

CLAMANTIS: The MALS Journal

Volume 1
Issue 4 *Spring/Summer 2018*

Article 11

May 2018

The Dramaturgy of Drag

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Recommended Citation

Paluch, Sydney M. (2018) "The Dramaturgy of Drag," *CLAMANTIS: The MALS Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/clamantis/vol1/iss4/11>

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Cover Page Footnote

n/a

MALS 290

November 14, 2017

The Dramaturgy of Drag

This paper examines the construction of Asian masculinities within the western drag subculture, specifically focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of such cultural constructions. Particularly, I will be focusing on the effect of postcolonial migration and diaspora, as the physical crossing of borders and boundaries presents both challenges and opportunities for individuals to cross the borders and boundaries of cultural norms and societal edifices. To analyze the world of drag, I am approaching this niche through Les Back's concept of a social "dramaturgy." Explicated in his paper "Whiteness in The Dramaturgy of Racism" Back explores the constructed nature of racism, arguing that it can be dissected in the same way that a dramaturg dissects the culture a play is created within. This argument can also be applied to how drag is constituted in response to the fiction of heteronormativity. As I will demonstrate, by utilizing the work of King-Kok Cheung, Back, and Judith Butler to dissect the societal implications of the drag persona Kim Chi, such entities are potential forces to queer contemporary cultural constructions and conceptualizations of hegemonic and hierarchical normative gender ideologies. This particular example has been chosen for the character's crossing of physical, cultural, gender, and racial borders and boundaries, as she serves as a site for queering the synthetic nature of the aforementioned socially constructed categories. By beginning with a background of both Kim Chi and the world of drag, and then applying the work of Butler and Cheung to analyze several of Kim Chi's looks, this paper explores the dramaturgy of drag.

I.A Visual Fantasy

Within the drag subculture, the idea of “birth” occupies a position of controversial respect, operating as both a confining symbol of bourgeoisie heteronormativity, and a point of self-definition. This is directly derived from the motifs of family that abound in the drag world and stressed relationships many drag queens have with their own biological progenitors. Unfortunately, gay young adults are often ostracized by their families. Although only an estimated seven percent of American youths identify as LGBTQIA+, this community represents forty percent of all homeless youths (Williams Institute). As a result, the drag community has evolved in a pseudo-family configuration to meet the needs of the plethora of members who are estranged from their birth families. Combined with the constructed nature of drag that seeks to present a character living within the non-fictional world, the motifs of family have resulted in a bifurcated characterization of birth. Drag queens will often reference both the performer’s own biological birth, and the character’s inception as a type of “birth” into the drag world. In order to present a complete picture of Kim Chi, I will therefore be biographing first the life of Sang-Young Shin, the man who performs as Kim Chi, and then the “seven-foot tall live action anime” (KimChi.com) character herself.

Although raised in South Korea, Sang-Young Shin was born in the United States on August 8, 1987 (McManus, 2016). His parents divorced and subsequently moved back to the United States during Shin’s childhood. He then proceeded to work as an art director in Chicago after graduating from college with a degree in graphic design (Swartz, 2016). Despite all three family members living in Chicago, Shin’s parents are unaware that he currently dons pounds of glitter, makeup, and eyebrow gel most nights in order to prance his padding and pantyhose in some of the most preeminent gay bars around the world (Moore

3). However, Shin did not step straight from the college classroom into the sequined subculture of drag. Instead, Shin discovered the art form by accident, after dressing up as a woman for Halloween with a friend and discovering how the artistic aesthetics of drag resonated with both his educational background and sexual identity (Swartz, 2016).

Unlike many queens, Shin does not have a background in performance and instead gained status through the power of aesthetics on social media alone. Now a full-time drag queen, Shin gained international attention through his participation in season 8 of the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Performing as Kim Chi, the “first Korean-American drag superstar” (Kimchi.com), Shin consistently received rave reviews on his meticulously crafted “visual fairytales” (Renee, 2016) intertwined with considerable criticism for his lack of dance abilities and utter inability to walk in heels (Logos, 2016). He embraced a highly conceptual aesthetic as can be seen below in images I and II.



Image I

Image II

Unlike other contestants, Shin revealed himself to still be a virgin at the age of 28, and constantly referenced his love of food. Encapsulated in catch phrases like “donut come for me”, “I’m not going to be ashamed of being hungry, I am hungry!”, and “I came to chop suey the competition” (Logos, 2016), these two aspects of Shin’s personality significantly inform the choices he makes when crafting Kim Chi.

Kim Chi’s basic biography closely mirrors Shin’s as a Korean-American raised in South Korea. She describes herself as “a cultural hybrid” who focuses on “conceptual fashion” (KimChi.com). The aesthetic image she constructs is unlike those typically cultivated within mainstream drag as she is a self-described “fat, femme, Asian” (Logos, 2016) who rejects many Western silhouettes. However, she is not locating herself in an Orientalist tradition either. As a Korean-American, Kim Chi’s look is radically different from the typically projected aesthetic in Korean drag. Whereas mainstream Korean drag tends to co-opt a simpler façade that closely follows the demands and silhouettes of stereotypical, western femininity, Kim Chi crosses the opposite border. Reaching back across the Pacific, she is instead co-opting both traditional Korean silhouettes and the fantastical elements of animated worlds.

Her approach ultimately allows Kim Chi to present an alternative construction of Asian bodies. Described as a “7' tall, live-action anime character and high-fashion model” (KimChi.com), she “never [does] something without adorning it with a meaning” (Seholi 2). This approach is encapsulated in the drag queen’s name, as she revealed in a recent interview “kimchi is the signature dish of Korea. I wanted a name that sounds feminine but also represents my culture at the same time” (Renee, 2016). Utilizing a concoction of Asian-American stereotypes, traditional Korean motifs, and elements of anime to constitute her

aesthetic, Kim Chi exists in an ambiguous state between the cultural borders of the West and East. This inability to fit squarely within the borders of either culture is also symbolically significant of Shin's inability to fit squarely within the borders of either heteronormative gender as a feminine, gay man. Paramount to the performance of Kim Chi is Shin's use of pop-culture references and self-deprecating humor. Together these aspects of Chi's characterization serve to insidiously lampoon normative societal ideals in both America and South Korea. As Chi's website states, "she deftly absorbs and interprets our contemporary cultural milieu with unflinching focus," constituting herself as a site for deconstructing the dramaturgy of modern society. She is blurring boundaries on her own body through the medium of drag.

II. Dames Doing Drag

However, what exactly is the practice of drag? Although the exact history is controversial, references to cross-gender dressing and performance have existed throughout both recorded and oral history. The stage was the realm of masculinity for much of Western history as "squeaking [...] boys" (Shakespeare, V. II. 215) performed the roles of women from Euripides to Shakespeare. In these Ancient and Early Modern theaters, "the sexual identity of the actor is erased in the act of performance, thus mirroring a social truth about gender itself, that it is a fiction which men and women learn and participate in, but which has no innate stability" (Dusinberre 11). By this "blurring of gender boundaries" (Singh 99) the performers' "biological identity becomes unimportant, it is as though it ceased to exist" (Dusinberre 2). Although women were prevented from performing professionally by social norms, in the theaters of western history, "gender identity was a fiction, generated between player and audience" (idem.). Nevertheless, this type of cross-dressing was merely a necessity in a time when women were not

permitted to fully engage with the public realm. It was not the specific use of heightened gender performativity that is defined as “drag” in the contemporary world.

Instead, what many scholars believe to be the first recorded use of the term “drag” in reference to a male ostentatiously impersonating a female occurred in the 1870s (Gonzales 231). At this time, paralleled theatrical practice began to emerge on both sides of the Atlantic with the pantomime dames of Europe (Moore 87) and blackface minstrel shows in America (Bean 10). Within these two theatrical traditions, female impersonation was utilized for comedic effect, with the added layer of repugnant racism in the American context. These two schools of performance then merged into the vaudeville shows of the early twentieth century as immigrants arrived in America (Bean 10). Vaudeville bridged the gap between “low” and “high-brow” performance, as several female impersonators, like Julian Eltinge, who began in vaudeville ultimately arrived on Broadway (Moore 106). Through vaudeville, female impersonation became connected to the homosexual community, driving the practice underground and forming a niche subculture due to the criminal status of same-sex attraction (Boyd 15). As a subculture, drag bloomed in the bars and nightclubs of metropolises across the nation. In infamous queer meccas like San Francisco, “communities forged inside bars and taverns functioned politically and, ultimately, offered practical and ideological responses to the policing [...] of queer and transgender communities” (Boyd 1). Drag gained mainstream attention with the gay rights movement in the second half of the twentieth century, as Queens in their six foot stilettos stomped and strutted their way across the protests of the sexual revolution from Stonewall to San-Fran (Boyd, “Encyclopedia”). Although the aforementioned Stonewall riots are perhaps the most well-known of the gay liberation protests, drag queens featured prominently in many uprisings prior to this event. In the early years of the twenty-first century, drag queens have become staples at pride parades, carving

out a place in mainstream pop culture. Drag has also death-dropped into mainstream media through intervention of social media and the critical acclaim of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a drag competition television show which won an Emmy in 2016. Dramaturgically, this history has directly influenced the constructed, anti-societal, and boundary-breaking nature of contemporary drag.

In the post-modern world, a drag character is a constructed entity, a role that is forged in reality. Yet, by her very existence such an ostentatious façade threatens normative cultural constructions, calling into question reality itself. Unlike a traditional theatrical role, drag characters are not constrained by the lip of a stage or edge of a proscenium. They are not constructed as fictional entities, a shell for actors to breathe life into. Rather, the drag character is one which is both purposefully synthetic and contradictorily claims the status of the Real. Drag entities are characters, yet they are characters that are inseparable from the host performer. They are not characters to be occupied by an actor, but rather inseparable identities wholly consubstantial with the performer themselves.

The drag identity and the personal identity of the performer is both one and the same, separate identities within one entity. Within drag, fiction and fact are seamlessly bonded together in order to create the paradigm of performativity identified by Butler in her theorizing on the constructed nature of gender (*Gender Trouble*, 1990). Just as gender is performative and given reality through mutually agreed upon social norms, the identity of the drag performer is also created through the malleability of performance. S/he has a life story that may or may not be similar/dissimilar to the life “story” of the performer who engages in drag. As such, the performer’s body — and indeed, very existence — serves as a site to examine the enactment of alternative masculinities on a constructed edifice. Although

it is taken as seemingly self-evident that drag exists as a site for queering heteronormative hierarchies and deconstruction of various binaries, there has been little critical research devoted to understanding exactly why. Since we have mapped the background of this issue, I will now be employing the work of Butler and Cheung in order to critically examine not just the “why” of drag as a deconstructive force, but also the “how” through the character of Kim Chi.

III. “Born Naked” and Butler

Identified by queer feminist theorist Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), gender performativity defines how gender operates as a social construct. This theory is derived from an intellectual tradition begun by Simone de Beauvoir whose book *The Second Sex* asserts that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (247). Building on the foundation begun by Beauvoir, Butler claims that “gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (25). This theory was further explicated in an interview in which she stated that,

When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role; we're acting in some way [...] To say that gender is performative is a little different. For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. (“BigThink”, 2011)

In other words, socialization works to install a particular selection of mannerisms and interactions within a given society in order to portray a participant's gender. Professional performance serves as a site for deconstructing this type of socialization, due to its nature as a place for highlighting artificial social constructions through self-conscious metatheatricality.

With this context, RuPaul's infamous saying that "we're all born naked and the rest is drag" (Logos) assumes a particularly poignant perspective. Mapping Butler's theories onto contemporary society, "Mama Ru's" catchphrase "gets at precisely the way he understands drag as a practice that destabilizes identity, but also one with use beyond the specificity of drag performance" (Betancourt, 2016). This "use beyond drag" is an examination of how gender is performative in "our contemporary milieu," to utilize Kim Chi's own description. RuPaul may continually reference the constructed nature of drag consistently throughout his show, stating things like "sissy that walk", and "gentlemen start your engines, and may the best woman, win!" (Logos), but these examples are startlingly similar to how gender is performed through various clothes, mannerisms, and ways of being in off-stage society.

Visual performativity is of paramount importance in the creation of Kim Chi since she is pure image. Unlike other drag queens who begin as dancers or actresses, Kim Chi is a visual artist and Instagram model who works in the medium of makeup. The myriad of ways in which Butler's theories can be applied to society through Kim Chi are depicted in the below image III:



Image III

As a character, Kim Chi is constituted through this picture. She is being performed in this crystallized moment and as a result, is not “a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (25). This image is therefore highly representative of the performative nature of drag, illustrating how the art form is able to destabilize identity. The pastel palette Kim Chi chose here contributes an overall softness to her aesthetic, reinforcing the plump, food-focused nature of her character. Pastels are also a departure from the typical wardrobe of mainstream drag, setting the Korean-American apart from other brightly clothed queens. Finally, pastels serve to immediately associate Kim Chi with femininity, as lighter tonality is reserved for women in Western society. This is a result of how even colors in the West are “gendered” due to their aesthetic implications on gender performativity. Yet not all of this picture is awash with the lighter end of the color wheel, as Chi’s bright red gloves and dark eyes stand in contrast to the other lighter hues. By contrasting these two details with the rest of the image the viewer is immediately drawn to these two sites. This is significant for its symbolic importance. Gloves are a piece of material culture that “signify high status, [...] cleanliness and purity. They also conceal. Gloves embody power

and protection, as well as nobility” (University of Michigan). Due to this material history, Shin is able to imbibe his image with the aforementioned implications.

By co-opting a symbol of Eurocentric prestige, Chi is interrupting the narrative of white social hierarchy. Furthermore, by dipping these symbols of protected purity in scandalous scarlet, the performative fiction of “purity” is questioned. The placement of the hands in a pose reminiscent of pin up posters and pointing to an erogenous zone further problematizes feminine performativity by undermining the signified nobility and purity. Finally, the cut of the sleeves draws the viewer’s eye to an abrupt halt at Kim Chi’s bust, an impressive proscenium of padding indistinguishable from a cisgender woman’s. With these soft curves reflected in Chi’s necklace and wig, her bust is the center of the image, an ostentatious symbol of femininity that is, nevertheless, artificially constructed. Kim Chi’s dress adopts a standard Western silhouette, closely following the contours of her constructed curves. Conservative elements like the frock and color scheme ultimately contrast with the “visual fantasy” of Chi’s purple hair and exaggerated eyes. These elements of fantasy are important interventions within Kim Chi’s aesthetic because they provide moments of metatheatricality when the viewer is reminded that the drag character is a constructed edifice. With her overdrawn, anime eyes, Chi is turning the gaze of society back on itself, asking how her costume is any different from the ones we wear every day.

IV. Cross-Cultural Context

But it is not her crossing of gender boundaries that makes Kim Chi unique, as transgressing heteronormative culture is foundational to drag. Rather, it is her crossing of cultural borders that marks the Korean American as avant-garde. Kim Chi specifically claims the distinction of being the “first Korean-American drag superstar” (KimChi.com) rather than the “first Asian drag

superstar” as there have been five other queens in Drag Race that identify as Asian. However, Kim Chi is the first of these performers to use her cultural heritage as an artistic impulse for her looks. Before Chi, “Asian characters were heavily racialized in ways that the other contestants weren’t, and more importantly, the show rewarded the Asian contestants the more they Orientalized themselves” (Kornhaber, 2016). As explicated by C. Winter Han,

Instead of relying on orientalist tropes, like the previous contestants who would wear cheongsams and have these red fans and mark themselves as being foreign, she takes these cultural cues that are contemporarily popular in Asia and then fuses it into the gay community (The Atlantic, 2016). By presenting in this manner, Kim Chi is confronting the ways in which Asian bodies are consumed in both the gay community and Western media. She is constructing an alternative to not just mainstream masculinity, but also the entrenched Orientalism of American visual culture. The alternative constructions she crafts break down the border between the East and the West as cross cultural differences are able to be identified. It is not “in spite of” her border-crossing identity that Kim Chi is both ground-breaking and commercially successful, but rather, “because of”. This is best exemplified through Chi’s gown for the “Ode to My Mother” challenge.



Image IV

For this challenge, participants were supposed to sew outfits that represented their mothers in some way. As can be seen in the above image IV, Kim Chi chose to wear a “contemporary version of a Hanbok, which is a traditional Korean costume” (Kornhaber, 2016). The Hanbok is combined with Chi’s trademark eight-inch nails and exaggerated eyes, as well as with an anime inspired headpiece. The cloth covering her hands is representative of Kim Chi’s Asian-American heritage. This covering is a traditional symbol of matrimony in Korea, which combined with her white dress represents the union of the orient and the occident in Shin. Beyond the significance of the dress’s coloring, the silhouette of this piece visually depicts the crossing of cultural borders. Kim Chi explained why she chose this particular cut by stating that the “western idea of fashion has everything really fitted, but when you look at a lot of Eastern fashion it’s not necessarily about showing off your body, but creating a dynamic silhouette” (Logos, 2016). However, Chi does not completely follow South Korean tradition, instead cutting the sleeves close to her arms. Through this combination of traditions, Shin crosses cultural borders through his clothing.

Crossing borders and creating alternatives to traditional, toxic masculinity is precisely what King-Kok Cheung’s article “Art, Spirituality, and the Ethic of Care: Alternative Masculinities in Chinese American Literature” focuses on. Examining several Asian-American novels, Cheung ultimately concludes that the ability to “entertain other manly possibilities” (286) can be achieved through a cross-cultural context. She claims that “instead of being males who dominate others by physical, economic, or political power, [the characters she analyzes] define their masculinity through art, spirituality, and the ethic of care” (258). This analysis can be applied to Kim Chi as well. Like Raymond, Ba, and Terrace in Cheung’s article, Shin is able to

“subvert hegemonic masculine ideals and exemplify alternative forms of strength” (285) through his performance as Kim Chi. He crafts his entire existence as a form of art through drag, embraces spirituality by proudly displaying his culture on the runway, and often engages in the ethic of care by consistently assisting other queens with their costumes, and makeup. Although a drag queen, Shin exists as an alternative to toxic masculinity.

V. “Now Sashay Away”

To conclude, our contemporary world is structured around male desire, a fact that has become horrifically apparent due to recent widespread revelations of sexual assault. Drag exists as an alternative construction to this toxic paradigm. By blurring boundaries on her own body, the drag queen is able to transgress the sexual and gender boundaries that the west has erected. Like satire, drag emphasizes its subject to an extreme degree in order to deconstruct its problematic elements. Although the subculture crosses the boundaries of gender and sexuality by nature of its very existence, Kim Chi is unique for her ability to cross cultural boundaries as well. Bringing to life the theories of Back, Butler, and Cheung through her outfits, Shin forces us to rethink how bodies are gendered and racialized for Western media consumption. Therefore, drag separates phallogentricity from possessive, dominating power as the phallus is both symbolically and literally “tucked” away. By bringing her cultural heritage to the forefront of discourses on drag, “Kim's work encapsulates the transcendental nature of drag, as the seemingly simple act of a man putting on a dress is transformed into fine art” (KimChi.com). Reflecting the constructed nature of modern society, Kim Chi depicts the dramaturgy of drag.

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