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Drag at the Showbar
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Context and overview

This chapter shares ethnographic research on leisure, gender, and sexualities in relation to drag and drag performance spaces. There is a rich history and increasing popular media attention to drag performers, whom Rupp and Taylor (2003, p. 113) define as “people who create their own authentic genders” by blurring the lines between masculine and feminine, often in theatre, film, music, comedy, and television (González & Cavazos, 2016). Growing scholarly attention in leisure studies has focused on drag, too (Barnett & Johnson, 2013a, 2013b; Berbery & Johnson, 2017; Johnson, 2008). Drawing from 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Gabby’s¹ doctoral research (2015–2019) including interviews with 40 drag artists and audience members, this chapter centralizes one drag venue—The Showbar—as a “sexy space” (Caudwell & Browne, 2011). For Caudwell and Browne (2011, p. 117) “sexy spaces intend to provoke critical discussion surrounding space, leisure and the sexual [...] to further consider the possibilities of conceptualising the leisure landscapes of sexual lives and gender, and the sexuality and gender of leisure landscapes.” This chapter explores The Showbar as a sexy leisure space.

The Showbar is a drag venue in a northern English city. It occupies a two-story building under a rainbow-painted railway bridge at the southern edge of the city centre known locally, yet unofficially, as the city’s Gay Quarter. Gabby wrote of her first visit to the venue in her fieldnotes:

The Showbar’s exterior is painted entirely matte black, with a half dozen pink neon lights shaped like high-heeled shoes positioned above its marquee, which is

surrounded in white lightbulbs like a dressing room mirror. Another vast rainbow flag runs the full height of the wall between The Showbar and an adjacent venue. It's the only drag venue in the city, but has a limited 200-person capacity, and tonight The Showbar is very crowded. All the tables are full of people drinking cocktails and awaiting the start of the show. Even though it's November, in here it is boiling hot. The décor is deep burgundy with pockets of low lighting and plush booth seating, leading to a stage area with a runway surrounded by tables and chairs, and a dancefloor. A bar extends from just beyond the seating area to the DJ booth along the venue's back wall. Dozens of disco balls dazzle from the ceiling, and the walls feature framed portraits of various drag performers. Past the dancefloor, a door leads to an inner courtyard offering space for conversations and shared cigarettes away from the loud music and crowds inside. Back inside, just past the DJ booth, stairs lead down into a musty cellar with vaulted brickwork, candles in wall sconces, and the toilets. The cellar décor is worth noting: the toilet stalls are covered in images of women in bondage outfits, kissing. The wall opposite the stalls features iconic imagery from the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939): Dorothy and Toto; the yellow brick road; and the Emerald City. This juxtaposition captures something of The Showbar, with hyper-sexualized images vis-à-vis the campy musical connotations of gay culture. The Showbar is a sexy drag space, somewhere under the rainbow.

Back upstairs, the evening's show begins when Jem comes onto the stage. They (as a non-binary queer individual Jem prefers pronouns "they" and "their") are wearing a huge fur coat trailing down to their knees, multi-coloured harem pants, and a black baseball cap turned backwards. They aren't wearing a shirt or shoes. "Hello you queer fuckers! How are we all?" Jem shouts and gets a huge cheer from the crowd in return. Jem explains how the night will proceed. There are around twenty

performers, some of whom are veterans; for others it is their first time on stage; “So please be nice,” Jem teases. “The show will be split into four sets, so every twenty minutes we will have a break: There will be nudity, there will be foul language, and it will be sickening!” The first act comes onstage. The performer is dressed in a wire outfit decorated in ivy and flowers, and they are dancing to the gay anthem Toxic by Britney Spears. Their face is painted porcelain, like a cherub, with spots of rouge high on their cheekbones and bright ruby red lips. As they twirl and drop into the splits, flowery pieces of their outfit begin to fly off; they pick up the petals and scatter them into the crowd; it’s like being sprinkled with fairy dust and the crowd cheers wildly.

When Gabby started visiting The Showbar in 2015, she knew she would be entering a space with a mixture of sexualities and different ways of expressing sexuality. Sex, whether in the form of sexuality or in the form of sexual acts, is a vital part of drag culture and performance. Drag queens talk about sex a lot, they tell dirty jokes, discuss how they need “sugar daddies” to look after them, perform songs with witty lyrics changed to puns about dicks and having sex (e.g., *This Boy is a Bottom* is a play on Alicia Keys’ (2012) *This Girl is on Fire*). Many well-known artists’ drag names are “sexy” too, like Rebecca Glasscock, Farrah Moan, Ginger Minge, and Alaska Thunderfuck 5000. While clearly an important space for drag performers, it is perhaps more significant for drag audiences: as a sexy space—for fun, pleasure, and the politics of pushing the boundaries of normative gender and sexuality.

In pushing boundaries, The Showbar and its drag culture prompt a number of questions about the matrices of sex-gender-sexuality, and also leisure, community, and identities. In what follows, we explore these questions via the historical and disciplinary roots of drag, the theoretical tensions and challenges that drag prompts for questioning, and opportunities to see leisure differently through the lenses of drag.

As Jem's introduction (above) intones, sex was widely discussed onstage as part of most shows. Otherwise – against stereotypical preconceptions of drag culture as promiscuous or over-sexed – in our experience, The Showbar was not all that different from many other nightclubs we've attended, with people holding hands, some cuddling and snogging (kissing) in the plush booths or out in the courtyard, or on occasion being propositioned to go home with someone (or two). The primary difference was that the people, e.g., snogging, were often same-sex and performing gender in diverse ways.²

Historical and disciplinary roots

With complex and often hidden histories dating back centuries, drag has a range of traditions and articulations. While there has been an explosion of popular interest as a result of the reality-TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*, there is a longer history of academic interest in drag. This includes ethnographies such as Newton's (1972) *Mother Camp*, and Rupp and Taylor's (2003) *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Schacht and Underwood (2004) compiled essays on the histories and cultures of drag, building on Schacht's (1998, 2002) immersive work with drag troupes and "The Court." More recent work has highlighted the potential subversiveness of drag performance (Barnett & Johnson, 2013a; Romaya, 2012) and the impact that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has had, not just on the American drag scene, but on drag cultures worldwide (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017).

Drag has deep roots in theatre. Romaya (2012) argues that drag, in distant Western history, originated in ancient Greece where young men would play women's roles when performing theatrical tragedies. Schacht and Underwood (2004) argue that prohibitions against women performing in theatre in the 17th century paved the way for drag as a profession. In Elizabethan England, women were barred from playing female roles and therefore, men or boys would act as women in plays (i.e., in Shakespearean theatre). Female impersonation

became an institutionalized part of English theatre. The origin of the word “drag” reportedly stems from this, attributed to the unfamiliar drag of the skirts as opposed to the “non-draginess of the trouser” (Baker, 1968, p. 18). Other word origins have been suggested such as “Dressed As Girl” or “Dressed Resembling A Girl;” however, there is little consensus on when the term was first used to describe female/male impersonation. Baker (1968) notes that until the late 1940s, drag was seen as a viable career path for men within theatre.

Another root of drag stems from military entertainment. As women were not allowed to enter soldiers’ camps, during the first and second world wars, troops of female impersonators were often called upon to provide entertainment for soldiers (Baker, 1968). During World War I, a drag troupe called the Dumbells were a famous Canadian military unit in France, and the sixteen performers in this troupe were exempt from all other military duties in order to perform and raise morale of the other soldiers (Halladay, 2004). Halladay (2004) argues that this particular type of “campy” drag is the earliest form of drag as we understand it today.

Where in English theatre female impersonators often adopted a dramatic performance by which they were trying to portray “real” female characters, Canadian drag was more comedic, with parody and exaggeration of the female form: performers were also unafraid to be vulgar or lift their skirts over their heads in providing bawdy entertainment for their audience.

Halladay (2004) states that the sexual identity of drag performers in the military had rarely been discussed and was not explicitly linked to homosexuality until the late 1940s; however, by the end of World War II, attitudes towards female impersonation began to change. At this time, drag still walked the “fine line” between hetero- and homosexuality (Halladay, 2004) as it was still seen as a form of entertainment and recreational outlet for troops. While it still embodied parody, it was not seen as a deviant act. After the war ended, drag collided with homophobic mainstream cultures, particularly in the United States. This stemmed from the

widespread belief in US culture that drag was the same as transvestitism and homosexuality (Newton, 1972). In 1950s America, drag queens were labelled “professional homosexuals” (Newton, 1972) embodying deviance and illegality. Female impersonation became something to ridicule, seen by many as an abomination to be discouraged as a dishonourable career in the “straight world.”

In a watershed moment, on June 28, 1969, The Stonewall Inn was targeted in raids by police; however, on this occasion, patrons fought back. Arriola (1996, p. 1) writes that “when an unlikely group of revolutionaries, a few black and Puerto Rican drag queens and butch lesbians” began a street fight with New York police, their actions publicly sparked the gay revolution. As Arriola (1996) notes, many leaders in this fight were drag queens, and since then, queens have been seen as the fierce face of the gay community, as protectors and activists.

From stage actors, campy military entertainers, or “deviant” homosexuals to social justice warriors, drag continues to inspire different imaginings. During her research, when Gabby asked people at The Showbar what it meant to “do” drag, responses invoked naming celebrities such as RuPaul or sharing an online image of a favourite drag queen as a visual explanation. Some offered musical references: drag sounds like a Cher song; it looks like a man in a hyper-feminine body-hugging dress lip syncing onstage. Beyond music, drag has become increasingly visible through popular culture, particularly cinema and television. As drag scholars such as González and Cavazos (2016) have noted, from early films such as *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933), Hollywood classics such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), cult hits like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Hairspray* (1988), *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julia Newmar* (1995), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) to blockbusters such as *Kinky Boots* (2005), there has been a long presence in cinema of men dressed in drag.³ More

recently, *Now TV* and *Netflix* have brought drag to reality TV and to a wider audience in the form of series such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present). Yet, defining drag through popular culture does not adequately capture its complexities or sufficiently describe the different forms of female/male impersonation. We turn next to these complexities and tensions.

Challenges and tensions

Drag is challenging to articulate because it encompasses a vast range of gendered and sexual performances and signifiers. Barnett and Johnson (2013a) suggest separating the word “drag” from anything that might come after it (such as queen, king, or performer) because the secondary term inflects the meaning of the first. For Barnett and Johnson (2013a), “drag” means “making oneself appear to be someone of another gender” (p. 678) but does not necessarily require movement across genders. This enables a broader and more inclusive use of the term “drag” and reinforces the idea that gender is a social construct; it is not reliant on the biological sex of an individual, but on what gender they choose to present at a certain time. In simplest terms, when an individual is performing a gender that is exaggerated, different, or opposite to their ascribed gender in front of an audience, then they are doing drag. Rupp and Taylor (2003) argue that drag performers can create their own authentic gender, with the agency to “construct and present gender on their own terms” (Barnett & Johnson, 2013a, p. 678), rejecting the binary of gender dictated by society in favour of more fluid understandings.

Bearing this definition in mind, other words can then be added to drag to describe a certain type of drag such as queen, king, bio, or performer, which add further inflections. Drag queens are typically defined as “gay men who dress and perform as, but do not want to be, women or have women’s bodies” (Rupp & Taylor, 2003, p. 115), although not all men who

perform drag identify as gay. Hastings (2016) further argues that “[t]he drag world of course includes traditional queens with heavy lip lines and huge lashes [...] to bearded ladies, who play with gender stereotypes,” (p. 1), but a definition of drag queen should not be limited to a certain aesthetic. For Schacht (2002), a drag queen is an individual

with an acknowledged penis, who has no desire to have it removed and replaced with female genitalia [...] that perform being women in front of an audience that all know they are self-identified men, regardless of how compellingly female – “real” – they might otherwise appear.

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(p. 159)

The idea that drag queens do not want to be women or have female bodies (in “real” life) is important as it separates the term drag queen from other terms such as transgender. There is a general misconception reproduced through popular culture that drag queens have a desire to transition from male to female; performing as a drag queen should not presuppose that men want to become women.

Schacht and Underwood (2004) argue this misconception stems from homophobia that paints drag queens as failed men, and because of this “failure,” they must want to transition to another gender. While there are popular drag queens who have transitioned from male to female (e.g., Carmen Carrera), this is certainly not the norm, and it is often the case that individuals use drag to help transition because they already want to transition, rather than drag “causing” this desire. Further, a drag queen’s performance can be characteristic of any woman, such as specific performers like Cher or Britney Spears, or based on a social role such as a grandmother or a housekeeper (Barnett & Johnson, 2013a). Taylor and Rupp (2004) add that when defining drag queen, it is important to remember that not every man who wears a dress falls into the category of drag queen; they may identify as transvestite⁴ or

transgender,⁵ which are not the same thing. Performers are considered drag queens when they present a male impersonation of any form of female.

A drag king is defined as a woman who embodies mannerisms that are traditionally associated with masculine behaviour (Rosenfeld, 2003). Volcano and Halberstam (1999) explained:

If the drag queen takes what is artificial about femininity (or what has been culturally constructed as artificial) and plays it to the hilt, the drag king takes what is so-called natural about masculinity and reveals its mechanisms – the tricks and poses, the speech patterns and attitudes that have been seamlessly assimilated into a performance realness.

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(p. 62)

Rosenfeld (2003) adds that drag king archetypes range from Elvis to average working stiffs, and when drag kings adopt these personas, they may also adopt aggressive hetero behaviours such as an enhanced sexual bravado and flirting with female audience members.

Bio-kings and bio-queens are defined by Barnett and Johnson (2013a) as “people who perform their own biological sex through a heightened or exaggerated gender presentation” (p. 678). They are men and women who present hyper-stylized versions of the sex they were assigned at birth. Taylor (2007, para. 13) states the term “faux” was once used to describe this style of drag; however, many in the drag community felt that this wrongly suggested that bio-kings/queens were an “imitation of true, authentic, natural and superior behaviour, and thus the lesser of a binary dualism” which was problematic. Therefore, the prefix “bio” serves two aims for the drag community: it gives bio performers a more equitable standing by not suggesting they are “less than,” and it helps to challenge common-sense understandings

of biology and expansion on its definition (Taylor, 2007) as reflected in all types and styles of drag.

While there is ambiguity around the term drag and what it means to be a drag performer, there is consensus that drag is centred on the illusions of theatrical performance (Lorber, 1994). Baker (1968) argues that “much of the delight of the stage is its complete separation from real life. [...] A perfectly ordinary man goes into a dressing room and emerges an hour later looking like Mae West [...] illusion is the quality that characterizes the best impersonators” (p.224). For Barnett and Johnson (2013a), whether on stage or not, there is some theatre required in most aspects of drag as it requires the individual to “assume a different persona, aesthetic and attitude” (p. 679). This characteristic of drag is one of the main distinctions that sets drag apart from other expressions of gender and sexuality.

Romaya (2012) argues that “like many other types of performers [...] drag artists utilize a great deal of theatricality, humor, exaggeration, parody, and imagination” (p. 145), but there is difficulty deciding what behaviour constitutes drag and what makes it something else.

Lorber (2004) states that a drag performer specifically uses performance and parody to display gender. This means that performers exaggerate the ways in which women and men are traditionally expected to dress and display this exaggeration through theatrical acts. For Romaya (2012), looking like the “opposite” sex includes so much diversity that it is difficult to discern what actions count as drag. He contrasts examples of musician Marilyn Manson and drag queen RuPaul to disentangle “dressed-up” differences. Superficially, both performers display basic elements of drag: wearing makeup and women’s clothing, using theatrics, exaggeration, and humour; both perform to an audience that knows they are watching a man perform in women’s clothing. However, within popular culture, one (RuPaul) is considered a drag queen and the other (Manson) is not. This suggests that drag cannot be defined through physical appearance alone.

Romaya (2012) adds that to be a successful drag queen an individual must bring together pairs of alternative visual or cognitive elements that work to create an experience. The most common paradox for drag queens is that they both satirize and deeply respect the female/woman experience. On the one hand, drag queens parody what they think it means to be a woman, in that it is fairly easy for a man to adopt superficial behaviours and dress codes to which females are socially obliged to adhere (Lorber, 1994). This parody is also a critique of the socially constructed gender category of woman. On the other hand, there is also a seriousness to the roles drag queens play. Many queens “pay homage to the agonizing practice of feminine grooming” (Romaya, 2012, p. 151) by painstakingly removing hair from their bodies, applying false nails, false lashes, and “tucking”⁶ before performances. This effort and expectation expose the demanding, and arguably patriarchal, effort required to reach certain social standards of beauty that those who identify as women face daily.

The performance is key, as drag requires an audience. Lorber (2004) argues that because drag relies so heavily on parody, there needs to be someone there to “appreciate the underlying joke” (p. xv), i.e., that “femininity” or “masculinity” can be so easily created and so easily deconstructed. Whether it is the intention of the performer to purposely subvert gender norms, or just to provide a show, having an audience, much like using parody and a stage, is a key element that separates drag from other “trans-” identities. Both physical and virtual audiences matter here, whether watching *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on TV or following a favourite drag queen on social media; as long as the audience is “there,” the performance can be understood as drag.

To be a drag performer requires a stage, a persona, an audience, and an act. However, there is no set style of show that a performer must adhere to, and acts can be comedic or theatrical; performers can sing or dance or lip sync. That said, there are certain “styles” of drag that are commonly found in drag culture. Schacht (2002) discusses four different types of drag

performer and how each style interacts differently with the element of performance. First, he describes “High Brow Female Impersonators” such as those he worked with as part of The Imperial Court System (a charitable organisation created in 1965). This organisation is built up of “courts” or “baronies” who come together to hold LGBT events. Schacht describes these queens as being considered the group’s best performers and rightful leaders. The performers generally “present glamorous [...] compelling images of traditional [...] femininity” (Schacht, 2002, p. 165). Because of the hierarchical nature of the court, these performers have people to play a supporting role. These individuals serve as “‘dressers’ [...] ‘seamstresses’ [...] ‘stagehands’ [...] and ‘escorts’” (p. 165). The drag queens here are considered “High Brow” because they use their drag to gain power and authority; they consider themselves artistically superior to other performers.

The second type of queen Schacht (2002) discusses is the “Female Illusionist.” He describes this as the most beautiful and “real” type of queen he has encountered within his work. Schacht (2002) describes these queens as like preoperative transsexuals⁷ who have no desire to get rid of their penis. Some may use hormone treatments or have breast implants to make themselves appear more feminine but do not wish to fully transition. He argues that performers who adopt this style of drag will often lip sync or dance to popular songs exclusively sung by females; their typical attire is “suggestive and includes tight fitting dresses, immaculately coiffured hair [...] and applied makeup, high heel shoes and boots [...] and large sparkling earrings, bracelets and necklaces” (p. 167). This type of performer presents as hyper-feminine in aesthetic and demeanour. Current examples can be seen in performers like Courtney Act, or Ben de la Crème, who change their voices and mannerisms to present as “passable” women while in drag.

The third type Schacht discusses are “Professional Glamour Queens,” who are arguably the most popular form of queen. For Schacht (2002, p. 169), the majority of the performers that

ascribe to this aesthetic are “expressed gay men in acknowledged glbt clubs/bars” with a fairly large, straight audience. This type of queen, Schacht argues, is most prominent in forms of popular culture. The majority of *RPDR* queens share this aesthetic: Alyssa Edwards, Bebe Zahara Benet, Alexis Michelle, and RuPaul herself present in this way. Danielle, a participant in Schacht’s (2002) work, argued that the best Professional Glamour Queens:

applied makeup in a noticeable but not overdone manner, carried themselves with confidence but were still quite feminine in gesture, wore the latest most expensive looking attire, and overall most lived up to conventional standards of female beauty found in most fashion magazines, e.g. looked like a supermodel.

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(pp. 170–171)

The presentation of a professional glamour performer has changed, with makeup more obvious and costumes more garishly decorated with sequins and beads.

The fourth type of queens that Schacht (2002) discusses are “Professional Camp Queens,” and these are arguably the second most popular type of queen in contemporary drag cultures. Schacht describes “camp” as “a form of gay sensibility, born of oppression, that enables the performer to aesthetically highlight life’s ironies in a theatrical yet exaggerated manner that is ultimately always humorous in intent” (2002, p. 171). Camp performers are generally present in venues as emcees or in comedy acts. Examples of this style include performers such as Dame Edna Everage or Lady Bunny, where the performance is less focused on the “look” of the performer and more on the act itself. The concern here is not to appear as “real” hyperfeminine, super-slim women, but to present as middle-aged or older women to make a joke of the concept of female beauty. All said, across these styles, performance is a significant part of being a drag queen, king, or bio performer. No matter which aesthetic a performer embraces, it is important that they incorporate theatricality for an audience (even

if, in the case of *RPDR*, the audience is primarily a virtual one). Without this, drag becomes something else entirely.

Whereas scholars, such as Drury (2011), had argued that many LGBTQ+ sexy spaces work to promote “the visibility of sexual minorities in order to legitimize and normalize non-heterosexual identities” (p. 422), this typology illustrates tensions and challenges in the perpetuation of gendered and sexual hierarchies. Yet, against this idealism, some drag queen “types” are less valued and included than others, and The Showbar itself was a less equitable space than Gabby had initially considered. While drag cultures resist heteronormative power structures and disrupt “old” hierarchies, in some cases they may (re)produce their own “new” forms of elitism and inequitable power relations.

These inequities and “types” of drag queens were clearly visibly in play at The Showbar, where most—but not all—did present as “Professional Glamour Queens.” As The Showbar is one of a kind in its city,⁸ this dominant style is reproduced within an environment that is very protective of its brand, performers, and audience members. When discussing community, where there is inclusion, there is also exclusion: an “in group” and an “out group.” This phenomenon was evident in Season 3 of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, when some contestants created a clique called “The Heathers.”⁹ Throughout the series, they were shady to the other queens and nicknamed this out group “The Boogers;” yet those in “The Heathers” didn’t believe that their behaviour was problematic, that it was “just drag.” This exclusivity can be seen as problematic as it values certain types of drag performances over others, especially by those local queens who do not adhere to a dominant aesthetic and are alienated as a result. One drag queen at The Showbar, “Farida,” explained that because it is the only place that drag performers get work, if queens are not working at The Showbar, they are not working at all. Therefore, many queens feel they have to conform to a dominant style of drag. The range of drag performances (Schacht, 2002) and the tensions in policing the parameters of “the

community” illustrate that even a small, local drag culture, such as at The Showbar, is complex, diverse, and always political.

Seeing things differently

Butler (1993) argues that there is no “necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and the reidealization of [...] heterosexual gender norms” (p. 297). Butler (1997) adds that drag is “ambivalent” at best as a site of gender parody that does not exactly question norms or reinforce them but is only implicated in wider power regimes. On the one hand, the parodic elements of drag make a joke of the rigorous rules of traditional gender (Butler, 2004; Rupp & Taylor, 2003). It is also a common-sense assumption that is made about drag performers, that “if a man can do it better than a woman,” then what has been assumed as “natural” gender can be unpacked to be understood as social constructs.

On the other hand, while it is generally seen a positive thing that drag questions gender, it often does so to the detriment of ciswomen, lesbian women, transgender individuals, and those who identify as female in general. For example, Gabby interviewed “Orien,” who was not permitted to perform at The Showbar. Orien is a bio-queen, who in everyday life identifies as a strong, queer, feminist woman. However, Orien styles her drag persona, “Venus,” on the expectations of what she thinks society tells women men want; she performs a hyper-sexual, hyper-feminized, heterosexual “male fantasy.” Venus is blonde, she accentuates her beautiful curves; she wears lingerie, high-heeled shoes, with perfect makeup. In her performance she seeks men in the audience and tries to appeal to them, through mellifluous flattery, playfully changing herself to become their fantasy woman. Orien and Venus, while the same person in “real” life, perform completely different gender roles and

explore different representations of gender. In her interview, Orien discussed her own queerness:

Queer is to be fluid in, you know, it's sort of questioning, you're not too sure yet. I'm more than happy to sit in my queerness and to be not too sure for the rest of my life in what I am.

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Despite this, Orien/Venus is not permitted to perform as a drag artist at The Showbar because she is not a man. This raises questions of the limits of drag participation and drag communities as a space of consciousness-raising and identity transformation for performers and audiences pushing the boundaries of gender expression.

Gabby's research found that many participants had positive experiences within the drag community when exploring gender. "Gabriel" describes himself as a recreational drag queen (i.e., an individual who dresses in drag while attending drag venues but does not perform professionally). The environment of The Showbar allowed him to explore gender through the use of makeup and clothing. He experimented with the use of corsets, high-heeled shoes, and wigs, allowing him to perform a gender that he has been unable to experience in other settings. In his everyday life, Gabriel presents as a man and does not experiment with his gender identity because of the pressure he feels to conform to hegemonic gender norms. This suggests that drag can have a positive influence on those that want to experiment with gender in a more fluid and playful environment.

Another participant, "Charlotte," a male to female transgender (MTF) individual, found drag bars and drag performers extremely helpful while going through her transition (Rogers, 2018).¹⁰ Gabby met Charlotte at The Showbar and they ended up spending most of the evening together, discussing favourite drag queens and what it had been like for Charlotte to transition. She had travelled many hours from the south of England to see her favourite drag

queen, Ebony White. Charlotte felt that seeing this queen perform would help her to overcome her own negative feelings during a difficult time in her personal life. Charlotte had been attending drag shows throughout the course of her transition. In her life outside these spaces, she was often misgendered both by accident and on purpose by people who did not agree with her transition. Drag performers were more accepting of her transition, and she often felt more welcome in drag bars such as The Showbar where she was rarely misgendered.

If drag has potential to subvert gender where it challenges heteronormative rules, this is not always seen as beneficial. Farida described discomfort and confusion at their experience of The Showbar. Farida identifies as non-binary, which they defined in their own words:

I feel like it's a declaration that I don't believe that gender is a binary issue [...] I'm not going to conform to either one of these schools [of thought] and I can just pick and choose what is my own personal path, my own identity from both of these opposing sides of what is supposedly masculine and what is supposedly feminine.

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As a non-binary individual, they identified drag as one of the main spaces to discover gender fluidity, where they were able to experiment with colour, makeup, and fashion. However, Farida also described being excluded by some of the queens at The Showbar when she came out as non-binary. Farida discussed "Sonique" in particular, who would display hostility ("shade") towards Farida: "he's just like saying that being non-binary isn't even a valid identity; it's like, 'look, this is what is okay and this is what's not okay.'" Farida soon stopped attending The Showbar as they no longer felt like it was a safe and accepting space. In an interview, Gabriel was asked if he believed some forms of drag lent themselves to subverting gender norms more than others. He noted that performers such as Milk did a better job of subverting understandings of gender than artists like RuPaul or other glamour queens.

This is because Milk does not always present as a glamour queen and sometimes employs alternative forms of makeup art or showcases traditionally recognized “masculine” traits including beards and well-defined muscles when performing in drag. Gabriel identified Milk because their drag troubles the binary of gender. Egner and Maloney (2016) argue that drag may produce “in between” or “third” genders that defy traditional or normative binary constructs of male/female or man/woman. Viewed through a queer lens, gender boundaries blur, and there is also the possibility of identifying with multiple genders simultaneously. Egner and Maloney (2016) write that “the performers who present a multiplicity of gender can be understood as presenting a minority gender identity made up of multiple genders, thus presenting a hybrid of minority genders and sexualities” (p. 880), and this invites audience members to question gender as a “real” concept in and of itself. Milk can be seen as a performer who actively attempts to embody a third gender through their drag.

Some participants questioned potential subversiveness of hyper-feminine drag performances. Asked the same question as Gabriel (does one style of drag subvert gender more than another?), Farida considered all types of drag as a form of subversion—even those who present as femme:

It depends on what the performance is and what the look is, but even if you’re doing a very feminine drag you can still be really subverting that. Do you know who Sasha Velour is? She’s very, like, androgynous in her drag, she’s subverting it in a completely different way to like, someone on the other extreme end of the spectrum, like Trixie Mattel, who has taken this idea of femininity to its absolute extreme. There is consumerist, packaged femininity; they both do completely different things but they’re still able to subvert our relation of what femininity is. Then I’m thinking of someone like Valentina from this season [Season 9] of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. She looks very femme, very “real” as it were, but, is she subverting it? Or is she in a way

just appropriating it? I don't know, it's tricky. There's such a fine line on this, but then, is her appropriation of it subverting it? I just don't know, I don't know!

noindent

The difficulty that Farida expresses answering the question echoes through many political possibilities and questions of subversive intent. Butler (1993) offers that many acts that look subversive on the surface deflect attention from heterosexuality so that it remains intact. If heterosexuality relies on imitation, it must continuously reinforce the idea that it is normal, and it must exclude all other possibilities of sex and gender to protect itself. Butler (1993) argues that heterosexuality has created its own acceptable drag to be mass produced; it allows individuals to see those that do not comply with traditional gender norms in a way that contains them and presents them as non-threatening. Drag, in this instance, could be attributed to a climate of tolerance (Spargo, 1999). Spargo (1999) argues that while tolerance of difference is a good thing, there is an underlying theme of "mainstream culture just flirting with a bit of the other in order to keep us all broadly on the straight line" (p. 4). This raises further questions of the transformational power of drag.

Here we return to Gabby's fieldnotes (January 2019), and tensions that remain in the sex-gender-sexuality matrix about masculinities and drag:

A friend and I are at a show to see Kameron Michaels. Kameron is another queen who bends the stereotypes of what is expected from a drag queen. While she presents as hyper-feminine in drag, she is also a bodybuilder so is very muscular. She initially comes on the stage dressed as Cher and lip syncs to Welcome to Burlesque. She looks and moves so much like Cher it is hard to believe that's not her on stage. During intermission we go outside to talk to other audience members. We meet "Callie" and "Ozzy" and talk about this and other shows that we have been to. Ozzy tells us that even though he is not dressed in drag tonight, he usually comes dressed as a drag

queen and shows us lots of photos of his aesthetic. Ten minutes later and back inside, having decided to stick together, we've pushed our way to the front of the crowd.

When Kameron comes back onstage, she announces "it's competition time!" She calls it "Battle of the Bulges" and she'll choose four men to come up on stage to have the crowd judge "what they're packin'." Ozzy wants to go up, so we make so much noise that Kameron can't ignore us. Once he is onstage with three other men, Kameron asks for music and all four men strip down to their boxers and start to strut their stuff. At the end of each round, Kameron asks the crowd to scream based on which performer they want to win. By the last round, thanks to our efforts (and now sore throats), Ozzy is crowned winner! When he jumps down from the stage he is laughing, and tells us that even though he is glad he won he wishes he had known about it so he could have stuffed his underwear.

noindent

Stone and Shapiro (2017) argue that even in the LGBTQ+ community, masculine bodies are considered more desirable; the domination of male bodies is not only visible when discussing female bodies but also when discussing queer bodies. In this fieldnote extract, this dominance is readily "packaged" as part of Kameron's drag show.

In this section we have argued that drag potentially allows us to see gender differently, though parody and exaggeration (e.g., *Orien*); through fluidity (e.g., *Farida*); through transition (e.g., *Charlotte*); however, and crucially, as Butler (1993, p. 297) reminds us, there is no "necessary relation between drag and subversion." Drag performances and sexy spaces do not "naturally" challenge norms or, alternately, reinforce dominant relations (e.g., *Kameron and Ozzy*). The transformational possibilities of drag are "ambivalent." Drag opens up the potential to see (and do) genders and sexualities differently, but not in the absence of

wider power regimes, such as the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinities and the commercialisation of drag cultures.

Charting the future

As drag becomes more popular and mainstream—especially through hit TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and via social media (Brennan & Gudeludas, 2017)—there also risks a narrowing of drag's meanings, taming of its subversive politics, and thus some rejection of drag by its former champions. The policing of drag's boundaries and acceptable levels of queerness were discussed during Farida's interview. They believed that the local scene had begun to self-police against those drag queens that were too flamboyant or feminine. Farida also explained that while some members of the gay community had become more normalized by "straight society," those that are unable to "pass" became further marginalized. In context, this suggests the incorporation of a proportion of the LGBTQ+ community and only the illusion of acceptance. For example, Gabby observed in her fieldwork that many middle-aged white males appeared to share the attitude that Farida described. One older gay man, "Clooney," who predominantly presents as masculine, expressed that he no longer understands why Gay Pride is needed because "most" of the LGBTQ+ community is now accepted. His masculinity has allowed him to "pass" in the straight community for years and believes that the straight community accepts all forms of sexuality and gender because they accept his own. Here, Butler's idea of heteronormative policing can be seen at work, with the dominant norm expanded to accept just a few more individuals.

This suggests that drag does subvert norms via parody but also reproduces gender norms. Schacht (1998) argued that queens generally adopt "gender identities that largely adhere to the values of the dominant culture with no intention of subverting or challenging them" (p. 206). Rather than queering and questioning, some drag queens adhere to strict beauty rules to

portray the most believable, feminine women they can. Their drag relies almost entirely on recreating illusions of female bodies and replicating impossible beauty standards.

Kleiman (2000) argues that “men performing as women” is problematic when limited to a narrow range of women’s behaviours. Kleiman likens drag performance to performances of blackface (the use of make-up by non-black performers to represent a caricature of a black person) and argues that in contemporary society, men performing as women should be treated with the same hostility as white individuals painting their faces to look like black individuals. For Kleiman (2000), drag is problematic because “women are shown primping, nagging, or longing for male protection” (p. 671), and what is seen as valuable is only the drag queen’s aesthetic beauty. When men dictate what is seen as feminine and reproduce it as the norm, drag makes men more powerful because it silences women and their experiences:

The culture and experience of women is not a costume. [...] When RuPaul says “we’re born naked and the rest is drag,” he is wrong. *He* is in drag because he is a man, and he can stop being a woman whenever it becomes inconvenient. [...] Male ideas of “femininity” are a major inconvenience to those of us who are actually women and have to live our lives in that state.

noindent

(Kleiman, 2000, p. 675)

Kleiman (2000) concludes that drag is harmful to the female experience because women are further pushed from their own narratives. She claims drag opens the way for the further oppression of women through misogyny, and just because misogyny is disguised by parody, it does not make it “funny.”

Kleiman’s critique of drag fails to account for the variety of drag styles and performers; yet examples of drag being harmful to women and gender perceptions in general circulate in the drag scholarship (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005; Schacht, 1998). Schacht (1998, 2002) writes

extensively about the drag community being misogynistic towards female audience members and performers. Through ethnographic research of the Court system, Schacht (2002) reported performers behaving in hostile ways toward biological females. He describes how some drag performers would fawn over men, but reject tips offered by women or accept them begrudgingly; sometimes they had commented on women's bodies and declared drag performers looked more real than most "real" women. Schacht argues that this is because female impersonators sometimes feel threatened by women in the audience as biological females challenge the hierarchy of who is most "real" or most attractive. In this sense, drag is problematic; rather than challenging dominant gender norms, it reinforces them and marginalizes women.

While in Gabby's research women reported feeling safe at The Showbar, many women do not feel safe in drag spaces. Lang (2017) argues that women are often treated badly by gay men and drag queens who will call women names such as "cunt" or "bitch," or inappropriately touch women, and this is acceptable because they are gay and/or dressed as women. Gabby's fieldnotes recorded one instance when a drag queen was repeatedly stroking Gabby's hair, back, and shoulders, even after being asked to stop. They argued it was okay to touch her hair without consent because they were not sexually attracted to Gabby. This highlights another problem in the local drag scene: while it is okay to "look" like a woman and "act" like a woman, you should not actually be a woman. In multiple instances in Gabby's fieldwork, queens refused to speak to her because of her gender, or she and her friends were mocked because they were females and unwelcome. When a drag queen read Gabby for a look (meaning they criticized her outfit or her makeup), or told her that they "could do it better" even though they are a man, or that she shouldn't be in an outfit because it makes her look fat, it normalizes harmful sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, and

heteronormative behaviour. As Kleiman (2000) points out, when drag performers behave in this way, it narrows the scope of how women are “allowed” to present.

Unfinished business

Gabby’s research, and this chapter, have sought to ask critical questions of drag and drag spaces – “sexy spaces” – as sites of performing gender and sexuality. After four years of her doctoral research, when Gabby now goes to see drag queens perform, she questions the standardized formula of the performance and wonders more than ever about the scope for potential social change. Part of this is due to the increasing global popularity of drag. While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has become an international sensation (*Drag Race UK* premiered in October 2019), we have become sceptical and do not watch the show in the same way. We wonder if it presents a platform adept at avoiding serious political and cultural questions, while seemingly answering them? That is, *RPDR* produces a facile, standardized, manufactured, and singular version of drag. While the show introduces some contestants that can be considered “alternative,” the majority are homogenously slim, young, and present as very femme. Contestants who do not adhere to this standard are criticized as “unpolished” and predictably leave the competition at early stages.

Another part of Gabby’s continued questioning of drag is about local “sexy spaces” (Caudwell & Browne, 2011). While The Showbar remains the only dedicated drag venue in this English city, a number of local drag “houses” have begun offering events on varying nights in other venues. For example, Haus of Drag have created an alternative drag scene that invites performers of any gender, sexuality, colour, or age. These events – in dive bars and back alley clubs – offer small but important temporary liminal spaces, where all are welcomed and encouraged to engage with gender play. If The Showbar has limits to its versions of drag, then edgier variations can be found, if once again on the margins. As

recorded in one of her final fieldwork visits to The Showbar, “Dragon” explained to Gabby that she had recently come out as bisexual, and having also just turned eighteen, she was excited to be able to finally attend her first drag show. She was a huge fan of *Drag Race* but had never been old enough to attend a show. Standing in the queue outside the venue, she explained she felt like she was entering a space that would accept her for her sexual identity. As the night progressed, Dragon became much more confident and vocal when discussing her sexuality, coming out, friends, and the joys of drag. In a later interview she described this night – spent somewhere under the rainbow – as “liberating.”

Further reading

40. Rupp, L.J., & Taylor, V.A. (2003). *Drag queens at the 801 cabaret*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

As a model for Gabby’s doctoral research, Rupp and Taylor present an outstanding drag ethnography—complex in its interdisciplinary theoretical framework, richly immersive in empirical detail, and sharply political in view of social movements and “performing protest” that drag queens and communities embody. “*Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* clothes the theoretical bones of the scholarship on gender and sexuality in the finery of actual drag queen life” (Rupp & Taylor, 2003, p. 2) – indeed.

41. Daems, J. (Ed.). (2014). *The makeup of RuPaul’s Drag Race: Essays on the queen of reality shows*. New York, NY: McFarland.

While Gabby’s research was focussed, locally, on drag at The Showbar, this book is specifically tuned in to the hit TV series *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Daems’ (2014) edited collection expands discussions explored in this chapter: on gender and sexuality, misogyny and policing the boundaries of homonormative drag, and on the politics of “race” and *RPDR*. The collection explores being fans of the series and developing critical scholarly positions on matters the show encapsulates.

42. González, J.C., & Cavazos, K.C. (2016). Serving fishy realness: Representations of gender equity on RuPaul’s Drag Race. *Continuum*, 30(6), 659–669.

This article attends to some of the complexities of drag queens as represented on television in contrast to the lived realities of drag queens themselves. It offers an historical encapsulation of drag in the media, a sharp literature review on theorizing sexual identities and media vis-à-vis Marxist ideological and cultural critique, and a superlative content analysis – and critique – of *RuPaul's Drag Race*; as (one must not forget) it is a TV show meant to create drama and controversy in order to generate viewers.

43. Brennan, N., & Gudeludas, D. (Eds.). (2017). *RuPaul's Drag Race and the shifting visibility of drag culture: The boundaries of Reality TV*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Finally—and as we prepare for the launch of *Drag Race UK*—we recommend revisiting this edited collection. It highlights the need to consider the global politics of drag cultures and “visibility” of LGBTQ+ representations, identities, communities, and belongings. While the locality of *The Showbar* remains significant, as argued in Gabby's research, these essays showcase the larger global presence of *RPDR*, and highlight drag's impacts across digital and social mediascapes.

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¹ Perhaps like many, Gabby first became interested in drag culture when, while scrolling through Netflix with a friend, she found *RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR)*, and they binge-watched Season 1. She soon made her first visit to The Showbar to see Sharon Needles (a star of Season 4 of *RPDR*). Enthralled with the space, from that moment she had decided to conduct her PhD research in The Showbar.

² Sex between drag queens, known as “kai kai,” was described to Gabby as undesirable or taboo.

³ González & Cavazos (2016, p. 659) note that most Hollywood films inaccurately depict “doing drag” via “men dressing in women’s clothing, not actual drag queens.”

⁴ Individuals who dress in the clothes of the non-ascribed identity to attain psychological satisfaction; there is usually very little desire to transition across sexes.

⁵ An individual whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

⁶ Tucking is the act of a drag queen pulling back his genitals to create the illusion of having a woman’s vulva. A “tuck” is often held by panty hose, duct tape, or tight underwear.

⁷ Schacht (2002) uses the term preoperative transsexuals to describe drag queens in different stages of transitions. For example, those queens who may have breast implants and a penis.

⁸ While anonymized here, following Leeds Beckett University’s research ethics protocols, the site of Gabby’s research is one of the largest cities in the UK, with over a million residents in its metropolitan area and has (relatively) vibrant urban nightlife.

⁹ A reference to the dark comedy film *Heathers* (1988), with its feared and yet revered “popular” clique.

¹⁰ According to Singh, Hays, and Watson (2011) *transition* can refer to a man who wishes to transition to a woman, a woman who wishes to transition to a man, or non-binary/genderqueer, a spectrum of gender identities that do not identify as exclusively masculine/feminine.