

The Trouble with “Queerness”: Drag and the Making of Two Cultures

A recent queer studies conference concluded with a cutting, if familiar, refrain. Responding to a paper on queer psychoanalysis whose examples were drawn almost exclusively from the lives of gay men, a prominent lesbian theorist demanded, “Where are the women? *Where are the women?*” (Castle 2009).

As anyone versed in queer thought will apprehend, the question is specific neither to the panelist’s talk nor to the respondent’s personal sensibilities. Nor is it merely rhetorical. In the twenty-plus years since Teresa de Lauretis (1991) inaugurated the field, it has become a truism that queer theory is gay male theory cloaked in more inclusive language.¹ The concern is not a trivial one. In light of queer theory and the queer movement’s tremendous success in dislodging the universalizing assumption of heterosexuality, those of us who engage in queer discourses should be wary of any argument that uses the history, culture, psychology, or politics of one segment of the queer population to stand in for that of the entire queer spectrum. This is a pitfall inherent to any umbrella term and, as I shall suggest in various ways throughout this article, one made all the more acute by the postmodern inducement to think everything intersectionally. In the scenario above, for instance, critical attention to the juncture of gen-

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¹ This sentiment, rooted in early radical women-of-color critiques of Western feminism such as those in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), predates the academic co-optation of the word “queer” and persists into the present moment. In the early 1990s, the consolidation of queer studies as a field provoked vociferous objections from radical lesbian feminists concerned that the prioritization of sexuality would eclipse gender difference, implicitly authorizing gay male dominance (Stein 1992; Castle 1993; Jeffreys 1994). Indeed, three short years after she coined the term, de Lauretis (1994) herself disavowed “queer theory” on the grounds that it had been appropriated for precisely the commercialist ends it was intended to resist. During the intervening years, the political and conceptual utility of “queer” has been challenged with respect to its racial, ethnic, economic, and gendered elisions (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005), and scholars within the discipline have begun to envision a “postqueer” academic and social movement (Green 2002; McRuer 2006).

der and ambiguously defined queer sexuality raises the question of what is assumed (in this case, a normatively gay male subject) and what is effaced (lesbian subjectivities) when we invoke such a nebulous term. But a further question goes unasked in this exchange and others like it, for implicit in the grammar of “Where are the women?” is the presumption that women merit *de facto* consideration in the context of the (ostensibly negligent) speaker’s analysis. Pushing this line of reasoning further, the question I propose we take seriously in queer scholarship is, in any given work of queer theory, why should there be women (or for that matter gay men, bisexuals, asexuals, transsexuals, transgender individuals, the intersexed, or self-identified heterosexuals who engage in marginalized sexual practices) at all?

To say this is neither an exercise in contrarianism nor an endorsement of some valuative identitarian hierarchy—a who’s who of the sexually abject. What I am challenging, however, is the self-evidence of the notion that an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink approach to queer theorizing and organizing is socially, politically, or philosophically effective. More precisely, I wish to highlight the paradoxically heteronormative stance underwriting the presumption that lesbians and gay men (or bisexuals, asexuals, transsexuals, etc.) should have anything in common culturally, politically, or otherwise. To put it more strongly, I wish to pursue the counterargument that there are many distinct, frictional, and even oppositional cultural practices that constitute the various identity categories subsumed under (and often eclipsed by) the queer banner. In order to unbury some of the elisions inherent in a grammar of queerness, I begin with an ethnographic case study of gay and lesbian performance cultures. I employ a performance studies methodology because, as I will argue, it is an analytic uniquely equipped to observe, name, and theorize identity categories precisely and coherently without essentializing. Finally, I propose that to move beyond the theoretical quagmire born of “queer”’s function as both verb and generic, we must adopt a new intellectual paradigm that views relations as the conditions of possibility for embodiment and discourse alike.

Questionable counterparts: Drag’s subgenres

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. . . . Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original.

—Judith Butler ([1990] 2006, 187–88)

But in all the articles and studies and media exposés on drag queen culture, very little time and energy has been expended on the drag queen's counterpart, the drag king.

—Judith Halberstam (1998, 231)

It is no coincidence that, as the title of this article indicates, I have chosen to examine and rework these broad, intangible currents in queer, cultural, and performance studies through the much narrower lens of drag. This intervention is the product of nine months of fieldwork at Bounce, an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) bar in Cleveland, Ohio. My research there focused on the drag queen revue *Girls A-Go-Go*, which attracts primarily gay men, male-to-female (MTF) transwomen, and straight women, and the Cleveland Kings & Girls (CKG), a drag king and bio femme troupe whose audience is largely lesbian and female-to-male transmen (FTM).² My work with the performers entailed extensive participant-observation, including twice-weekly attendance at performances, presence for backstage preparations and rehearsals, travel to engagements in and out of Cleveland, group and individual interviews, and informal meetings.³

The structure of my argument, particularly the choice to position drag as the connective tissue between the political and the performative, has developed quite organically from this research and is, I believe, an honest portrayal of how these performers articulate the activist work that their performances do. I use this word “do” deliberately, instead of, say, “reflect” or “represent.” One of the major points this article seeks to prove is that what we typically think of as staged performances, like drag shows, produce effects just as real (and as really political) as apparently unstaged performances—political rallies, legal interventions, and organized protests, to name a few. Of course, not all political strategies are created equal, nor can or should they be used interchangeably. A drag queen's rendition of Lily Allen's antihomophobia anthem “Fuck You” is not especially likely to secure marriage equality for people of all genders and sexual preferences on

² Bio femmes are “biological” females (that is, women who were born with a female anatomy rather than transitioning into one through surgery or hormonal therapy) who identify as women and who perform stereotypes of femininity onstage as a critical practice. There is, of course, some degree of variation among both drag performers and spectators. *Girls A-Go-Go* always includes one or two drag kings, and the CKG features a new queen each week. There are lesbian devotees of Kari Nickels, the hostess of *Girls A-Go-Go*, and gay male regulars at CKG. But, in general, at Bounce and at king and queen shows I've seen throughout the United States, audiences remain segregated along the lines described above.

³ Field research for this article was conducted between December 2009 and August 2010. Recordings and transcripts of interviews are on file with the author.

its own. But neither has the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell prompted all closeted service members to come out to their families, let alone to their fellow troops. Indeed, I'd wager that watching and doing drag are tactics far better suited to the project of negotiating, claiming, and articulating an individual or collective queer identity than, say, campaigning for queer-friendly candidates and legislation.

In engaging ethnographically with drag, then, I hope to contribute to the literature on what drag can do to, with, and through gender and sexual identity. Curiously, only a single scholarly article has addressed kinging and queening comparatively (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010), a lacuna simultaneously explained by and demanding interrogation of the fact that these practices have almost nothing in common with each other. I concede a few very basic parallels. First, generally speaking queens are biological males who perform as women and kings are biological females who perform as men (although even this comparison is questionable at best, given the increasingly vocal and critical presence of genderqueer and transgender drag performers at various stages of transition). Second, kings and queens critique stereotypes of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, race, and class through a process José Esteban Muñoz (1999) terms "disidentification"—marginalized subjects' political and aesthetic appropriation of exclusionary cultural productions for their own world-making ends. Finally, almost without exception, drag performers do or did at some point in their lives identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer.

Although for these reasons queens and kings are discursively lumped together under the heading of drag, in terms of audience demographics, aesthetics, stage persona, movement vocabulary, and treatment of race, class, gender, and sexuality, the two performance genres are so radically distinct as to be, in some cases, diametrically opposed. I thus propose that drag kings are in no way the "counterparts" of drag queens, as Judith Halberstam suggests in the epigraph to this section, and moreover that to conceive of them as such is both to replicate the heteronormative assumption that gay and lesbian cultures are ontologically related and to obscure the complex and transformative ways in which practitioners of each idiom perform gender.

Perhaps the most significant difference between kinging and queening as they are performed at Bounce is that the ideal of femininity operating in queen shows is far more fixed than the ideal of masculinity produced through king shows. More specifically, queens celebrate what sociologist Raewyn Connell might call hegemonic femininity: the dominant temporally and culturally specific ideal. In contemporary US culture, the hegemonic norm is straight, white, wealthy, able bodied, and, regardless of

domestic and career choices, unambiguously female in appearance. Kings, by contrast, experiment with a variety of masculinities, particularly those Connell (2005) terms “subordinate” (78)—those deviating from the hegemonic norm (e.g., androgyny, homosexuality, and disability)—and “marginalized” (80)—those intersecting with minoritarian racial, class, and ethnic identities.

Hegemonic femininity saturates drag queen culture at Bounce. Most performers’ stage names interpellate upper-class subjectivity by referencing expensive tastes (Kiara Cartier Fontaine, Miko Chanel, Mandy Merlot), pedigree (The Lady Akashia), or celebrity (Shari Turner, Stevie Reese Desmond). The class structure implied by their stage names is made body by the queens’ management of audience rapport. Performers at Bounce rely on tips to supplement their fixed percentage of the bar’s revenue on the night. Thus, the relation between performer and spectator might ordinarily be read as one of dependence. Queens refigure this economy, however, by casting themselves as uniquely skilled service providers. So, for example, Miko Chanel, whose persona is part whirling dervish, part acrobat, part high-stepper, and all thigh-high stilettos, quite literally demands compensation for her distinctive talents. If the audience is not sufficiently forthcoming with its money, Miko stares down individual spectators until they fork over the cash, pulls a wallet out of an unsuspecting audience member’s back pocket, or otherwise hints that onlookers are obligated to pay her—that they owe her and that she deserves their money. Similarly, should a newcomer attempt to garner the attentions of Kari Nickels, grande dame of Girls A-Go-Go, by lying down on the stage with a dollar bill in his belt buckle, she glares disdainfully and shakes her head ever so slightly, indicating not only that will she not demean herself for tips but that the crowd member’s actions merit no more than the tersest dismissal.

While queens project entitlement through their crowd interactions, kings unabashedly court their spectators’ generosity. CKG members routinely come down to the audience’s level, crouching on the edge of the stage to make eye contact with each fan who holds out a dollar. Thus, when Ace Daniels spots a girl waving a tip in his direction, he locks eyes with her, saunters purposefully toward her, and places a hand or a kiss on her cheek before accepting the money, as if his time and performance were dedicated to her alone. A more explicit form of this self-abasement is the commonplace of simulating sex with tippers: performers remove dollars from fans’ lips, cleavage, and waistbands with their mouths and gyrate their hips up and down the length of their fans’ bodies. The kings’ willingness to submit to the audience’s demands is consistent with the nonhegemonic forms of masculinity evoked by their names. These range from the punny (Logan

Behold, Nic Tendo) to the dirty (Collin Lingus, Travis McNasty) to the abject (Donnie Waste, Blake Bound). But it is also consistent with a broader identification with the working classes, one summarized most eloquently by Miss Red/Christopher Dane, a bio femme and king who emcees the Wednesday night shows. Following Donnie Waste's performance of John Lennon's "Working Class Hero" (a phrase that, not for nothing, is tattooed on Donnie's arm), Red commented to the audience, "Especially in northeast Ohio when we're struggling for jobs, a working class hero is definitely something to be."

Such reflexive acknowledgments of the social intersections that subordinate and marginalize certain masculinities are routine in drag king performances. Many of the white kings, most notably Xavier Alexander Jade, adopt the hyperbolic gestures of black hip-hop masculinity in order to transcend the limiting construct of masculinity as an absence of affect that once led Halberstam (1998) to describe kinging as a study in underperformance. Xavier's racial performances are, crucially, rarely uncritical insofar as they typically draw attention to the act of appropriation. So, in one instance, he imported the gangsta swagger characteristic of rap videos to a country music number; in another, he complicated his own co-option of Usher's ladies' man persona by pulling up his shirt to reveal his binder, the undergarment that many kings and transmen wear to conceal their breasts. These performances use the presumption of gender inauthenticity inherent to drag shows as a platform to highlight the equally inorganic production of race. Likewise, performances of gayness or sexual submissiveness, which might be assumed to threaten the illusion of masculinity on which kinging depends, are in practice easily absorbed by CKG's pluralistic conception of masculinity. One astonishing example is a twice-performed piece by Bryce Chambers, a king whose usual milieu might be described as Sinatraesque. In the original performance, a dominatrix strips Bryce to his underwear, whips him, pours hot wax on his stomach, tags him with spray paint, and finally strangles him with a riding crop. The second version is identical to the first, except that Bryce becomes the dominator and Xavier plays his houseboy-cum-sex-slave. Bryce and Xavier's apparently inconsistent relationships to masculinity highlight the remarkable absence of a logic of non-contradiction in kinging. Kings' hybridized identity performances gesture toward a metaphysical standpoint about which I shall have much more to say below, one in which the performative distinction between what one is and what one does begins to collapse in on itself.

The bricolage of racial, sexual, gender, and class identities that constitute kinging as a genre would be impermissible within the generic conventions of queening, whose performers depend on the invisibility of real-

world social structures to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity. Instead, the hegemony of celebrity and glamour in queening effaces categories of difference like race and sexuality. Consequently, queening practice constructs the latter as aimless and objectless. This is to say that while queens draw on a visual lexicon of sexual desire (skimpy costumes, explicit banter, suggestive dance moves), the type of sex act or person toward which this desire is directed remains undifferentiated. In light of the queens' proclivity for dominant forms of femininity, one might read into their personae a default heterosexuality. Although this may be accurate with respect to certain performance pieces, I prefer to read drag queen sexuality as, in the Peircean sense, iconic. In layman's terms, the sexuality performed by drag queens refers only to itself rather than to any external sex act or object of attraction. The self-containment or iconicity of queen sexuality shores up the perception of queens as extraordinary, surreal, or spectacular, which in turn perpetuates the performance of undifferentiated sexuality.

Within the generic conventions of queening, race is analogously pressed into the service of maintaining illusions. Since race, like sexuality, is subordinated to an ideal of celebrity and socioeconomic status, racial crossings often appear to go unremarked. Thus queens may select songs by differently raced artists, but the focus is always directed at, say, Maya Tack's reproduction of M.I.A.'s outrageous fashion, or at Rosario Garcia's acrobatic upgrade of Britney Spears's choreography. Nothing in these performances calls attention to the racial subtext of a white performer's appropriation of a Sri Lankan rapper's image or a Latina queen's technical improvements on a white, Southern pop star's moves. In fact, in my nine months of fieldwork at Bounce, only one performance disrupted this pattern of racial elision. In this piece, Akashia, a black performer, donned a blond wig, a vinyl catsuit and corset, ballet slippers with eight-inch spike heels, and full whiteface makeup and performed to Christina Aguilera's aptly titled "Not Myself Tonight." Arriving bewigged and bepainted at Bounce, Akashia brushed off the doorman's suggestion that she use the back entrance so as to avoid the obstacle course of the crowded bar. "I'm a white lady now," she quipped. "I can do whatever I want." But onstage this witticism was belied by her skintight costume and extreme footwear, which restricted her movement to writhing on the floor. Unlike the kings' appropriations of racialized tropes, which expand the definition of race to mean more than a fixed set of characteristics inhering in certain bodies, Akashia's performance of the limits of race reifies queening's dominant feminine norm.

Can we extend the differences between queening and kinging practices to a general theory of what constitutes gay male versus lesbian cultural prac-

tices? I think a more productive question is, what would be the use of making such a distinction? And to this I respond that highlighting these dissimilarities decentralizes the white, upper-middle-class, gay male body as the hegemonic norm of queer life. However, taking this exercise to its logical extreme, one might speculate that the relative invisibility of race in queen performances bespeaks the broader gay male population's resistance to grappling with race relations, or that drag kings' affinity for blue-collar iconography reflects a wider lesbian commitment to social justice. To be clear, I absolutely do not mean to suggest that drag queens (and by extension gay men) disavow critical engagement with power structures or that drag kings (and by extension lesbians) are single-mindedly focused on disrupting these structures. To draw such a conclusion is simply to invert one dualistic hierarchy within queer culture, idealizing lesbians and demonizing gay men, while leaving the structure of hierarchy fully intact. And while I do believe that drag performance can tell us something important about the cultures that produce it (e.g., that for many lesbians, to be masculine is to physically index a particular working-class narrative), I want to make the stronger claim that performance generally, and drag specifically, offers us a theoretical wormhole of sorts—a new metaphysic for thinking (queer) identity that is not a priori structured around binarism and hierarchy. Toward this end, I offer a critique of “performativity” as it has been used in much radical queer and feminist thought of the last twenty years. This usage, I argue, has perpetuated the construction of stage performances, such as drag, as “politics light”—a dilute version of the real thing and a lame substitute for actual activism. Moreover, it has severely restricted performance's analytic and strategic utility outside the humanities and beyond academia.

The epistemological framework that underwrites most academic treatments of drag and of staged performances in general relies on what I call the metaphoric use of performance. Studies predicated on this framework view performance as a (mere) metaphor for real-life phenomena rather than as a real-life phenomenon in its own right. Such usage enables, and in some cases encourages, the transvaluative deduction that the content of the argument must be metaphoric (ergo insubstantial) as well. One particularly clear example can be found in Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor's ethnography *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2003). The authors adopt the language of performance studies, which they define as “literatures which employ the metaphor of performance” (214), to suggest that drag is a political protest strategy of the queer dispossessed. They advocate

a more complicated reading of performances as almost always partaking of both [politics and culture], such that politics and entertain-

ment are deliberately interwoven with the goal of winning acceptance of the message [about gay rights]. Further, cultural performances typically are staged to elicit strong emotion and are experienced by the audience *as play rather than serious*, which allows them to attract participants who might not otherwise attend a political event. . . . Performances have the potential to promote the *internal articulation of collective identity* among the performers and segments of the audience who share interests with them. At the same time, as we have seen, cultural performances can contribute to the *external articulation of collective identity* between members of the different groups who gather to participate in the event, on the one hand, and the larger community, on the other. (Rupp and Taylor 2003, 216; emphasis added)

Although I have a larger quarrel with the naturalization of abjection implicit in Rupp and Taylor's assumption that drag must justify itself through a legitimating claim to "the political," my concern here is to show that an aspirational framing of performance imputes a false chronology to identity formation. Rupp and Taylor's formulation of drag as a "deliberate, conscious, and strategic use of cultural entertainment" (217) presumes an ontological relation between gayness and drag, in which the realization that one is gay precedes the choice to perform theatrically as a queen. Suggesting that the queens intentionally present their performance work as a form of play through which to subversively articulate a serious message about homophobia precludes a reading of drag as in fact productive of the identity that the authors here claim it merely expresses. Simply put, I think that drag does far more identity work than an argument premised on the distinction between stage performance and the performance of everyday life can convey.

A metaphorical use of performance cannot, for instance, account for the gender-transformative experience related to me by Jess, the FTM-identified king who performs as Xavier Alexander Jade:

I actually found out what "trans" was through drag. I had never heard of it. I always figured I was, you know, *different*. I always wore boy clothes throughout school, always got teased, always had short hair. . . . I didn't know how that fit into my life quite yet, but being in drag gave me more confidence than being out of drag. . . . There were times when I would stay in drag all night long and be like, "yeah!" Then I'd go home and I'd get all depressed because I had to take it off, and I'd completely change into this other person. [Drag is] a way for me to express things that I could never really express without, per se, "the mask" on. It breaks me out of my shell,

shows me who I *can* be, yet who I really maybe shouldn't, don't wanna be. . . . It definitely helps me emotionally with my confidence and the way I talk with people. Because I used to be so closed off and so angry that I disrespected and mistreated people very badly. But now that I've learned where that comes from, it's a little bit easier to *not* do that anymore. It makes me more comfortable with who I am instead of just being angry all the time because I *don't* know who I am.

For Jess, then, his drag self is in many ways more real than his real (i.e., offstage) self. He is most comfortable in his own skin, most capable of honest expression, when he is playing the part of Xavier, so to speak. Indeed, he frames this irony quite astutely by referring to drag as "the mask," in quotation marks, implying that on the contrary, his offstage identity, anchored uncomfortably and illogically as it is in his pretransitional female body, is the true facade. Drag gives Jess the language, the permission, and the knowledge paradigm to name and embody his sense of self as a man. Or, to take a good deal of license with Simone de Beauvoir: He was not born a man. He became one by performing in drag.

This more complicated conception of drag's relationship to gender identity is echoed, albeit in quite different terms, by Terrah, a femme-identified queer woman who performs as both a bio femme, Miss Red, and a drag king, Christopher Dane:

I don't want anybody to ever think that just because I'm feminine that I cannot portray that masculine stereotype onstage. I don't think that that's fair. I don't think that as a woman that's something that is off limits to me. I don't think that as a femme that's something that's off limits to me. I don't think that only butches can do drag. At all. . . . For me, getting in drag is getting an opportunity to play a masculine stereotype. It's not about feeling more like myself onstage because I *don't* feel like a man. . . . I think it just depends on the performer, mostly, as to what reasons they do drag. Like Krucky [a king who identifies as a woman and who performs as Travis McNasty], he does it because he wants to feel like that rock star onstage. You look at Krucky and you see a short little butch dyke, but for those four minutes he's on stage he's a rock star. And I think that that has really helped him come out of his shell. I think that drag, if you use it in the right way, it'll help you grow so, so much.

Terrah's use of drag, while quite different from Jess's, is also generative inasmuch as it enables her to experience femininity as a nonrestrictive iden-

tity.⁴ By portraying “masculine stereotypes”—and doing so with a facility that belies her femme identification—Terrah breaks with feminine stereotypes and in the process transforms femininity into a habitable descriptive signifier. The grammar in which she discusses a fellow performer further attests to the slippage between drag performance and the performance of gender in everyday life. In referring to the offstage persona of her colleague, Krucky, Terrah defaults to the masculine pronoun. Playing fast and loose with pronouns in this manner is a commonplace among both the drag kings and queens at Bounce, such that many performers use feminine and masculine pronouns interchangeably when speaking of other performers. At times, a given performer is described as both “he” and “she” within the span of a single sentence. Such pronominal fluidity testifies to the impossibility (or at least, the impracticability) of separating on- and offstage gender performance. Importantly, however, this phenomenon applies exclusively to performers who identify with the gender into which they were normatively considered to have been born. Transgender performers are uniformly designated by the gendered pronouns with which they identify: Kari Nickels, an MTF queen, is a “she” without exception, and FTM king Timmy Knight is always referred to as “he.” The culture of drag performance, I want to suggest, makes possible this inversion of the pronoun problem encountered by many genderqueer and ambiguously gendered individuals. Drag carves out a space in which the only stable gender identity is one that deviates from the norm.

In using ethnographic observations of drag shows to investigate larger problems in the construction of putatively queer identities, communities, and philosophies, the relation between the two I wish to communicate is, therefore, decidedly not one of allegory to actuality. Rather, it is that of microcosm to metaphysic. I want to position drag as a miniature of the discursive formation “queer,” the study of which can yield important information about the metatheoretical project of queering social, political, and cultural thought. By zeroing in on two concrete iterations of cultural performance, namely, drag king and queen shows, I hope to give the reader pause when encountering the discourse of artifice that inflects most discussions of gen-

⁴ The notion of femininity as restrictive or constrictive has underwritten a great deal of feminist theorizing from Beauvoir to the present and is summed up rather provocatively by psychoanalytic theorist Susan Bordo: “The general rule governing the construction of femininity [is] that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited” (1997, 96). For examples from other disciplines, see Young (1980), Morgan (1984), Blum and Stracuzzi (2004), and Greenfield (2006). For critiques of this representation of femininity, see Brushwood Rose and Camilleri (2002).

der (as) performance. I argue instead for a theory of performance that does not limit itself to the realm of mere metaphor, one that actually, unapologetically, and without qualification breaks down the boundary between stage performance and the performance of everyday life. Such a thoroughgoing reconceptualization, I suggest, opens up radical new possibilities for an understanding of gender and sexual identities and communities as legible, recognizable, and analyzable cultural objects, while simultaneously nullifying totalizing discourses of authenticity, stability, and stasis.

The matter of bodies: Toward a theory of omniperformance

And yet it turns.

—Galileo, when asked to recant.⁵

In advancing a theory of gender performativity, Butler states in no uncertain terms that “to claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ as oppositional” ([1990] 2006, 45). Nevertheless, the twenty-plus intervening years since the publication of *Gender Trouble* have seen the rise of a critical paradox in performance studies, namely, that performance at once reduces everything to bodies (to the exclusion of the social) and reduces everything to discourse (to the exclusion of the material). This is, of course, an effect of the hierarchical mind/body dualism, which confusingly declares that while the body is literal matter, the mind is what really matters. Within the context of performance, the matter of what matters is made murkier still by the antinomy of offstage/onstage, often translated as “real life / imitation of life,” wherein the real is presumed to exist in a relation of ontological superiority to the imitation. I will attempt here to unravel the discursive bind that arbitrarily juxtaposes “theatrical performance” with “the performance of everyday life” and in so doing to move performance theory beyond the tiresome necessity of reckoning with the “real.” I do this because, despite the misconstruction of performance as metaphor that I’ve identified above, I remain convinced that performance theory has the greatest potential to resolve a number of the rhetorical conflicts that perennially plague queer theory and the queer movement.

⁵ Stephen Hawking refers to this possibly apocryphal exclamation in his edited collection of essays by foundational physicists and astronomers (2002, 397).

In spite of the philosophical revolution inaugurated by Butler's argument that gender is a doing rather than a being and that authenticity is a fiction, when we make assumptions about what constitutes queerness and whose lives, voices, and ideas should count as queer ones, we implicitly claim that queerness *is essentially* something, that it has certain essential elements, and that a discourse that neglects one or more of these elements (lesbianism, e.g., in the opening vignette) automatically ceases to be queer. In this way, queer theorists get caught between wanting to believe that nothing *is* (essential) and nevertheless feeling that some things are. Thus, as a woman who identifies as a woman I am intellectually certain that my femininity exists only inasmuch as I perform it through my clothing, grooming, posture, movement, and so on. Tomorrow I could shave my head, don boxers, baggy cargo pants, and an oversized T-shirt, sit with my legs apart, and perform the ritual markers of masculinity. I could do these things, but I would feel a bit disingenuous; I would feel, that is, as if I were not being myself. The same general idea structures countless narratives of coming out as gay or transgender:

One day Mom caught me in one of her dresses and threatened to put me out in the street. . . . I was scared but it didn't stop me. (Richard Fung in his video memoir *My Mother's Place* [1990])

"Sometimes I'll get the occasional 'Well, how did you know that you were [gay]?' . . . For me it's just always been there. I knew from the time I could think for myself on. It was pretty obvious," he concluded gesturing to his thin frame and tight-fitting tank top with a flourish. ("Ricky," a high school student interviewed in Pascoe 2007, 66)

I have always felt like one of the guys. I dreaded puberty. When I started growing tits I thought my life was over and just learned how to "deal" with having them. I've been trying to hide them as much as possible since I've had them, but drag. . . . It was finally okay to portray what I wanted to be. I met some people that let me know that I could do something about changing my outward appearance to match the way I feel and who I am. (Donnie Waste, a drag king and self-identified "borderline genderqueer/transman," interviewed by author, March 15, 2010)

When I was thirteen, I wanted a punching bag and boxing gloves for my birthday. I believe that these accoutrements of masculine competition signified for me a way to keep adult womanhood at bay. . . . I was told that boxing was not appropriate for a girl my age and that I should pick out something more feminine. . . . Next came gender-

appropriate clothes and all manner of social prohibitions. I personally experienced adolescence as the shrinking of my world. . . . When I look back on the set of limitations that female adolescence bestowed on me, I feel a kind of rage. (Halberstam 1998, 267–68)

As Gayle Rubin insightfully notes, “People often assume that if something is social it is also somehow fragile and can be changed quickly. . . . Frustration with the enduring quality of certain things sometimes leads people to think that they can’t be socially generated” (1994, 69–70). And yet gender and sexuality *are* socially generated. And yet we cannot and do not want to change what and who we feel we are. And yet it turns.

Trapped within this catch-22, performativity-based theory often turns in on itself. Caught between the conviction that identity is always already performed (always context contingent, always demanding to be reproduced) and the negative connotations of performance discourse (fakery, insincerity, falseness, inauthenticity), writers often hedge their bets, wittingly or not, by setting limits on performance. Such is the case in *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Rupp and Taylor 2003), which, I’ve argued, distinguishes the conscious or premeditated act of (drag) performance from ostensibly unconscious or automatic lived experiences (of queerness). A similar line is drawn by performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson in his provocative interrogation of racial authenticity *Appropriating Blackness* (2003). Johnson argues that race is performative inasmuch as ongoing contestations over what constitutes authentic blackness actually produce blackness. But his mobilization of performance discourse is conditioned on a critical proviso: “Blackness [is not] always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing. In this respect, blackness supersedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance—the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of racial identification” (8). Ultimately, I want to suggest that this argument, like Rupp and Taylor’s, devolves as a result of assuming an implicit valuative hierarchy of performativity over performance. On the one hand, Johnson maintains with Butler that blackness can be neither authentic nor inauthentic since it exists only in terms of appropriation; every definition of blackness, therefore, is equally produced by virtue of blackness’s performativity. On the other hand, performance cannot account for the fullness of blackness as an embodied state of being because it is, in his own words, a “spectacular,” “theatrical fantasy” (8), which is to say unreal, invented, inauthentic, and at odds with a “material way of knowing.”

The rather paradoxical relation between performance and performativity operating in Johnson's rhetoric is, in point of fact, nothing new; it is expressed quite explicitly—albeit in far less politically engaged terms—by the grandfather of performativity theory, John L. Austin. Early in the lecture series *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), Austin makes an important qualification about the types of speech act that may properly be called performative: “As *utterances* our performatives are *also* heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect *all* utterances. And these . . . we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. . . . Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language” (21–22). Performance, in other words, is a bastardization of performativity. Whereas performative utterances produce tangible real-world effects—a legal marriage, for example, is effected through the exchange of “I do”s—utterances spoken in theatrical performance are so potentially damaging to the function of language that they must be excluded from performativity's purview. I want to suggest in counterpoint to Austin and Johnson that performance and performativity need not be treated as mutually exclusive discursive modes.⁶

A significant challenge to these models of performativity is posed by Daphne Brooks's book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006). Brooks takes as her subject “Afro-alienation acts,” cultural performances that transmute conditions of abjection and alterity into strategies of self-making (4). Crucially, Brooks draws her examples entirely from the realm of staged performance to show how putatively theatrical performances reclaim, reperform, and, indeed, reappropriate the real-life experience of blackness. Her chapter on Henry Box Brown, a former slave who mailed himself to the free North in a crate, is especially demonstrative. After escaping slavery, Brown became a visual and performing artist and made a career of reenacting his passage to freedom for paying audiences in North America and Europe. Brooks argues that Brown's black body transformed from a white colonial commodity into property fully his own—a vehicle for lived experiences of his own choosing—precisely at the moment he publicly restaged his escape. That is, Brown performatively produced his (real) identity as a free black man

⁶ It is not my intention here to conflate Johnson's definition of performativity, which includes performance with the caveat that performance alone may be an insufficient trope for theorizing the material conditions in which identity is lived, produced, and embodied, with Austin's definition, which not only excludes performance but moreover casts it as a threat to the social function of language.

through the (staged) performance of freedom, much as Jess, the drag performer quoted at length above, crafted his real identity as a transgender man by performing as a man onstage. Compare this to Rupp and Taylor's formulation of drag performance as protest, and it quickly becomes clear that the distinction between the lived experience (of race, gender, sexuality, etc.) and the staged performance thereof is not so solid as it may initially seem. Practically then, where Johnson reads performance as connoting a spectacularity and intentionality insufficient to the task of articulating the invisible and unconscious experience of blackness, Brooks suggests that epistemological and embodied experiences of blackness are themselves performances. Brooks productively extends Johnson's claim that blackness writ large is neither authentic nor inauthentic: there is no blackness writ large, but there is blackness made body, and the performance of blackness (and, I want to suggest, of queerness, straightness, femininity, masculinity, and androgyny) is always and equally embodied whether on stage, in the street, in a classroom, or at home. What Brooks's work suggests is that grounding any discussion of performance in an ontology of the body renders the question of authenticity moot.

The need for such an ontology of the body is echoed and expanded in Karen Barad's (2003, 801) answer to the question, "Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?" Drawing on the work of physicist Niels Bohr, Barad reverses the causality of representationalist metaphysics, in which individual entities (subjects and objects) preexist the possibility of relations; for Barad, the world is instead composed of ontological relations, which can subsequently be divided into subject and object. Consequently, there are no ontological boundaries between entities; entities only become intelligible as such within the context of antecedent relationships. This reconception leads Barad to suggest a new epistemological lexicon in which phenomena (not things) are the "smallest material units—relational 'atoms'" (822) and agency is expressed in terms of intra-actions within those phenomena rather than interactions between things or actions of one thing upon another (815). So, to borrow an example from science, light looks variously like a wave or a particle, depending on the nature of the experiment. In crude terms, the divergent results of these experiments parallel the results one would expect from shooting an industrial pressure washer versus a machine gun at a wall with two large holes in it. This discrepancy perennially frustrates physicists' "efforts to specify the true ontological nature of light" (815 n. 21). The wave/particle conundrum ceases to be contradictory, however, when we recognize that "the objective referent [of the ex-

periment] is not some abstract, independently existing entity [light] but rather the phenomenon of light intra-acting with the apparatus. The first apparatus gives determinate meaning to the notion of ‘wave,’ while the second provides determinate meaning to the notion of ‘particle.’ The notions of ‘wave’ and ‘particle’ do not refer to inherent characteristics of an object that precedes its intra-action. *There are no such independently existing objects with inherent characteristics*” (815 n. 21). Because we are looking at a different phenomenon in each experiment (the intra-active relation of light with a gun-like apparatus versus that of light with a washer-like apparatus), it should come as no surprise that the observations issuing from each one (particleness and waveness, respectively) should differ as well.

Barad’s account goes on to redefine agency not as a quality of some material objects but as a reconfiguring of phenomena: an action perhaps more appropriately captured by a verb, “agentize.” Since on this view all matter—human, nonhuman, and discursive alike—can agentize (act), agency becomes irreducible to (the capacity for) language. Materiality and discourse become inseparably coconstitutive, “mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity” (822). And because material relations are endlessly changing and changeable through intra-action, there can be neither an ontological thing nor a telos toward which the process of becoming leads. If, to return to a prior example, the phenomenon we are studying consists of relations between my body, a buzz cut, menswear, and an open-legged seated posture, the intra-action might give meaning to the concept “masculinity” or even “female masculinity” for any given observer. And yet, whether unconsciously or by conscious choice, I routinely keep my hair long, shop in the ladies’ department, and cross my legs knee over knee when I sit down—a set of intra-active relations that to most people signifies femininity. But the point I wish to make about this admittedly narcissistic thought experiment is this: neither of these scenarios is any more real, any less performed, any more constructed, or any less essential than the other; the latter amalgam of relations simply tends to arise more frequently. It is primarily for this reason that friends, family, acquaintances, and I would identify me as a normatively feminine woman—not because I was born this way, or was psychically conditioned to feel this way, or was socially inculcated with the expectation that I present myself this way, or because one day I made a considered decision to look and act this way (although each of these may be true within the context of any particular intra-action). Rather, *I*, as a person with an identity that consistently makes me legible *as myself* to myself and others over time, only exist as a function of relations. And it is the relative consistency of these relations over time that gives weight to gender. Thus, one might *be* gay or masculine or genderqueer but

only inasmuch as one *does* (agentizes) intra-actions that give meaning to gayness or masculinity or genderqueerness.

Despite the emphasis on temporality in this example, the reframing of performativity as intra-activity marks a significant shift away from repetition-based understandings of performativity, such as Butler's citationality (1993), Richard Schechner's restored behavior (1985), and Victor Turner's ritual (1982). Performativity here is not about reiteration or pattern or copies of originals that are themselves copies. Nor is it about particular gestures whose repetition over time sediments something like an identity. Since the referent of performative intra-action is always a relation and not a thing, the issue of repetition becomes virtually obsolete. Because bodies are constantly intra-acting with other matter (people, computers, ideas, the weather), there is no metaphysical expectation that meanings (e.g., identities) will be reproduced consistently. Within this performative framework, there is no longer cause to debate whether a "biological" female who identifies as a woman is a more authentic woman than a masculine-identified "biological" female, a bedroom cross-dresser, a professional drag queen, or an MTF transsexual because the meaning of "woman" is coextensive with each new intra-action.

This is not to deny the relative historical stability of the concept "woman." Gender has undeniably served a host of patriarchal and heterosexist ends and, consequently, has left deep scars on the flesh and psyches of people who live on the edge or underbelly of its norms. The performance metaphysic I've adapted from Barad does not account for the historical uses and abuses of gender; rather, it is an instrument of change. The insistence on continuity of identity, a foundational trope of gender injustice, is produced and sustained by—ergo only possible within—a representationalist metaphysic. By contrast, intra-actions, the discursive and material relations that preexist the possibility of distinguishing bodies from identities and that encompass each person, can shift from moment to moment, day to day, year to year; hence, the meaning of gender issuing from any one bodily intra-action could potentially be subject to revision just as often.

The point here again is not merely rhetorical. The paradigm I offer challenges the rigidly policed boundary between performance and performativity. Johnson tacitly assumes such a distinction in the excerpt cited above. Butler, however, insists upon it: "It is important to distinguish performance from performativity," she notes. "The former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject" (1996, 112). Here I take her to mean that the concept of a subject did not and could not have existed prior to the invention of discourse, and ergo discourse creates both the general idea of a subject and specific, individual subjects. Like Austin's performative

utterance, which creates a new state of affairs by virtue of being uttered, Butler's notion of performative discourse creates, reproduces, reinvents, or denaturalizes subjects by virtue of being discourse. In the case of performance, by contrast, since a performance is an action and an action cannot be performed in the absence of a performing subject, the existence of a subject must precede the existence of a performance. While I follow Butler's logic with respect to performativity, I disagree inasmuch as I believe performance can also challenge the assumption of a subject before the Law. The fault I find in her argument is that the distinction between performance and performativity hinges on a conflation of the subject with the body. That is, where Butler assumes that an action must be performed by a subject, I counter that performance requires only a body, loosely defined. Indeed, I want to argue that the antecedence of bodies/matter/substance is the condition of possibility for the intra-actions through which subjects and objects are performed.

Performance, on this account, has the capacity both to produce and contest "the very notion of the subject," rendering its distinction from performativity merely discursive, so to speak. Both performance and performativity are radically dependent on the prior existence of a material body in order to produce meaning, regardless of whether that intra-actional production occurs on stage, in casual conversation, while cross-dressed for a drag show, or as the result of a normatively deviant gender identity. Simply put, I am suggesting that *there is no difference between performance and performativity*, that the rhetorical distinction between the two has exhausted its utility, and that a performance paradigm based on an ontology of bodily intra-action accounts for both the theoretical fluidity and the apparent fixity of individual identity. In so saying, I do not mean to disparage or dismiss Butler's pathbreaking work, to which my own is deeply indebted. Nor do I deny the power of language in producing subjectivities. My purpose is simply to decenter language as the sole or primary arbiter of subjecthood and to affirm that bodies share in the work of identity formation. In pursuit of this aim, Barad's insights transport us across a critical impasse, namely, that performativity grants language limitless power to make, break, and subvert identities while glossing over the material conditions and consequences of having a (particularly gendered, sexed, raced, and classed) body.

Detachable cultures, queer effects

Whenever there is polarization, there is an unhappy tendency to think the truth lies somewhere in between.

—Gayle Rubin (1984, 303)

Kinging and queening, as I have articulated them, are a fruitful lens through which to interrogate the broader notion of queer border wars and the problematic elisions engendered and sustained by the rhetorical, political, and cultural ambiguity of the word “queer.” “Border wars,” as I am using it, is a phrase borrowed from Halberstam’s discussion of the tense relations between butch lesbians and transmen: “If we study the fault lines between masculine women and transsexual men,” she expands, “we discover . . . that as transsexual men become associated with real and desperate desires for reembodyment, so butch women become associated with a playful desire for masculinity and a casual form of gender deviance. . . . I believe that the confusing overlaps between some forms of transsexuality and some gender-deviant forms of lesbianism have created . . . a strange struggle between FTMs and lesbian butches who accuse each other of gender normativity” (1998, 143). While Halberstam is focused on one border war in particular, I think the concept’s explanatory power can be applied to any number of debates about who counts as queer, for what reasons, according to whom. Although I have been primarily concerned with the fault lines between lesbians and gay men as manifested through the practice of drag, queer theory is rich in additional examples: bisexual versus homosexual, butch versus femme, vanilla versus fetish (Rubin 1984), so-called homonormative (i.e., heteroassimilationist; Duggan 2002) lifestyles versus death-driven subcultures (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005), transgender versus transsexual (Valentine 2007), promiscuity versus celibacy versus monogamy (Delany 1999; Warner 2000), men who have sex with men versus gay men (King 2004), and the list goes on. Yet even as queer theorists and activists police these boundaries (e.g., by eschewing gay marriage as inimical to a queer counterpublic ideology), we are paradoxically loath to make claims that might be construed as essentialist or essentializing. “Queerness,” I have argued, is at once a catchall for gender and sexual deviance and a taxonomy of internal interests. It simultaneously seeks to erase differences (by insisting on the inclusion of an ever-expanding array of nonnormative genders and sexualities) and to maintain differences (by framing some bodies and lives as queerer than others). Drag shows, I suggest, produce and reify such proprietary understandings of queerness and queer performance in brilliant technicolor. When, for instance, an audience regular at Bounce’s *Girls A-Go-Go* dismisses king performances as “messy, unrehearsed, . . . zero production value,” we see at work the Foucauldian dictum, “Discourse is little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze” (Foucault 1981, 66). To wit, such a statement (mis)reads the discursive product of one discipline (kinging, lesbian performance culture) via the rhetorical terms of another (queening, gay male performance cul-

ture). Or, alternately, in evaluating lesbian drag according to the (altogether different) standards of gay male drag, the speaker not only appropriates and assimilates the former to the latter but finds, unsurprisingly, that the former comes up lacking. Or, again, in voicing a common refrain of MTF drag devotees, the speaker lays claim to—and implicitly claims knowledge of—kinging as a sector of the drag umbrella while concomitantly critiquing it for being insufficiently draggy.

This tension within queer studies generally and drag performance specifically mirrors a parallel conflict at the border of performance and performativity that pits “real” enactments of selfhood against “artificially” produced ones. This rhetorical strategy perpetuates an ideological practice of exclusion-in-inclusion; that is, it claims that all identity is born in performance but that some identity performances are less authentic than others. I have argued instead that it is precisely through relations (such as the cross-cultural friction underwriting the aforementioned spectator’s dismissal of kinging’s performative value) that notions of identity and difference come to exist.

In contradistinction to discursive ontologies that counterpose performativity with embodied experience, innate with acquired identity markers, reality with pretense, I believe, with David Halperin, that such ontologies unnecessarily restrict our ability to make any but the narrowest claims about the relationship between individual and cultural identities. Articulating the controversial proposition that camp is the defining generic convention of gay male culture, Halperin (2008) remarks: “I am well aware of all the reasons why it might seem hazardous even to speak of gay male culture. The foremost danger is that of essentialism, of seeming to imply that there is some defining feature or property of gayness that all gay men share. But to make such an objection is to confuse a culture, and the practices that constitute it, with the individuals who belong to it and who may not all be gay themselves.” Such a conflation is far more difficult to sustain, however, when one understands both individuals and cultures as effects—not producers—of relations. Viewed in this way, culture becomes detachable from individual bodies (and thus is not inborn or essential to any particular body), yet culture only exists as an effect of bodily intra-action (and thus is not merely a discursive construction, conjured out of ether, but is instead substantial or, in conventional terms, real).

Conceiving the cultural production of identity and the identity-based production of culture thusly allows identity and culture to be both an action and a state of rest, a construction and an essence. It moves us beyond the compulsory choice between bodies or discourse, and it explodes the idea that staged performances (like drag shows) reflect but don’t produce

gender and sexual identities. Most significantly, it circumvents the problematic uses of “queer” I have outlined above. A relational metaphysic allows us to stake and make claims to and about queer discourses, bodies, and identities without falling back on purely essentialist tropes. Since queerness on this account is the product of a particular constellation of bodies and ideas and not an inherent characteristic of some bodies or ideas, we might begin to imagine scholarly exchange and political coalition based on coexisting, rather than competing, definitions of queerness. We might accept or even admire an argument that defines queerness as a product of certain phenomenal intra-actions involving gay men, knowing that it does not negate or supplant a definition issuing from lesbian-encompassing phenomena. Perhaps then we can undertake the queer work of social justice not as counterparts, arbitrarily juxtaposed along bi-and intersecting lines of preformed difference, but as partners rearranging and reinterpreting the relations that make those differences matter.

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