

# FOUR RENDITIONS OF DOING FEMALE DRAG: FEMININE APPEARING CONCEPTUAL VARIATIONS OF A MASCULINE THEME

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## ABSTRACT

*Departing from many contemporary writers' and researchers' homogenous conceptualization of the transgendered as a gender subversive enterprise, this paper explores the conventional ways that female impersonators do gender and sexuality by donning women's attire. Drawing upon my ethnographic experiences in a dozen different drag settings over the past eight years, I highlight the apparent differences and striking similarities of those doing female drag. By locating female impersonators within the matrices of gender and sexual performance, identity, and embodiment, a multifarious viewpoint of this activity results that better illuminates participants' contextual motivations for undertaking what the dominant culture otherwise often defines as a stigmatized presentation of self. Out*

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*of the myriad of ways those doing female drag comes the strong impression that, while such individuals may be gender traitors of sorts, they are anything but gender anarchists.*

## INTRODUCTION

Eunice Kennady Smith, co-mistress and emcee for this evening's event, Coronation 1995 of the Imperial Sovereign Court of Spokane (ISCS), reads the following from a cue card, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are proud to present a special performance by the current reigning Miss Gay Seattle . . . please welcome Mr. Mark Finley." Mark walks onto the stage wearing a silky, floor-length robe, noticeably applied makeup and large earrings, but with otherwise short masculine appearing hair, carrying a laundry basket full of various drag queen accouterments (i.e. makeup, wigs, high heels, and so forth). Initially appearing as an obvious man, albeit with effeminate appearing make-up and earrings, he seats himself at a table conveniently placed at the middle of the stage, and touches up his makeup while lip-syncing the following song verses of a masculine sounding voice played on the ballroom's sound system.

*Mark Finely Lip-Syncing:* Once again, I am a little depressed by the tired old face that I see. Once again, it is time to be anyone other than me. With a rare combination of girlish excitement and manly restraint, I position my precious assortment of pencils, powder, and paint. So whenever I feel my place in the world is beginning to crash. I apply one great stroke of mascara to my rather limp upper lash. [what was previously a very slow tempo to this song increases significantly at this point] And I can cope again. Good god, there's hope again."

During the last lines of this song Mark has also quickly put on a short but stylishly coiffed black wig and upon completion of this song, stands and removes his robe, underneath which he is wearing a tight fitting black velvet dress, three large strands of simulated white pearls, and a pair of black three inch high heels.

What follows is a quite spirited, nearly twenty minute performance of twenty-two different songs (none lasting more than a minute in duration) from popular Broadway shows ranging from Cabaret to Miss Saigon. All the songs lip-synced are by female recording artists such as Liza Minelli or Barbara Streisand. With each new song Mark either removes and/or adds items of traditionally defined female attire; e.g. replacing a wig with a hat or stripping off his present dress underneath which is found a new gown. Accordingly, his demeanor and physical motions change to fit the emotion of the song he is lip-syncing. With each song change emerges a new female persona in image, physical movement, and deportment. The entire performance is a fluid, ever-changing, but marked presentation of hyper-femininity all being played out in front of an almost exclusive audience

of gay men (over half appearing as drag queens) and lesbian women (over two thirds appearing as drag kings). He ends the entire performance by removing his final wig, whereby his initial masculine appearance reemerges, and is greeted with the appreciative applause of the audience.

Since the Spring of 1993 (and typically with the accompaniment of my spouse, Lisa Underwood) I have been undertaking an ongoing ethnography of what, for simplicity purposes, I will presently call drag queens in over a dozen different contexts in North America.<sup>1</sup> While prior to my involvement in various drag communities I was a strong proponent of understanding gender and sexuality as powerful social constructs (Schacht & Atchison, 1993), I have come to have a far more experiential appreciation of how these presentations of self are truly performed and almost entirely situational in meaning. Whether it be watching drag performances such as Mark Finley's, or my own experiences of being an ephemeral drag queen (Schacht, in press), I have increasingly come to a personal understanding that gender and sexuality are extremely fluid, ever-changing ways of being in the presence of others. This is in direct contrast to my previous outlook of gender and sexuality as largely fixed and dichotomous (e.g. male/female or gay/straight) albeit socially constructed categorical states of existence. Years of participation in various drag communities has taught me that the socially constructed boundaries of being a woman versus a man, or gay versus straight, in our contemporary society are far more ideally meaningful than practically lived and experienced.

The following paper proposes that to gain a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be a gendered and a sexual being, one must consider issues of performance, identity, and embodiment as a given individual enacts them both in terms of intent and contextual outcome. The analysis that follows will only apply this proposed theoretical framework of gender and sexuality to what thus far has been loosely termed drag queens and will not consider other forms of transgendered behavior (such as transvestites or transsexuals).<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, drag queens<sup>3</sup> are simply defined as individuals with an acknowledged penis, who have no desire to have it removed and replaced with female genitalia (such as transsexuals), that perform being women in front of an audience that all knows they are self-identified men, regardless of how compellingly female – “real” – they might otherwise appear.

My reasons for limiting myself to this particular population are twofold. First, the majority of my ethnographic experiences with transgendered individuals have been with drag queens (as just defined). Second, while I can see possible applications of my proposed conceptual framework of gender and sexuality to larger societal contexts, it is specifically through drag queens that I have experientially come to my present understanding of gender and sexuality. Thus, other

than some summary speculation in the concluding section of this paper, further applications of the proposed analysis model are best left to future papers and/or others writing in this area. Before more clearly outlining and applying my proposed experiential model of gender and sexuality, a brief review and critique of existing literature on the transgendered and drag is warranted.

### **EXPANDING UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRANSGENDERED AND DRAG QUEENS**

While there is not universal agreement on the term transgendered, there is an emerging generic sematic space that is inclusive of all people who cross-dress. It includes those who self-identify as male-to-female transsexuals, male transvestites and cross-dressers, and those who lie between the traditional identity and transsexual (as someone seeking hormonal and sex-reassignment surgery) and the male transvestite (Bolin, 1994, p. 465).

In recent years there has been a proliferation of interest in transgendered individuals, as just defined, in the popular press (Bornstein, 1994; Chermayeff, David & Richardson, 1995; Feinberg, 1996; Fleisher, 1996; Brubach, 1999); the mass media with movies such as the *Crying Game*, *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Birdcage*, and *Paris is Burning*; and as evidenced in the emergence of cultural icons like RuPaul – recording artist, host of a national television show on VH1, and self-proclaimed super model of the world (RuPaul, 1995). Numerous academics have also seized the transgendered as a wonderful medium from which to critique and challenge dichotomous conceptualizations of gender and sexuality; e.g. male/female and gay/straight (Butler, 1990; Garber, 1992; Bergman, 1993; Ekins & King, 1996; Tewksbury & Gagne, 1996; Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997). In the broadest sense, the mere notion of the transgendered does seem to challenge many peoples' notions about what it means to be sexual and gendered in our society.

Nevertheless, the construction of this largely single “generic sematic space,” sometimes also referred to as a third gender or sex (Herdt, 1994), also simply casts a wide variety of very different individuals' motivations, experiences, and behaviors into one transgendered category, which is seen as seemingly having all sorts of subversive possibilities that ultimately challenge the pre-existing gender order (Butler, 1990; Garber, 1992; Feinberg, 1996; Lorber, 1994; Boswell, 2000). Apparently anyone who dons “gender inappropriate” attire is captured into the inclusive state of being transgendered replete with its own community. Not only does this falsely represent the very real diversity of those now relegated to the category transgendered, but the dominant culture, through this ever so pernicious sleight of hand, obfuscates, coopts, and often commodifies – sometimes to be sold as an exotic “other” – what

may or may not have been the original intent of those living what are seen as gender transgressive realities.

I believe much of this homogenous, all-encompassing conceptualization of the transgendered, at least in academic settings, is the result of many writers' and researchers' over-reliance on literary texts (movies and fictional books) and critiques of other writers' interpretations while simultaneously neglecting to fully consider the actual motivations and experiences of individuals living such realities (Butler, 1990; Epstein & Straub, 1991; Garber, 1992; Bergman, 1993; Baker, 1994; Harrower, 1995; Whittle, 1996; Schacht, 2000b). Although all of this important work has significantly added to the ongoing discourses on deconstructing gender and sexuality, its frequent failure to include the contextual motivations of those now called transgendered results in an incomplete understanding of the activity. Almost all this work has an exclusive emphasis on how outsiders view seemingly gender bending behaviors – subversive to the dominant culture's conceptualizations of gender – all the while neglecting to consider the actual intentions of those undertaking them. The resultant focus is that all such individuals, conveniently housed under the “danger-ahead” marker of the transgendered, are apparently real threats to the existing gender order. And yet, when actual studies are undertaken with transgenderists (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998; Devor, 1999), they strongly suggest that the majority of such individuals are quite content with preexisting notions of gender and sexuality, and have no intention of undermining present gender inequalities. This insight will be further explored in later sections of this chapter.

As the transgendered directly applies to drag queens, such individuals are not only often framed as subversive agents of gender, but perhaps because of this, they are also frequently presented as being stigmatized and peripheral in the both the larger cultural milieu and their own communities (Tewksbury, 1993, 1994; Baker, 1994; Ekins & King, 1996; Perkins, 1996). Esther Newton's (1979) *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, the only other ethnographic account of drag queens that I am aware of, is very representative of the approach of viewing drag queens as stigmatized outsiders. Though truly groundbreaking in subject matter and approach, unfortunately, the actual field-work portion of this study was undertaken in the mid-1960s, prior to Stonewall, with just professional female impersonators. This leads to Newton making observations such as, “professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world” (p. 3) and, overall, constructing an image of drag queens as cultural deviants.

While this may have in fact been true thirty years ago, such assertions are unequivocally not applicable to the numerous contexts in which I have been involved. In virtually every drag setting I have been in and/or participated, the

drag queens literally reign supreme and for the most part are held in the highest regard.<sup>4</sup> In the end, Newton's analysis, very much grounded in a traditional anthropological – functionalist – framework (p. 132), is more concerned with viewing female impersonators through the eyes of the dominant culture than understanding drag from the contextual intentions of such individuals or recognizing the important roles they play within the communities in which they dwell.

In sum, the following analysis departs from much of the present academic work on the transgendered and drag queens in three important ways. First, instead of using movies and/or fictional texts as data sources, the following is based upon my ongoing ethnographic experiences and involvement in several different drag contexts, which I believe results in a much different understanding of what contextually motivates certain men to do female drag. Largely as a result of this methodological stance, I refuse to simply label drag queens as transgendered individuals – those who explicitly or implicitly set out to challenge preexisting notions of gender – and instead recognize the quite conventional ways that these men realize contextual status from wearing women's attire. Finally, and quite related to these first two differences, instead of viewing drag queens as stigmatized individuals, I investigate cultural realms where such individuals are held in high regard and often reign supreme.

### **LOCATING FEMALE DRAG WITHIN THE MATRICES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

Social theorists are increasingly recognizing the relational and situational basis of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; Schacht, 1996). This outlook argues that whether one is doing masculinity or doing femininity, "the meanings attached to these social constructs can only be fully comprehended when they are simultaneously considered as relational contrasts of existence" (Schacht, 2000a, p. 254). In other words, the mere terms "male" or "female" have only limited meaning until they are compared against that which they are not supposed to be. Thus, to fully understand what it socially means to be a woman or a man in any given setting, not only should the actual gendered performance undertaken be considered, but its socially constructed antithesis, present or imagined, must be given equal consideration. To successfully perform being a man one must also have a very clear idea about what is not supposed to be performed: being a woman. The same can be said about presentations of sexuality. Doing heterosexuality only has limited meaning until one considers its socially constructed antithesis – homosexuality – and only then will a clear image of "straight" performance expectations emerge (Butler, 1991; Namaste, 1996; Schacht, 1998).

Nevertheless, just because one successfully undertakes a gendered (male or female) or sexual (gay or straight) presentation of self, this in no way ensures that one will have the same corresponding gender or sexual identity. For instance, one can very much think of oneself as a man yet convincingly present themselves as a woman (Schacht, 2000a), or think of oneself as gay but undertake compelling presentations of heterosexual conformity (Schacht, 2000b). When this occurs, an ostensibly contradictory form of embodiment occurs wherein the given individual undertakes a presentation of self that is apparently at odds with one's personally claimed identity; e.g. the masculine embodiment of the feminine (Schacht, in press) or the homosexual embodiment of the heterosexual. By recognizing seemingly contradictory forms of embodiment, a different understanding of the intent and the motivation of those undertaking a given gender or sexuality performance is derived.

Of course, like all public presentations of self, one must also consider the targeted audience for which the performance is undertaken, as they ultimately determine if one accomplishes the desired gendered or sexual presentation of self. In other words, how successful one is in performing a given gender or sexuality is always relationally dependent upon a situational audience of gendered and sexual others. It is through our interaction with these others that we come to experience ourselves as gendered and sexual beings. As this discussion applies to those doing female drag, everyone present (except for an outsider who might by accident wander into the given setting) knows that they are self-identified men – individuals with penises – who are attempting to present themselves as women (typically heterosexual) in image and demeanor. How successful one is in doing female drag then becomes wholly dependent on the audience's normative expectations about gender and sexuality in the context and how well the given performer fulfills them. Thus, what may understandably appear to outsiders as some sort of seditious presentation of self, when viewed from the eyes of the insiders of the setting, the performance is actually often quite customary, normatively conventional, and, as I will argue later in this paper, frequently more reflective than transgressive of the dominant culture's ideals of gender and sexuality.

Over the past eight years of my involvement in several different venues where female drag is undertaken, I have identified what I see as four emergent renditions of doing female drag: high brow female impersonators, female illusionists, professional glamor queens, and professional camp queens. While these are not proposed as mutually exclusive or exhaustive categories – as reflected in Mark Finley, an individual performer can actually undertake several forms – to me they have experientially felt like noticeably different types of doing female drag.<sup>5</sup> To better assess differences and similarities of those doing female drag,

each of these proposed types of female drag is analyzed using the following criteria: (1) the gender and sexual identities of the given participant; (2) what type of female drag image the participant is attempting to perform; (3) the gender and sexual identities of the audience and their contextual expectations of the performer; (4) what types of embodiment situationally results; and where appropriate, (5) issues of race and class of the participants are also considered. When such individual and situational considerations are made, I believe a different understanding of doing female drag results wherein radically different, non-dichotomous identities would have to be envisioned and embodied to seriously challenge existing gender inequalities. This assertion will be revisited in this chapter's concluding section.

#### *High Brow Female Impersonators*

One of the longest standing, formally organized venues for doing female drag found in United States is the Imperial Court System. Recently renamed the International Court System, it can also be viewed as one of the first gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual (glbt) groups in the world. Founded in 1965 by Jose Sarria<sup>6</sup> (a.k.a. Queen Mother of the International Court System, Empress I Jose, and the Widow Norton) the court system is a charitable organization made up of 65 local chapters (called courts or baronies) found throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, and England. While the stated purpose of the ICS is to operate as a charitable organization for the given community in which it is located, courts also serve as an important conduit for gay and lesbian individuals to do drag and as a venue for formal affiliation and personal esteem (largely in the form of various drag titles; i.e. empress, emperor, princess, and prince) often unavailable to such individuals in the dominant culture. Although the ICS membership is open to everyone, regardless of their gender or sexual identity, almost all members are gay and lesbian with gay men almost entirely holding the positions of empress and princess. Titleholders, especially past and present empresses, are seen as group leaders who personally oversee all events sponsored by the given court. All participants wear gender attire consistent with their station (i.e. female for empress and princess, male for emperor and prince) that often is quite formal – high brow – and hyper-gendered in appearance and intent (i.e. tuxedos and lavish, expensive gowns).

Since 1994 I have been involved in the Imperial Sovereign Court of Spokane<sup>7</sup>, and for an almost four year period (1995–1998), I was an active, full participant and member of this setting (for more detailed discussions of the court system, and the role I played in this specific setting, see Schacht 1998, 2000a). During this period I became close friends with over a dozen of the core participants



of the group and once donned female drag myself (Schacht, in press). While those doing female drag in this setting often present glamorous (glam), compelling images of traditional (often quite conservative) femininity, they are entirely self-identified as gay men, and the only time they wear female attire is for formal court functions and shows. All but one of the court members during the time I was involved was White, with the exception being one Black female impersonator who was somewhat of a marginalized group token. Most come from solidly middle-class and above backgrounds. They perform (lip-sync and dance to songs by female recording artists) in front of an audience of other gay drag queens, gay drag kings, lesbian drag kings, and lesbian drag queens (Schacht, 1998) at a local gay bar in Spokane, WA called Pumps II (except for the yearly coronation that is held at an upscale hotel). During shows sponsored by the ISCS, audience members are expected to approach the stage and tip the various performers. These monies are then collected and given to whatever group for which the fundraiser is being held.

In the ISCS, like all the courts I am familiar with, the drag queens are seen as the group's best performers and its rightful leaders. In the role of reigning or past empress, the queens of court are responsible for the planning of all court sponsored shows with the best serving as emcees at these events. While they take center stage, gay drag kings (the masculine appearing personas of the group) play a supportive, often behind-the-scenes role (Schacht, 1998). Serving as "dressers" (personal attendants who help their chosen queen change outfits), "seamstresses" (doing almost all the beadwork and sewing of gowns), stagehands (responsible for the assembling and taking down of stages for more extravagant events), and "escorts" (almost like a prop) when tipping other performers, in both image and behavior, gay drag kings are very much the drag queens subordinates. Moreover, both the lesbian drag kings and lesbian drag queens of the court also often play similar supportive, secondary roles in this setting (Schacht, forthcoming). Veiled beneath multiple layers of the feminine, the drag queens of the court literally reign supreme over all present.

As such, the men in the court doing female drag can very much be seen as undertaking the masculine embodiment of the feminine. These female impersonators view doing drag as a means to garner power and authority in the setting; the most "elegant" and "tastefully" done female impersonators of the court are its venerated leaders. They merely view doing female drag as a tool, its physical image the real estate, for realizing and exercising masculine dominance over other court members. In fact, many of the gay drag queens in this setting have expressed quite misogynist sentiments about real women – often called "rg's" (real girls) and "fish," with even straight female friends being referred to as "fag hags." Some even go as far to say they make better women than women<sup>8</sup>, and

as previously noted, the only time they wear feminine attire is for formal court functions (many have told me they dislike wearing women's clothing and when outside of this setting most can and sometimes do pass as straight men).

It can also be argued that since the drag queens of the court self-identify as gay men, their resultant performance is a form of the homosexual embodiment of the heterosexual. That is, when gay drag queens are relationally viewed alongside their masculine appearing counterparts, especially gay drag kings, an image of heterosexual conformity emerges. This is most clearly seen when empresses and princesses are escorted by their emperor or prince. In fact, a drag queen's appearance is most compellingly "real" when it appears alongside a hyper-masculine appearing gay drag king – as an escort or attendant – as *he* provides the appropriate contrast to *her* striking feminine beauty. Regardless, I believe that any resultant images of heterosexuality are more about trying to imitate and seemingly live privileged images of regal prestige and authority – through conjoined empresses and emperors – than challenging any notions of what it means to be gay or straight in the dominant culture. After all, it is in concert with the gendered performances of others present, that all members of the setting, and the drag queens in particular, come to experience the various events staged as status conferring. While the drag queens of the court oversee an affirming, safe haven of sorts where they are able to garner respect and power from their minions, they are far more conventional and supportive than transgressive of accepted societal notions of gender or sexuality.

#### *Female Illusionists*

By far the most "beautiful" and compellingly "real" appearing female impersonators that I have come in contact with are what I am terming female illusionists.<sup>9</sup> My involvement with these individuals has almost been entirely at a performance venue called the Baton Show Lounge<sup>10</sup> (in Chicago, IL) and a yearly beauty pageant sponsored by the show lounge owner called the Miss Continental.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, I am also aware of similar female impersonators of this type in Las Vegas, New York City, Boston, Miami, and in many other large cities throughout the United States and Canada.<sup>12</sup> In a sense, these individuals can somewhat be viewed as preoperative transsexuals, as almost all of them take female hormones, have had electrolysis to remove unwanted facial and body hair, many have had breast implants, and undertaken an array of other cosmetic surgery techniques to physically appear as women. Female illusionists differ from preops, however, in that none expresses any desire to undertake the final operation to become a transsexual: removal of the penis<sup>13</sup> replaced with a surgically constructed vagina and/or to legally become a woman.

At least in the context of the Miss Continental and the Baton Show Lounge (where almost all the performers are former titleholders), some of this expressed acknowledgment of having a penis may be the result of pageant rules that clearly specify that all past or present titleholders must have a penis and should they become a female transsexual, they would be stripped of their title.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, given that female illusionists often make a good living performing (Mimi Marks of the Baton reportedly makes upwards of \$250,000 a year) there is strong monetary incentive to keep one's penis, and all explicitly perform as such.

However, given that these individuals have undertaken such a radical and permanent transformation of physical appearance, many convincingly pass in public as women. Many also state that they are only interested in dating straight men.<sup>15</sup> Given many heterosexual men's desire to date and have as partners physically "beautiful" women, as defined by the larger dominant culture, several of these female illusionists appear to have no problems attracting such men. Thus, ironically, while all these individuals professionally perform as explicitly acknowledged men impersonating women, in their personal lives many seemingly do live as heterosexual women in appearance and apparent dating preference. Note should also be made that while most of the contestants and all of the winners of recent Miss Continental Pageants have been Black and/or Latino, the biggest stars of the Baton and the pageant are Mimi Marks (Miss Continental, 1992) and Monica Munroe (Miss Continental, 1993). Both are White and appear as large-breasted, bleached blonde performers, and they perhaps epitomize an image of what being a woman is seen as in this setting.

Female illusionists perform both individual and production routines, which involves lip-syncing and dancing to predominantly popular songs sung by exclusively female recording artists. These songs typically emphasize contemporary notions of what it means to be a woman in our society (e.g. Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman"). Typical attire worn is suggestive and includes tight-fitting dresses, immaculately coiffured hair (almost always wigs) and applied makeup, high heel shoes and boots (most four inches or taller), and large sparkling earrings, bracelets, and necklaces. Female illusionists almost always adopt a hyper-feminine demeanor – small tipsy steps, sashaying hips, quivering lips, and accentuated but delicate hand movements. Yet they still often give energetic performances with some utilizing high leg kicks and doing cartwheels and the splits during their routines.

Notwithstanding the yearly pageant and Sunday nights at the show lounge,<sup>16</sup> the female illusionists of the Baton perform for largely straight (over 90%), predominantly female (over 80%) audiences. The lounge holds over 300 people (charged \$10 a piece with a two drink minimum), and as most shows sell-out

(held three times nightly), reservations are suggested with some patrons making them weeks, even months in advance. Many in attendance are celebrating birthdays or holding bachelorette parties; during one show I counted over thirteen such groups of women, often signified by the bride-to-be wearing her veil. Of the half dozen audience members I have spoken with about why they come to the Baton, most have responded that it is a “fun,” “different,” “entertaining” way to spend an evening.

When the performers are up on stage doing their routines, audience members are expected to come up and tip, typically in the form of one or more one dollar bills. While most women are given a cordial smile in return for their tip, I have seen a couple treated in a rather harsh manner with the performer refusing their money. In one case, a culturally attractive, large-breasted woman pointed to her own breasts, and appeared to be saying “mine are real” while attempting to tip Monica Munroe. In response, Monica took her dollar bill, threw it on the stage, kicked the bill back at her and then continued on with her performance, securing tips from other audience members as if nothing had happened. In a different instance, another culturally attractive, young (and quite blonde) bride-to-be attempted to tip Mimi Marks, who continually and overtly refused her money until finally the young woman gave the dollar to a friend from whom Mimi then accepted it. In both of these instances, I felt these women overtly, or in image alone, threw into question who was “fairest-in-the-land” and ultimately in control of the activities being undertaken.

In a sense, since many audience members are themselves young, culturally attractive women, during every show a seemingly high stakes contest occurs over who can appear to be the most “real” woman. While the female illusionists almost always “win,” those who in action or image seemingly question this expected outcome must obviously be put in their place and situationally subordinated. I believe to do otherwise would not only undermine the very real power that the performers’ exercise in this context, but it would also diminish the audience appeal of the shows – men as the *most* beautiful and glamorous women you will ever meet.

On the other hand, men, especially apparently straight ones,<sup>17</sup> typically are given warm, sexually flirtatious attention from the performers. Perhaps part of this is the function of men often giving the performer several one dollar bills (usually \$5–\$10, although one evening I witnessed one apparently straight man<sup>18</sup> from the audience pass out several thousand dollars to various performers, much of it in \$100 bills), whereas women in the audience typically just give a dollar bill at a time. Regardless, although men are a notable minority in the audience, the performers frequently use them as an additional performance prop by almost always taking their money in an overtly seductive manner. A resultant

sexual tension between the illusionist and the man tipping emerges with the man often becoming nervous and/or embarrassed ultimately appearing like some teenager caught staring at someone on whom he has a crush. This interactive performance of sorts seems to clearly frame and further highlight how beautiful they are in explicitly (and quite important given the audience) heterosexual terms.

In sum, although the female illusionists of the Baton present and perform compelling images of female beauty, they still do so as acknowledged men. Everyone present is aware that the performers have a penis, and during almost every show the emcee will make some joking note of this fact with comments such as, "I bet you wonder what we have done with it . . . that's a trade secret." Moreover, the performers very much expect audience members to pay homage to their glamorous hyper-feminine image in the form of adulation and tips. Those audience members who potentially throw into question who is "fairest-in-the-land," are ridiculed, summarily dismissed, and/or ignored. Under the focusing light of a single spotlight, often with additional flashing stage lights to frame their performance, female illusionists very much take center stage and expect all present to accordingly appreciate how "fabulous" and "flawless" they are; ultimately they demand unequivocal contextual respect and wield considerable authority over all in attendance. Combined with the largely indifferent, sometimes subordinating treatment of women and the coquettish attention given the men (especially apparently straight ones) in the audience, I am left to conclude that they, too, are partaking in a form of the masculine embodiment of the feminine and the gay embodiment of the straight.

#### *Professional Glamour Queens*

When most people think of female impersonators, it is probably the image of what I am calling professional glamour queens that most often comes to mind. This is by far the most popular form of doing female drag, and accordingly, I have attended shows staged by professional glamour queens in over a dozen cities throughout North America. All of the shows I have attended were put on by expressed gay men in acknowledged glbt clubs/bars; nevertheless, often a fairly large straight audience will be in attendance on show nights. While a few of the professional glamour queens I have met perform on a full-time basis and purportedly make an income they can live on, since most clubs/bars I have frequented only have female impersonator performances on a limited basis (one to three nights a week), most have additional, typically full-time jobs to supplement their often meager drag incomes.

Although a fair amount of my experience with professional glamour queens has been primarily as an audience member, when I initially started my ethnography of female impersonators in 1993 in Springfield, MO, I became an active participant in one of the local drag venues called Club 1105.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, over a nine month period this involved me becoming friends with several of the club's female impersonators and serving as a judge for a regional Miss Gay Missouri Pageant. I also became close friends with one individual performer in particular, Danielle Lamour, who was the club's show director and at that time had been a professional glamour queen for over seven years.<sup>20</sup> Danielle was my first teacher on the intricacies of doing female impersonation; she was the first drag queen that I witnessed transform from a man to a woman in image, prior to several shows in a dressing room at the club. Since I believe she very much can be viewed as an ideal type of this form of professional drag, her motivations for and ways of doing female drag will loosely provide the basis of the rest of this section.

From the numerous conversations I had with Danielle about being a female impersonator, initially in the form of depth-interviews to the more open dialogue we would subsequently have as friends, four prevalent themes emerged. All of these are quite consistent with the sentiments I would later hear in other settings where professional impersonators performed. First and foremost, as she stated to me on numerous occasions, doing female impersonation for Danielle was about being in control and having power; i.e. she told me that she "loved the feeling of being up on stage . . . with the spotlight and everyone's attention focused on me" and performing in a setting where "it's all about me."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as head drag queen (club show director) and show emcee, she loved that "no one in the crowd audience would ever dare fuck with Danielle, or any of the other queens." In a sense, Club 1105 provided Danielle with a stage where brandishing a microphone and donning glamorous female attire, she derived almost absolute contextual power over a largely appreciative and admiring audience of (albeit situationally subordinate) others. Any parties present who disliked Danielle (a few personally did) knew to either leave or to keep their mouths shut in her presence. All of this was in direct contrast to Danielle's other jobs as a "boy" – janitor and part-time bartender at the club – both of which she despised as she felt they were "shit" jobs.

Second, Danielle felt there were concrete standards by which all female impersonators should be judged. For her, the best queens were ones that 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 glamour and beauty found in most women's fashion magazines; e.g. looked

like a super model. Or, as she more simply stated to me on several occasions, the best female impersonators are “beautiful chicks with dicks,” and really “make better women than women do.”

Third, Danielle felt being a female impersonator was an excellent way to pickup guys, especially straight ones. Accordingly, she reported that many of her previous boyfriends had been straight men, and when we first met, she spent a great deal of time hitting on me until it eventually became clear that my interests in her were truly research oriented.<sup>22</sup> Like the female illusionists, handsome men (both straight and gay) were given special attention during shows by Danielle and seemingly used as an appropriate contrast for such an attractive appearing “woman.” Finally, because of the situational power that doing drag gave her, Danielle (like scores of female impersonators I have met over the years) dreamed she eventually would do drag on a more full-time basis, truly making a living as a female impersonator.

Danielle and numerous other professional glamour queens I have met very much personify a form of masculine embodiment of the feminine. The allure of the idealized, hyper-feminine image they portray is used as a vehicle to not only garner situational power and authority in the setting in which they perform, but also to solicit sexual partners, especially straight men who are viewed by many – including many masculine appearing gay men I have met in these contexts – as the ultimate conquest. Whether it be a specific male audience member for whom special attention is directed, or an actual boyfriend that escorts his queen, such men as contrasts (especially attractive and/or straight ones) provide a resultant image of heterosexual conformity and highlight how powerful a queen is in a given setting. In a sense, such men are a “must” fashion accessory that every venerated professional glamour queen should have.

#### *Professional Camp Queens*

Camp is seen 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 (Babuscio, 1993). Camp also symbolically serves as a form of gay sub-cultural argot that can be used to differentiate insiders from outsiders (Bergman, 1993). To varying degrees, all of the aforementioned types of female impersonators previously discussed could be conceptualized as sometimes undertaking forms of a camp presentation of self. That is, nearly every drag queen I have met has at least one, sometimes several camp routines in their performance repertoires.

Moreover, many drag venues (including the Baton Show Lounge) have at least one camp performer in their cast who often serves as an emcee.

What differentiates professional camp queens from the previous forms of doing female drag proposed in this paper is that while the latter almost always has an explicit and very serious emphasis on capturing idealized cultural images of hyper-feminine beauty, notions of feminine beauty are of little or no concern for camp queens. Instead, queens of the camp genre typically utilize exaggerated images of femininity as props to largely play the role of stand-up comedian. Or, using Fleisher's (1996) "plumage scale" conceptualization of drag (attire and demeanor utilized) camp queens would be viewed as "clowns" versus "glamour" queens on the other end of the scale. Many professional camp queens use campy stage names that immediately let the audience know what sort of performer they are; i.e. Cleo Taurus, Craven Morehead, Alice Phallus, Miss Understood, Hedda Lettuce, and so forth. The best professional camp performers are always quite witty and have a stage acumen that enables them to always be ready with a cutting remark or gesture to be directed at anyone present. This perhaps explains why such individuals make wonderful emcees, as they are quite efficient at dealing with any unruly or unwelcome audience members.

There are several well known professional camp queens that I have seen perform and met that I could use as an example of this type of female impersonator; e.g. Lady Bunny, who organizes and emcees the annual drag festival Wigstock in New York City. However, one camp queen named Darcel, who I have seen perform several times, I believe best exemplifies this form of drag. Darcel, also known as Darcel XV and owner of a club in Portland, Oregon under this same name (where, like the Baton, shows are staged for largely straight, female audiences), was a friend and sometimes performance partner with Divine – perhaps the most quintessential of all camp queens – before her death. She also organizes a yearly drag pageant for aspiring professional glamour queens called the Le Fem Magnifique, held every Labor Day Weekend (the same dates as Wigstock and the Miss Continental Pageant) in Portland. Darcel also sometimes travels with the performers of the club she owns (all professional glamour queens) to put on shows at selected gay clubs throughout the Pacific Northwest region.

Like many professional camp queens, Darcel is a very large individual that, especially as a female impersonator, would be considered extremely overweight. While her attire and applied makeup are both without question quite feminine – she always has a heavily painted face and sometimes dons nearly see through negligee – in comparison to all previous types of drag discussed, issues of appearing as "real" as possible as a skinny but shapely beautiful woman are obviously not of concern. Instead, the image she most emulates is that of a



very large, quite feminine appearing middle-aged women with tasteless fashion sense. Such an appearance is very befitting the raunchy often outright misogynist dialogue she undertakes as an emcee and a performer. For instance, two typical jokes I have heard her state on several occasions are as follows: (1) What does 80 year old pussy taste like? Depends.; (2) Would have been completely different outcomes if Mama Cass would have just shared half of her sandwich with Karen Carpenter. In between her rounds of standup comedy she also likes to single out male audience members, especially attractive straight ones, after routines by glamorous performers in her group in an attempt to embarrass them in front of the rest of the crowd. She is typically quite successful in doing this, with responses from these individuals and the audience becoming an important part of the show.

Darcel, like every other professional camp queen I have seen perform, also undertakes a form of masculine embodiment of the feminine. While there is no concern for adherence to glamorous images of the feminine – Darcel is somewhat sloven in appearance whereas the guise of other professional camp queens, such as Lady Bunny, is more about exaggerated, almost cartoon caricatures of women – the outward presentation of self is still unequivocally feminine. In this case, like a middle-aged housewife who has “let herself go” physically. Yet from this seemingly helpless image emerges a powerful voice that will do battle, and win, with anyone present.

This aesthetic irony, of course, is part of what makes the performance campy and humorous. Nevertheless, it is once again buried under layers of the feminine that camp performers situationally exercise decidedly male control and dominance over other drag queens – professional glamor queens for Darcel – and all audience members. Accordingly, otherwise cultural dominants in the audience, straight men, often are embarrassed and belittled in a manner in which they have no choice but to grin and bear the harassing comments directed their way. I would also argue that when professional glamour queens are indirectly used to this end, it reinforces notion of heterosexuality and could once again be considered a homosexual embodiment of the heterosexual.

## **TOWARDS A SITUATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER**

... he prefers to dress up, go out in drag, get lots of attention, then go home, take it all off, and be done with it. How tedious – how relentless – it must be, he imagines, to be a woman, someone who is looked at all the time (Bruback, 1999, p. 117).

I don't think being a woman, being a female is necessarily it. Rather, it's centered in the power of the icon, and people's need for images, strong images. Because drag is like sitting

in a Sherman tank. It has power, and you're driving that motherfucker. That's where drag is going; that's where the best of drag has always been (Interview with Matthu and Zally, in Chermayeff, David & Richardson, 1995, p. 71).

From my ethnographic involvement in these various drag contexts, like many researchers in this area, I have also come to experientially appreciate that sexuality and gender are anything but innate, fixed, or concrete realities that individuals merely embody and are in fact fluid, continuously ongoing performances that we accomplish in concert with others. Nevertheless, while doing gender and sexuality is a form of imitation and performance wherein the individual actor enacts being either male or female, gay or straight, my analysis of various types of female drag throws into question expected outcomes of such presentations of self. That is, if a self-identified man convincingly presents himself as a woman, a culturally beautiful or a disheveled one, yet still strongly identifies with being a man, then what results is a masculine embodiment of the feminine. The additional homosexual embodiment of the heterosexual – gay identified men presenting images of heterosexual conformity – that often is undertaken by those doing female drag is used to further reinforce the seemingly innateness of the image they are performing which often results in more compelling and convincing images of the feminine.

As I initially encountered the above types of doing female impersonation over the past few years I honestly felt I would actually find very different reasons for why the given type of drag is undertaken. In the final analysis, however, shrouded beneath various layers of the feminine, those doing female drag (at least those discussed in this paper) are seeking and often exercising male authority and ultimately embodying a status of relational superiority to all present in the various venues they perform.

Thus, while I would hold that all the types of individuals doing female drag discussed in this paper are gender traitors of sorts, in that they somewhat disparage most members of the dominant culture's understanding of what being male and female is or should be, they are anything but gender anarchists. To the contrary, they use images of the feminine as the real estate upon which they garner adoration, respect, and power from the various audiences in which their performances are situationally undertaken. As such, in a society that often marginalizes and forcibly oppresses gay men, drag contexts can provide an important safe haven of sorts where female impersonators can realize feelings of affirmation, interpersonal power, and self-esteem. However, in no way do those doing female drag realistically subvert existing gender hierarchies; instead, they still enact gender as dichotomous practice, although typically inverted in appearance, where images of the feminine are still employed to realize male

dominance. Despite their stigmatized sexual identity and undertaking what most contextual outsiders in our society (especially men) would see as a shameful presentation of self – a man appearing or acting like a woman – by reenacting and ultimately imitating and internalizing the misogyny and homophobia of the dominant culture, gay female impersonators, too, can cash in their “patriarchal dividend . . . [an] advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 79).

That it is gay men who are most adept at accomplishing this seemingly paradoxical feat – realizing masculine authority and power utilizing mere images of the feminine – is perhaps not that surprising. After all, many of the trend-setters and recognized leaders of the worldwide fashion industry are gay men who also use images of the feminine (now applied to actual women’s bodies) as a means to gain wealth and fame all the while ironically telling straight men in the larger dominant cultural what they should find sexually desirable and attractive. And while the business executive who uses the beautiful wife as an arm-pie to attest to his power is seen as quite obvious in his intent, his seeming antithesis, the drag queen – in some cases now seemingly appearing as his beautiful wife – is situationally also able to exercise masculine power. In either case, as images or actual physical bodies, women are still ultimately being exploited as tools for doing masculinity, power, and dominance. The true power of the icon found in female drag – whether it be the beautiful wife or the beautiful female impersonator – is that both are being “driven” by men.

Writing this paper has been difficult for me as the frequent critical tone I take about female impersonators has often made me feel like I was betraying many of the significant friendships I have made over the years in the various drag contexts in which I have been involved. To be clear, I very much acknowledge and personally fight against the very real oppression glbt individuals experience in our society.<sup>23</sup> I also recognize that the same oppressive attitudes they expose and behaviors they undertake are imitations of larger mechanisms of oppression. In return for their complicity in women’s subordination, female impersonators are given contextual male privilege and authority. It truly saddens me that seemingly the only way that the oppressed can experience affirmation, status and esteem in the hegemony of our present society is by finding someone else – another group in the matrices of categorical inequality – to oppress. An egalitarian future will be never be realized until people learn to view each other in diverse (versus dichotomous), non-hierarchical terms, regardless of the given individual’s apparent gender or sexuality, and will not simply be accomplished with new frocks that insidiously veil the real intentions of those donning them – masculine power.

## NOTES

1. Most significantly, I was a member of and full participant in the ISCS from 1994 to 1998. During this time I attended well over 100 different court shows and events – most in Spokane, although I have on several occasions also walked with the ISCS at court functions in Missoula, MT and Seattle, WA (see Schacht, 1998 and 2000a for more detailed discussions of my role in this setting). In addition, I have served as a judge for the 1993 Miss Gay Queen City Pageant in Springfield, MO; was an invited attendee of the 1996 Miss Continental Pageant in Chicago, IL (promoted as the largest, most prestigious female impersonator pageant in North America); attended the 1998 Wigstock celebration in New York City. I have also attended a multitude of various drag functions and shows in Bellingham, WA; Portland, OR; New York City, Buffalo, and Plattsburgh, NY; Burlington, VT; Huntington, WV; Minneapolis, MN; Boston, MA; Washington, DC; and Montreal, Quebec. In several of these cities – Seattle, New York City, Huntington, Springfield, and Spokane – I have attended shows at multiple venues (e.g. at two or more clubs/bars).

2. Transsexuals are individuals who desire or have undertaken a complete sex change operation, while transvestites are predominantly straight men who dress in women's attire often in private for erotic purposes (Woodhouse, 1989; Hirschfeld, 1991; Bullough & Bullough 1993; Raymond 1994).

3. Unlike the female impersonators interviewed by Tewksbury (1993, 1994), who rejected the label of "drag queens," in almost every drag context I have been involved, participants have used these terms interchangeably, as I do in this chapter. Even in the setting of the Baton (to be discussed shortly) where on stage they call themselves "female illusionists," in informal discussions I have had with various performers, they have also frequently referred to themselves as "queens" and "drag queens." Speculating, I believe some of this apparent attitude change might be the function of several popular movies about drag queens in the 1990s.

4. Part of my differing perspective is arguably the result of the cultural commercialization of drag queens during the 1990s. I also believe part of this disparity, especially concerning more recent studies, is the result of me assuming a contextual insider role in many drag settings. The drag queens I know strongly resist any notion that their activity is deviant (consistent with Tewksbury, 1993), nor are they treated as stigmatized individuals in the various venues they perform.

5. Moreover, as they are entirely based upon my extensive but still limited experiences in various drag contexts, I am quite sure other equally meaningful emergent types of doing female drag can be conceptualized.

6. For a wonderful biography of Jose Sarria's life as a gay activist, see Gorman's (1998) *The Empress is a Man*.

7. The ISCS has been in existence for nearly 30 years and is reported to be the first and thus oldest glbt organization in Spokane, WA.

8. Over the years I have heard this sentiment of men making better women than women in numerous drag contexts.

9. My reason for using this term is twofold. First, I have heard participants of this type of female drag often refer to themselves as female illusionists. Second, almost all female illusionists present a nearly flawless image of cultural ideals of feminine beauty. In other words, they can and often do pass as "real" women in public settings.

10. Most of the following discussing in this section is based upon informal discussions I have had with various performers and bartenders at the Baton. I also had several insightful conversations with a number of contestants at the Miss Continental Pageant I attended.

11. Also held every year in Chicago, the Miss Continental pageant is now in its twentieth year of operation and is the culmination of over thirty preliminary events held throughout the United States and Canada from which over forty contestants are now drawn each year. It is held over two nights every Labor Day weekend, and is nearly identical to many other beauty pageants, as contestants compete in the events of swimwear, evening gowns, and talent (which accounts for 50% of the competitor's score).

12. The drag queen, The Lady Chablis, from the book and movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is perhaps the most widely known individual of this performance genre. She performs as a drag queen – someone with acknowledged penis or “candy” as she calls it-but otherwise lives as a woman always wearing women's attire (Chablis, 1996).

13. Female illusionists “tuck” their penis's by pushing their testicles up into their lower groin sockets, pushing their penis backwards, covering with some fabric (called a gaff by some), and then taping their genitals into place. While some female impersonators also undertake this practice, this is reportedly much easier for female illusionists, as taking female hormones shrinks both one's penis and testicles often leaving the individual impotent. Regardless of the type of female impersonator, tucking often makes sitting an artful practice – carefully sitting on the edge of a chair with upright posture – which often appears as quite feminine in manner.

14. Throughout the mid-1990s numerous performers from the Baton, most former Miss Continentals, appeared on virtually every imaginable television talk show as self-identified men who professionally perform as women. One of these shows, by Maury Povich, had audience members try to figure out who were the “real” men and women out of nine guests all appearing as women. I have also used a videotape of this show in my classes, and my students, like the audience members, have failed miserably in discerning who is “really” male or female.

15. Although not as explicitly stated, many drag queens and gay men in general in all the various contexts I have been involved have expressed similar sentiments about “bagging” “virgin” straight men. As many gay men are attracted to hyper-masculine appearing men (Levine, 1998), this is perhaps not that surprising. From my observations, drag queens (and especially female illusionists) do appear to have a decided advantage over masculine appearing gay men in attracting straight men as sexual partners.

16. When I attended the Miss Continental Pageant in 1996, most of the over 3000 people in attendance were gay men and a few non-competing drag queens. Of the nearly two dozen times I have attended shows at the Baton over the years it had always been on a Wednesday through a Saturday. The last time I attended a show (summer 1999), I went on a Sunday night to find a much smaller, almost exclusively gay and lesbian audience. Similar to shows put on at the Baton during the Miss Continental Pageant, the bar's atmosphere was very different with a decided welcoming feel like many gay bars I have frequented. Accordingly, performers have told me Wednesday through Saturday are trade/money nights, Sunday is their community night.

17. The reason that I believe these men are straight is threefold: (1) these are men from the tables in the audience who are sitting with women; (2) to varying degrees,

they become embarrassed when tipping while a gay man tipping a queen, seldom shows any emotion other than gratitude or respect (these men, sometimes boyfriends, sit on stools at the bar); and (3) it is contextually assumed by both the bartenders and performers that male audience members at tables are mostly straight men while those at the bar are mostly gay.

18. This man appeared to be in his late 30's to early 40's, strode into the bar with a provocatively appearing woman on his arm smoking a very large cigar. He stood at the bar leering at the various performers selectively giving money to his favorite performers for one set and then left. After the set, the various folks – bartenders and performers – I spoke with had no idea who he was and appeared sincerely shocked at the amount of money he had tipped.

19. This club was a gay bar-complex of sorts with a small front bar, where older male patrons often sat, a leather/S & M back bar, and a main bar with a large stage where the queens performed. Drag shows were staged on Tuesday, Thursday, and some Saturday's nights. Audiences for shows were a mix of gay and straight folks while other nights, when a DJ played, audiences were largely gay and lesbian. Perhaps one exception to this was Friday, which was officially college night at the bar. The queens and regulars all joked that many of the men who frequented the bar this evening were pretty fraternity boys who came out to show off their bodies and "play being gay" while Saturdays was their "date night" with sorority sisters. Having seen many fraternity members at the 1105 on Fridays, some wearing their letters, I am guessing there was some truth in their joke. The club went out of business shortly after I left in 1993.

20. The year after I moved from Springfield, Danielle went on to become Miss Gay Missouri 1994 and placed in the top ten of that year's national pageant. Note should be made that just prior to my meeting Danielle, she had been a professional female impersonator in what she called a "show bar" in Pensacola, FL. While she only made limited monies as a performer, she told me that she made great money (\$20 an individual) and had lots of fun giving "blow jobs" to "straight" men from the nearby naval base who frequented her place of employment on a regular basis.

21. Over the years I heard this sentiment expressed on numerous occasions by many different female impersonators. In fact, one of the queens in the ISCS in Spokane has a car licence plate holder that reads "It is all about me."

22. Some of her overt sexual overtures towards me as an acknowledged straight man were probably also the result of my own homophobia and sexist outlooks and being quite nervous when initially interacting with her. Thus, once I was able to try to overcome my own limiting stereotypes and started to interact with her with confidence and true sincerity, we were subsequently able to become close friends. Over the years I have also found that emulating the behavior of gay men when tipping and being in a gay bar or drag venue (e.g. being respectful and appreciative of the drag queens and receptive to any overtures of affection, such as hugs and kisses) combined with extensive knowledge about various drag scenes quickly gets me identified as a welcomed insider in most new settings I enter.

23. Over a four year period (1995–1998) when I was a complete member of the ISCS, and most actively involved in the group, as a form of acknowledged community outreach, I brought well over a 150 different "straight" students of mine to various drag shows and events (Schacht, 1998). Since beginning this ethnography in Springfield, MO, over the past seven years I have brought a total of well over 250 different students and friends to drag shows and glbt bars throughout North America. For most, it is their first time in

a glbt setting, while for some, it is the first time they have knowingly interacted with a glbt individual. No one has ever reported to me not having a good time, with many asking that I include them the next time I attend a show. Moreover, by typically attending drag shows with an entourage of tipping customers, in nearly every setting I have been treated with the utmost respect; i.e. frequently bar owners or drag queens will reserve the better seats and sometimes entire tables for the “straight folks” that accompany me and make public note of how wonderful it is to have the group present.

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