens his mouth, but the words won't come out
He's chokin', how everybody's jokin' now
The clocks run out, times up over, bloah!
Snap back to reality, Oh there goes gravity
Oh, there goes Rabbit, he choked
He's so mad, but he won't give up that
Is he knows
He won't have it, he knows his whole back city's ropes
It don't matter, he's dope
He knows that, but he's broke
He's so stacked that he knows
When he goes back to his mobile home, that's when it's
Back to the lab again yo'
This whole rap shit
He better go capture this moment and hope it don't pass him

You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
You own it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime yo'

The souls escaping, through this hole that it's gaping
This world is mine for the taking
Make me king, as we move toward a, new world order
A normal life is borin', but superstardoms close to post-mortem
It only grows harder, only grows hotter
He blows us all over these hoes is all on him
Coast to coast shows, he's know as the globetrotter
Lonely roads, God only knows
He's grown farther from home, he's no father
He goes home and barely knows his own daughter
But hold your nose cuz here goes the cold water

These hoes don't want him no mo, he's cold product

They moved on to the next schmoe who flows
He nose dove and sold nada
So the soap opera is told and unfolds
I suppose its old potna, but the beat goes on
Da da dum da dum da da

No more games, I'ma change what you call rage
Tear this motherfuckin' roof off like two dogs caged
I was playin' in the beginnin', the mood all changed
I been chewed up and spit out and booed off stage
But I kept rhymin' and stepwritin' the next cypher
Best believe somebodys payin' the pied piper
All the pain inside amplified by the fact
That I can't get by with my nine to five
And I can't provide the right type of life for my family
Cuz man, these goddam food stamps don't buy diapers
And its no movie, there's no Mekhi Phifer, this is my life
And these times are so hard and it's getting even harder
Tryin' to feed and water my seed, plus
See dishonor caught up between bein' a father and a prima donna
Baby mama drama screamin' on and
Too much for me to wanna
Stay in one spot, another jam or not
Has gotten me to the point, I'm like a snail
I've got to formulate a plot fore I end up in jail or shot
Success is my only motherfuckin' option, failures not
Mom, I love you, but this trail has got to go
I cannot grow old in Salem's lot
So here I go is my shot.
Feet fail me not cuz maybe the only opportunity that I got

You can do anything you set your mind to, man

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