

“Don’t Call Him A Cowboy”: Masculinity, Cowboy Drag, and A Costume Change

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Abstract

Informed by feminism and theories of masculinity and space, this ethnography explores how gay men negotiate hegemonic masculinity in a country-western gay bar, focusing specifically on how the bar’s clientele use dress as a marker of hegemonic masculinity and how bar patrons change their dress (and consequently their masculinity) as they migrate to other bars in the city. By examining social practices and cultural descriptions, the author is able to discern how gay men engaged in a negotiation process that included both acquiescence and opposition to heteromale ideologies which simultaneously reinforce and challenge hegemonic masculinity but always remain connected to symbolic power, strength, and self worth as gay men.

KEYWORDS: *Gay, Masculinity, Leisure, Cowboy, Dress*

Introduction

The journey is only 1.1 miles from my studio apartment to Saddlebags. As I turn onto 12th Avenue I peer in through the windows of the independently owned queer bookstore that sits nestled comfortably on the corner to my right. One couple in their early twenties sits on the small corner patio bench smoking cigarettes. As I pass them one of the men leans over and steals a long soft kiss from the man holding his hand.

I pass Promenade Park on my left, one of the most popular urban parks in the city. Promenade Park serves as a host to public events like movies on the lawn, music festivals, art and craft shows, fundraising initiatives, and the Southeastern United States’s largest gay pride festival. This entire area of the city is more than queer-friendly, as it is dominated by the gay men, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people who live, work, and play in this geographic location.

Considering the large gay male population in the city and the diversity of the gay male community, I should not have been surprised that there were over 25 gay bars to select from as a site for my research. Consider a few of this community’s choices: Gary’s, a trendy neighborhood bar flaunting its central location on the park and offering the latest surge in gay/lesbian television programming and video dance remixes; Glenn’s, a more rustic neighborhood bar focusing on Karaoke and commercialized promotional events; Sinners, a dark, gay male exclusive dance club; and Boxers, known for pouring the strongest drink in town and appealing to men of color and the white men who love them. Alleyways, a 24-hour nightclub with high-energy dance music and an adjoining cabaret theater, contrasts with Extremities, a small, dimly-lit club with strippers and drag queens for entertainment. Hanging Harry’s is a high-end all-male, all-nude strip club. And The Falcon, a bar catering to the counter-culture needs of Leather-

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men (men who like to dress in leather) and Bears (typically large, hairy gay men). I contemplate how my research and my life might be different if I had chosen one of these other bars.

Scholars in leisure studies are searching for research that examines the structures which foster and perpetuate inequality of marginalized populations (Aitchison, 1999; Kivel, 2000; Pedlar, 1995) and seeking to “develop richer understandings about the social construction of place and its political ramifications” (Stokowski, 2002, p. 379). This paper addresses that concern. The goal of the larger ethnography was to describe the culture of a country-western gay bar and to explore how gay men confront and negotiate meanings of masculinity in that culture. In this paper I focus specifically on how the bar’s clientele use dress as a marker of hegemonic masculinity and how bar patrons change their dress (and consequently their masculinity) as they migrate to other bars in the city.

Background

For as long as I can remember I have been cognizant of the essentialized notion of what it means to be a man—most men are. I have not always been successful in my performance of it—most men aren’t. Despite the success or failure at presenting an acceptable performance of manhood, a persuasive and often subversive set of cultural norms exists, as part of mainstream discourse, to inform and guide men’s behavior (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995).

Connell (1995) described “masculinity” as those practices in which men engage male social gender roles with the effects being expressed through the body, personality, and culture. Culture, then, serves as both a cause and effect of masculine behavior and in our western society masculinity has taken shape in relation to securing and maintaining dominance. Masculine power is balanced by its difference, whereby masculine is valued over the feminine. While masculinity is grounded in difference, it is not a static characteristic, but a fluid construct organized within social relations. According to Connell (1995), masculinity is not just an object of knowledge but the interplay between the agency of the individual and the structure of the social institution. By placing masculinity in a historical moment and cultural context, researchers can examine how at that moment, in that culture, the framework of patriarchy emphasizes the control of emotions and denial of sexuality around the construction of masculinity. This argument contends that while there could be a variety of ways to perform masculinity, men often feel obligated, consciously or unconsciously, to perform masculinity in specific ways that are dependent upon the current cultural climate. These dominant ideological norms of masculinity are referred to as hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Most people would agree that some socially constructed characteristics of masculinity are valued more than others. The value of those characteristics is often based on their relationship to dominant ideological discourses. Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of male gender practices that serves to legitimize patriarchy and heterosexuality, guaranteeing the dominant position of men and heterosexuals and the subordination of women and non-heterosexuals (Connell, 1995). Connell used terms such as “hegemonic masculinity” and “marginalized masculinities” to describe

structures of practice that are constructed in social situations. Hegemonic masculinity fosters access to power for those who are heterosexual and male. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is a powerful tool used to secure and maintain the current social order. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is an elaborate performance of social authority, and is not easy to challenge openly. Men who eventually choose to separate from hegemonic masculinity are choosing to confront a major dilemma of difference. Who would dare challenge and forgo such authority?

Gay Masculinity

What happens to men who cannot or do not conform to hegemonic masculinity? Gay men are sociologically fascinating because they consistently express such a paradoxical relationship to hegemonic masculinity, sometimes resisting and sometimes reinforcing dominant ideologies. Because gay men encounter a hegemonic masculinity that is based on heterosexuality, their everyday relations carry contradictory messages and an undercurrent of threat. Dominant groups such as male heterosexuals use violence and fear as tactics to maintain their power and dominance to enforce hegemonic masculinity. Those actions are aimed at punishing the betrayers of manhood—betrayers like gay men.

Gay men, by their very existence, challenge the power structures of hegemonic masculinity in a variety of ways. One argument suggests that gay men give up their everyday masculine privileges and styles of interaction by claiming a non-heterosexual identity (Connell, 1995; Sedgwick, 1990). Sedgwick elaborated on the politics of “coming out” in her influential essay *Epistemology of the Closet*. In this essay, Sedgwick illustrated how the categorical identity management of sexual identity information creates a double bind for gay men because denouncing heterosexuality severs gay men’s link to hegemonic masculinity. Sedgwick emphasizes in the above passage the hindrance and vulnerability gay men encounter in trying to be “gay” and “men” at the same time.

Lehne (1998) discussed an example of the double bind gay men encounter, suggesting that heterosexual relations with women are the proving grounds for masculinity and that adequate sexual functioning with women is seen as proof of masculinity. Consequently, a lack of sex with women will inevitably damage the male gender identity. Accordingly, since homosexual desire is not based on the desire for the opposite sex, it serves as a direct challenge to the power of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. In retaliation, hegemonic ideologies create messages that use gay men as the antithesis of masculine, instead of feminine.

In spite of these contradictory messages, gay men attempt to resist the stigma of homosexuality by enacting a variety of strategies. These strategies include renunciation of masculinity, adoption of hypermasculine qualities (Connell, 1995), and/or self-segregation (Johnson, 2000). As they negotiate the double bind of being gay and male, many gay men retain the idealized sexual and gendered messages connected with the symbolic power, strength, and self-worth maintained in hegemonic masculinity. And though not all men practice hegemonic masculinity, most men benefit from it. Therefore, when faced with giving up their masculine gender privilege for their (homo) sexual identity, the (homo) sexual identity is often repressed or even denied.

In an attempt to maintain their masculine gender privilege, in spite of their gay identity, many gay men actively attempt to sever their link to effeminacy by exaggerat-

ing aspects of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, these men unconsciously reinforce and intensify hegemonic heterosexual and masculine ideologies, keeping in place the oppressive, monolithic practices of what it means to be a "man."

Although many scholars and activists would argue that gay men are forced to live in a world that does not acknowledge their existence, I contend that gay men live in a world that *requires* their existence in order to maintain definitional control of dominant ideologies (Foucault, 1978). These dominant ideologies allow heterosexual men to maintain control by reinforcing the binary structures that value heterosexual over homosexual and masculine over feminine, and link them together inextricably. Therefore, acknowledgment of the everyday life and experiences of gay men categorically situates those individuals into an identity category that serves as a mechanism for their oppression and at the same time supports the dominance and superiority of "men." With these considerations in mind, gay men seem to occupy an interesting place for the study of gender and sexuality in contemporary society. While heterosexual ideologies often appropriate gay men as feminized males, a closer look at gay men in their everyday lives may help us to better explain how gay men come to understand and negotiate the meaning of masculinity.

Gay Men in Leisure

Despite the categorical necessity of gay men in a world where heterosexuality is considered to be normal, their everyday lives are unexamined and their unique situations and circumstances are frequently regarded as less important. One context where the negotiation of gay men's double bind might be readily evident is in their leisure. Wearing (1998) argued that leisure is often used to shift the goal posts of cultural domination and that leisure spaces are important locations where social control of individuals and political and social strategies for change are prevalent. Kivel (1996) recognized the need for understanding these differences and advocated for more theoretical work indicating that researchers "should not only focus on the individual, but should also focus on the cultural ideologies...to understand how leisure contexts contribute to a hegemonic process" (p. 204).

Although many leisure studies scholars have begun to focus on the cultural ideologies fostered in the contexts of leisure, there remains a noticeable absence of research examining gay men's culture. When gay men have been examined, their experiences are assumed to be the same as or similar to those of lesbians, bisexuals, and/or people questioning their sexuality (Kivel, 1994; Kivel, 1996; Kivel and Kleiber, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Caldwell, Kivel, Smith, & Hayes, 1998). This blending of non-dominant populations highlights oppression and marginalization as the groups' common characteristics but also creates a framework that overlooks other important differences.

Methodology¹

As I approach the door I see one of the bar patrons that I have met on several occasions. I feverishly search my memory for his name muddling through my recollection of pseudonyms before finally

¹ A more comprehensive discussion of feminist ethnography and the methodological details of this investigation are discussed in Johnson, C. W., & Samdahl, D. M. (2005). "The night they took over": Misogyny in a country-western gay bar. *Leisure Sciences*, 27, 331-348.

achieving success in remembering his real name. "Hey Rodney," I call out. He replies "hello" with a smile and turns back toward the front to advance in the small line where we wait.

I shift into observation mode and throw my ethnographic gaze upon Rodney. His old, discolored Wrangler blue jeans grip his legs so tightly that they must cause a decrease in circulation. Circling the waist of his jeans is a thick, worn, brown belt held together with a medium-sized silver buckle. Rodney's crisp, maroon, oxford button-down shirt plunges into his jeans and hangs loosely around his wrists and neck. His old pair of work boots have obviously sloshed through the water puddles that cover the ground from the late summer storm. As Rodney pulls back the green wooden doors the lyrics of "Cotton-eyed Joe" escape into the night.

As Rodney pulls the ID from his back pocket, a ten-dollar bill drops to the floor. Rodney, with a bit of difficulty, crouches down to pick it up as the bouncer casts his gaze onto Rodney's rear. A broad and intentional smile spreads across the bouncer's face, directing me to take notice. I raise my eyebrows offering a more subtle recognition. As Rodney lifts his head, and flashes his ID, he realizes that he has become the object of the bouncer's mocking, hypersexualized, attention and offers his own flirtatious grin. We all laugh and Rodney chuckles to himself as he moves into the bar already strewn with over 200 people. The large room is about 30 yards long and 15 yards wide, a well lit, well-ventilated, open space. The entire bar is visible from the doorway with the exception of the bathrooms and kitchen. Only the activities and the people inhabiting them demarcate the remaining space. As Rodney enters several people call out greetings from the closest section of the bar and the bartender begins to brew a fresh pot of coffee.

Selecting the Site

Feminist ethnography offered the opportunity to engage in an analytic description and reconstruction of cultural scenes and cultural groups to both illuminate and criticize that culture's behavior, knowledge, and artifacts. As Stowkowski (2002) advocated, to understand our role in the fabric of place, we must not only have factual background on the physical setting, but also develop an "abstract understanding of how place is organized and confirmed socially and culturally...and look to the role of language and discourse to develop richer understandings about the social construction of place and its political ramifications." (p. 379).

The specific bar selected for this ethnography was *Saddlebags* (a pseudonym), a country-western gay bar located in the downtown region of a major southern metropolitan city. *Saddlebags* is one of the few country-western gay bars in United States thus shaping this ethnography both specifically and circumstantially to that gay country-western culture. Horrocks (1995) noted that "the western [image] is a true mythical system...constantly elaborated over time, until it has achieved the complexity and richness of more ancient mythologies. It provides a set of symbols, which are instantly recognizable" (p. 60). Those symbols usually aligned with "true manhood" and heterosexuality prevail in country-western bars through the décor, music, attire, and behaviors of bar patrons. Though *Saddlebags* was a gay bar, it mirrored these attributes and appeared like the heterosexual country-western bars in the region. With the strong hegemonic culture of masculinity already in place, *Saddlebags* was an interesting and appropriate selection for examining gay men's negotiation of gender.

Data Collection Procedures

Using participant observation as the primary method of ethnography, I entered the social situation in September, 2000 and participated in activities appropriate to the culture and to observe the people, activities, and context of the social situation until May, 2002. Equipped with my digital voice recorder (DVR), a pen, and 3x5 inch index cards I took both vocal and written jottings of observations during my time in the bar. Although it was foreseeably impossible for me to capture everything that was said or done in the site, I did jot key words, phrases, and ideas to remind me of important events or to stimulate my memory of specific instances. I focused my jottings on scenes and interactions, thick characterizations (not generalizations) of participants, concrete details about actions and talk, sensory details about the scene, and impressions or feelings about the significance of events. Most of my jottings were done verbally, as I found it quicker and more comfortable to speak my jottings into the DVR than to write them down. Immediately after leaving the field each night, or on some occasions first thing the next morning, I would transform my jottings into expanded fieldnotes. As I expanded each jotting, I created a more comprehensive, complex, and detailed account of what I witnessed. These expanded fieldnotes serve as the written record of what I saw, heard, and experienced in *Saddlebags*. As the frequency of my participation increased, I funneled my observations from a macro focus on *Saddlebags* as a cultural context for leisure toward a micro focus on the cultural phenomenon and individual behaviors that were more relevant to my research questions.

Although participant observation was a primary method for this ethnographic study and proved to be an invaluable tool, ethnography encourages a “multi-instrument” approach (Wolcott, 1999). Therefore, ethnographic and semi-structured interviews were used to collect additional data. Ethnographic interviewing according to Spradley (1979) is a “series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (p. 58). Though the ethnographic interviews were never audio-recorded, these conversations became part of my expanded fieldnotes. Although not necessarily typical in ethnography, I also conducted nine semi-structured interviews, lasting one-three hours, with a total of eleven participants. Although gay men’s masculinity was the focus of my study, I eventually expanded my sample to include three lesbian women.

Data Transformation

As suggested by Creswell (1998) and Wolcott (1994, 1999), a three-stage process for formal data transformation was employed by simultaneously constructing descriptions, conducting analysis, and making interpretations guided by the research questions. The more formal analysis stage began as the data were interrogated to identify patterns of thought, behavior, and key events. In the early stages a standard construct approach was used (Creswell, 1998) by conducting line by line readings of the expanded fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Several rounds of open coding allowed for the creation and application of abstract categories to the data and the use of those categories to compare, contrast, complexify, sort, reduce, refute, and refine patterned regularities, key events, cultural groups, and cultural signifiers. Analytical memos were written to explore patterned themes and to connect the individual pieces of data across the entire set of data. After identifying Dress and Migration patterns as a central

theme of the study, data collection continued and focused coding began specifically on that theme. Descriptions and analysis were then used to construct the narrative vignettes (Van Maanen, 1988) that accompany the theme. The details of these tales were directly lifted from the fieldnotes or from the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews. Although not descriptive of actual events, these tales are not fictional. Rather, they have been pulled together so that discrete pieces of data are organized around a theme that tells an analytic story (Emerson et al., 1995; Van Maanen). Each narrative stream used time disjuncture and/or a re-sequencing of the data, allowing me to create narratives that tell an engaging story and balance the tensions between analytic propositions and localized meanings (Emmerson, Fretz, Shaw, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 2001). Using narrative streams allowed me to blend events into multiple story-lines with multiple participants, thus revealing key cultural elements and multiple perspectives on important aspects of the bar.

There are several instances throughout the narratives where I cautiously ascribe participants' feelings and/or emotions. In every case where I assign feelings and/or emotions, I have data to support that characterization. In addition to altering time and the sequence of events, I also altered many of the participants' identifiable physical and social characteristics to insure confidentiality. As a result, I was able to generate narrative tales that read like a novel but are solidly grounded in events from my fieldnotes or interviews. After constructing the narratives I outlined the major theoretical points I wanted to discuss; connecting the data with the theoretical structure that framed this ethnographic work.

Although it was not my goal to eliminate or even reduce assumptions and/or expectations in ethnographic work, it was my goal to recognize their influence and to "foreground the tensions involved in speaking with rather than *to/for* marginalized groups" (Lather, 1994, p. 107). Therefore, in my efforts to de-center myself as the conveyor of "truth" I used a variety of mechanisms to ensure trustworthiness in my data and my representation of those data. I used member checks with key informants and research participants, a gay-male advisory panel, peer debriefing, and a research/writing group to assist me in these endeavors. The following discussion summarizes some of the key findings.

Findings and Interpretation

Chuck hangs up his cell phone and presses down on the accelerator pushing his car near 70 miles per hour. He would go faster, but he doesn't want to run the risk of getting pulled over. Chuck has been driving for over five hours now from his home over 300 miles away, he stares dead ahead at the road; the scenery has become all too familiar. Chuck makes this trip almost every other week leaving his job as a computer programmer early on Friday after lunch and arriving in the city just in time to get his hair cut for the weekend. He thinks about moving to live with Jared in the big city, imagining that he could be "out" all the time, but he is all too comfortable living with his parents in the small rural town where he grew up. Jared says that he is just leading a double life: a closeted country red-neck at home and a butch queen in the city. As he pulls up in front of the house he sees his brother sitting on the porch so he taps the horn to draw his attention. The drive to Genie's Hair Salon is a short one and they both get their hair cut and styled in less than 30 minutes. On their way out of the salon, Jared reminds his brother that it is "Gay Rodeo Weekend" and that Saddlebags will be very busy tonight. Chuck's eyes fill with excitement at the thought of all the cowboys that will be in town.

Dressing for Saddlebags

I became interested in how men dressed in *Saddlebags* early in my study as I thought about the conceptualizations of Judith Butler (1991), who argued that dress is a performative act, a visible and conscious marker of a gendered performance. Based on my understanding of gender performativity, I began to construct descriptions and categorizations of men based on their embodiment and attire in *Saddlebags*. Although these categorizations were useful in advancing my thinking, I found them homogenizing in a way that did not capture how gay men are conscious of their appearance, and how they use that appearance to define themselves (and be defined) within specific cultural contexts. I abandoned those categories in hopes of finding a more useful way to discuss how the gay men in *Saddlebags* dress. I recognized appearance was an important consideration in this investigation as I frequently wrote about clothing options in *Saddlebags*.

Getting ready is a different process for Jared than for Chuck, and it is almost the same every weekend they are together. Chuck is never really happy with his selection of clothes since he has recently shed over 75 pounds and has yet to expand his wardrobe. However, he has purchased a couple of pairs of jeans, Levi-501 button fly, and pulls a pair on after deciding to wear no underwear. Then sneaking by Jared who sits on the couch waiting for his turn in the bathroom, Chuck raids his brother's closet picking out a red and gray striped Mossimo V-neck T-shirt. Once Chuck has his shirt on he wraps a black belt around his waist and comes into the living room and asks Jared, "Should I wear this shirt tucked in or out?"

"That's my shirt," Jared responds and a bit of brotherly bickering ensues. Finally, after a few slanderous remarks, Jared realizes he is in a futile argument and gets up to choose his own attire. Rooting through the clothes hanging in the closet and strewn about the room—on the floor and across the bed—Jared comes to a decision: a pair of overalls, a solid blue-t-shirt with the number eight printed boldly across the front in yellow, and a baby blue baseball hat on top of his head. Jared is ready in less than 15 minutes, deciding not to shower since he had one earlier in the day. While Jared is picking out his clothes, Chuck heads back toward the bathroom to play with his hair, which he swears is not laying right tonight. As Jared emerges from his bedroom, his brother asks again about the shirt, "Are you sure this looks alright tucked in?" Despite his brother's reassurance, Chuck will ask that same question at least two more times before they get to the bar, which is less than five minutes away.

Cultural descriptions of how people dress in *Saddlebags* are interwoven throughout this manuscript, emphasizing the importance that my participants and I placed on our appearance. I found that people adapt their appearance in a variety of ways dependent on things like the day of the week, the weather, and their previous and future plans during the evening. Paul's statement reveals that you can see all kinds of styles of dress in *Saddlebags*, from conservative to radical:

We get drag queens. We get people who have spiked purple hair with pierced ears, nose, lips, nipples and all. We get a lot of different people in there. Oh my god, you see anything from Daisy Dukes to combat boots. We get the spectrum. We don't have a dress code.

However, beyond this variety, there seems to be one common thread among *Saddlebags* patrons. Almost everyone wears jeans. Yes, jeans: tight, relaxed, baggy, stiff, worn, holy, black, acid-washed, or blue still leave considerable room for differences in style. Dirk indicated that jeans were part of *Saddlebags* "unofficial dress code." He said, "For the most part [you wear] jeans. Jeans and anything from a button up top to

a T-shirt to a tank top. Some people, not a very large percent, come in really dressed up with the purposes of picking somebody up. [They] do not tend to stay very long." Although this quote, along with most of my appearance-based descriptions, indicate that *Saddlebags* permits a variety of appearance-based styles, the culture fosters and privileges traditional heteromale images. Specifically, those images the patrons have described as "the cowboy."

Dirk is standing in front of the mirror laughing at himself when a knock comes at the door. Darrin is right on time. Earlier that day Dirk and Darrin had driven about 30 minutes south of the city to a country-western store called The Shiny Spur. Although they had only intended to buy matching cowboy boots and hats, they ended up spending over two hundred dollars each purchasing tight Wrangler jeans and buttoned down western shirts. Tonight they were going in full-tilt "cowboy drag," which they had wanted to do since discovering *Saddlebags*, and especially since learning to dance. When Dirk pulled open his door he couldn't help but laugh out loud, not just at Darrin but also at himself. "What's so funny," Darrin asks. "Just the thought of us being cowboys," Dirk replies. They both take a moment to look each other over and then Dirk notices Darrin's big shiny belt-buckle. "Where did you get that?" Dirk asks pointing to the buckle. "My friend from work let me borrow it from her husband. Isn't it great?" Dirk feels envious as Darrin one ups him in country-western flare. He wishes he had a lasso.

Dressing Hetero-Masculine: The Regular Guy and the Cowboy

According to Cole (2000), it is unfair to assume that all gay men are interested in what they wear, or that all gay men use their dress choices as a marker of their sexual identity. However, the data reveal that many of the gay men in *Saddlebags* are conscious of their efforts to adopt a hegemonic masculine image, or at minimum, to avoid an effeminate (stereotypically gay) one. Attempting to represent themselves as masculine, these gay men rely on images and ideologies grounded in heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity, in an effort to tell others that they are "real" men (and perhaps straight acting) even though they are gay. Indeed, the perceptions of non-regular visitors to the bar indicate that a good number of the gay men in *Saddlebags* accomplish this objective. For example, one of my colleagues who visited the bar to insure data trustworthiness wrote:

My first impression, and my remaining impression, was how clean cut and "normal" these men looked. On the dance floor there were lots of pointed cowboy boots and cowboy hats, and more oxford-style shirts than I would have expected. Away from the bar men wore T-shirts and well-worn street shoes.... Everyone (and I mean everyone) wore blue jeans. I was expecting to see a show...but that definitely wasn't the case.

Other gay men, both frequent and non-frequent patrons, have also indicated that *Saddlebags* is "just a bunch of guys who happen to be gay" or "is where the regular guys hang out." But who is this "regular guy?" Do they mean "normal"? Do they mean heterosexual?

Terry believes that by dressing in specific ways, gay men can become the kind of "straight men" they wish to be and perhaps the "straight men" they wish to have.

I think I am pretty straight looking and so I am more attracted to straight looking/acting people, and you go to *Saddlebags* and you see a lot of them like that and you meet a lot more people like that than you would at other places.

While the observations and interviews indicate that some men in *Saddlebags* attempt to perform as a “regular guy,” “the cowboy” image is the emphasized and more valued (re)presentation of masculinity of the culture. Cowboy drag, as I define it, is the performative act whereby gay men wear cowboy attire to signify the traditional macho image of the cowboy. That is not to say that some of the men in *Saddlebags* are not “real” cowboys, in the sense that they work on a ranch/farm or ride in the rodeo, but that most of the gay men who wear cowboy attire in *Saddlebags* are “playing dress-up.”

So what makes these gay men want to dress up like a cowboy? Fischer (1977) argued that country-western imagery and cowboy archetypes have become a natural myth, and that most American young boys most surely have a cowboy hero. This natural myth is accentuated by society’s accessibility to cowboy imagery in television and film. Cowboys “represent a traditional but non-conforming aspect of masculinity and [are] used by the media to play up masculinity and sexuality in ways that are understood by the gay populace” (Cole, 2000, p. 94).

However, further analysis reveals that the gay men of *Saddlebags* do much more than understand those traditional, non-conforming aspects of masculinity; they also perform them within *Saddlebags*. David said, “Yeah, I mean it is a conscious effort when you wear that stuff,” and Darrin said, “Something about *Saddlebags* just makes you want to dress the part.” So how do the gay men recreate this cowboy image? For most, it is through a combination of clothing elements. For example, when I asked Terry what he thought I should wear if I wanted to dress in “cowboy” for *Saddlebags* he said, “boots, boots, boots, and tight jeans, a button-down collar or any kind of tight T-shirt, and a cowboy hat. ...Most people stick to the country-western theme.”

There are indications from the participants that the cowboy attire does have a functional purpose in *Saddlebags*, usually connected to better dancing. However, what is compelling is how cognizant these men are of their appearance-based masculine gender performances, successfully parodying the unquestioned cowboy image as a heterosexual one. My consciousness of these acts as gendered performances came to me as I began to question my own desire to dress in cowboy drag. In my research journal I wrote, “I think the cowboy image is a really powerful one, especially for gay men attempting to enact masculinity...and that’s part of what I’m exploring with my own dress and body. I am attempting to appear masculine, as to attract masculine, but also to demonstrate that as a gay man I can be as masculine, if not *more masculine* than straight men.” David, who frequently dresses in cowboy drag, believes that he is challenging popular assumptions that gay men are not masculine. He explained,

Gay and country...I do think that it’s a little bit different because people don’t equate being gay with being masculine, which is what you do when you think of cowboys. When you say cowboy you think of the Marlboro Man, you know, and there are plenty, plenty of gay men who look like the Marlboro Man, if not better.

And Paul, who is heavily invested in many aspects of the country-western culture, says that what you wear in *Saddlebags* can make a statement to society,

If [cowboy style] fits you as an individual it allows you to be like, “God I can be a fag and a cowboy at the same time.” I personally know a lot of people that *Saddlebags* has done that for. You know people that still live in rural areas [and] this is their outlet.

Although the gay men of *Saddlebags* may be subversive in demonstrating that het-

erosexuality inherent in the cowboy image is a false one—challenging the assumption that all appearance based indicators of heterosexuality are accurate—they are also stylizing conventional forms of masculine (and hypermasculine) dress. I asked Dirk if he was just trying to appear straight when he dressed in cowboy drag and he said,

Not always, I mean one of my concerns about getting the Wranglers and the hats is that...people would think that [we] were, you know losers, pretending to be something we were not, which is I guess kind of true. But in the same sense it's a lot of fun and we've been working it. We've been consistent at [dressing like cowboys] for six months now. We're getting better and we've become known as regulars [at *Saddlebags*].

Regardless of how they look, or why they dress in cowboy drag, the gay men of *Saddlebags* recreate the traditional masculine cowboy image in *Saddlebags*, simultaneously allowing them to resist notions of stereotypical effeminacy linked to being gay men, and reinforcing an essentialized notion of a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity.

Dirk and Darrin move slowly around the dance floor, Dirk with his usual stoic face and Darrin with such an exuberant smile that it borders on actual laughter. "For some reason I just dance better tonight" Darrin says to Dirk. "Me too" Dirk replies. As the song comes to an end, Dirk spins Darrin and then realizing he has on a hat, he raises the front and bows his head into Darrin. Darrin chuckles and mimics Dirk's movements. Then as the DJ calls forth the line dancers, they exit the floor and move toward the table where their friends have gathered. As they approach the table, their friends point, laugh, and welcome them back into the group. Out of their group of friends they are the only ones dressed as cowboys, the others are dressed in more "casual/everyday clothing": jeans, t-shirts or polos, baseball caps, and a variety of footwear options. One of their friends embraces Darrin and tells him, "You guys look great, I can't believe it is you!" The others chime in with similar statements and comments on their improvement in dancing and their ability to "look like cowboys." Darrin says, "And the hats and boots make us dance better Dirk looks at Darrin, "You're really right," he says. "Perhaps that is why so many of the dancers wear cowboy drag." His friends all laugh and Dirk's new "boy toy" raises his beer into the air and says, "Here is to Dirk and Darrin, the new Marlboro Men of the gay community." All the men around the table raise their cocktails and begin to laugh.

So why are these gay men attempting to represent the "regular guy" or "cowboy" appearances? As Cole (2000) suggested, many gay men make conscious efforts to reinforce a communal identity through their dress. In *Saddlebags*, the traditional hetero-masculine performances of the "regular guy" and "the cowboy" demonstrate that one can be masculine and gay simultaneously. Moreover, while these two forms of masculinity are the privileged forms of masculinity in *Saddlebags*, the value of those masculinities is context specific. As we will see in the next section, the gay male patrons of *Saddlebags* recognize that these privileged (re)presentations of masculinity change as they leave *Saddlebags* and migrate to other gay bars in this gay/lesbian community.

Jared and I find Chuck in his usual location at the bar. Pointing across the bar, Chuck begins to tell us about the "man of his dreams." I convince Chuck it is time to go and we pause to give our bartenders Jack and Paul kisses goodnight as our newly formed crew maneuvers out the door, into our cars, and down Garfield Avenue toward Sinners. The warm summer night air blows in through the car window. I remove layer number one, my light-plaid button-down oxford, leaving me in jeans and a muscle t-shirt. I also remove my belt, facilitating a lower hanging jean across my waist. Meanwhile, Jared pulls a t-shirt and a hat from underneath the front seat and begins to switch his shirt and cover his head. "What are you guys doing?" asks Chuck. We both respond simultaneously, "A Costume change!"

Bar Migration and Costume Changes

A typical characteristic of major urban areas in the United States is the existence of a large number of gay bars that gay men can select to patronize. Although a large number of gay bars exist in this community, a few of the men I talked with only go to *Saddlebags*. For example, Terry told me about his friend Allen who only comes to *Saddlebags* because he just "isn't into the gay bar scene." Many others, usually older gay men and women, also indicated that *Saddlebags* was their sole destination and not merely a stopping point on a night of migration. Personal experience indicates that it is more common for gay men in urban areas to "bar hop" or migrate from one bar to the next. Based on the data this is also true for most of the gay men who frequent *Saddlebags*. Even David, who rarely ventures out to other bars, recognized that most gay men in this city do. He said,

It is very odd. Gay men seem to follow migratory patterns. It's very strange to me. I will hear people say, "So where should I be going at nine o'clock or ten" and then "where does everyone go after that?" That's just foreign to me. I don't do much of that. I mean I will see people they will come in and have drinks...and I am referring really to Friday and Saturday night between 10 and midnight.... For some reason *Saddlebags* is like on the list for places you should be during that time and then people go to other places.

Chuck and Jared, who only go to one bar (*Saddlebags*) during the week, use *Saddlebags* as their starting point on the weekends. Jared said,

Our routine is to go to *Saddlebags* as a pre-bar, at like ten o'clock, and stay till like eleven o'clock...then go to *Sinners* and stay until one o'clock or two and then leave there and go to *Alleyways*. That was pretty much the routine

Although a variety of migratory patterns and combinations exist for the gay men who frequent *Saddlebags*, I have found that most of the patrons are going on to other gay bars. Paul said, "*Saddlebags* is what we call an early night bar. From here the biggest place I hear people going to is *Sinners*, *The Falcon*, *Alleyways*, or *Gary's*. It just depends on what they want to do."

Regardless of what bar the men go to, my analysis indicates most will change their "costume."

Feeling the crowd of *Saddlebags* swell to near capacity, Dirk and Darrin decide they will accompany their friends to Gary's, a trendy neighborhood bar located less than two blocks from *Saddlebags*. Gary's, a large bar with no dance floor, is primarily used by gay men to drink, cruise, socialize, and watch/listen to video dance remixes. Most gay men in the city refer to Gary's (and bars like it) as an "S & M bar," not sado/masochism but "Stand and Model." As their friends move toward the exit, Dirk realizes he and Darrin are dressed in cowboy drag, and he declares, "We can go to Gary's, but not in these clothes." "I am just going to take off my hat," Darrin responds. "No, I need to change clothes" Dirk demands. So Dirk tells Darrin and his other friends he will meet up with them at Gary's in about a half-hour; he climbs into his Acura and speeds away.

It has almost become common wisdom that space is socially constructed, and with the influence of postmodernism, some scholars might argue that "individuals are now 'free' to (self)consciously experiment with identity, having at their disposal a rich wardrobe from which to pick and choose" (Bell & Binnie, 1994, p. 32). This may be

particularly true for the gay men of *Saddlebags*, who are constantly changing their costumes, and thus their (re)presentations of masculinity, as they travel from one gay bar to the next. And though it is through these costume changes that gay men may be consciously performing a variety of (mostly masculine) gendered identities, I believe it is more likely they are changing costumes to conform to the masculine (re)presentations privileged at each bar.

The patrons of *Saddlebags* highlight this idea when they discussed how and why they dress differently as they migrate to other gay bars in the city. Kirby said, "I don't see people dressed [in cowboy] in *Alleyways*. People don't really dress that way outside [*Saddlebags*]." Malcolm, agreeing with the others said, "I am a cowboy boots kind of guy, but you don't see them too often, I mean most gay men don't go to *Alleyways* in a cowboy hat and rodeo shirts."

Though it is not my objective to give full descriptions of other bars' appearance-based norms in the context of this manuscript, or to homogenize them in any way, my participants did say things like, "*Gary's* is more retail, you know like you work at Banana Republic or whatever," or "at *Sinners* and *Alleyways* you have a lot of men running around with their shirts off." Because most of the gay men in *Saddlebags* migrate to other bars it should be of no surprise that they all discussed their needs for a "costume change."

Sinners is much different from Saddlebags; it is a dark, dank club known for its great music and dance floor, and its exclusive clientele of gay men. Barely lit, mostly from the flashing disco lights that match the techno/house/trance/pop-mixed music, I can see the crowd flash before me. Though many of the individuals that make up this crowd are the same people I see in Saddlebags night after night, the crowd looks different. "What's different?" I ask myself as I feel the cold sting of an ice cold beer bottle on the back of my neck. I turn to find Chuck offering me an Icehouse, which I graciously accept. As I free his hands, Chuck removes his shirt and inserts himself into the mass of half-naked men gyrating on the dance floor. As I see him move into the mass of "sameness" I realize how important what we wear, and what we don't wear, is according to each gay bar in this bar community. I start to take account of what people are wearing here in Sinners. Most of the men came here in jeans and t-shirts, and most of the men on the dance floor have removed their t-shirts and have them hanging from their waist, tucked into their jeans. Then, spurred by Tamia's "Stranger in My House," the dance remix, I decide to abandon my analytical thinking, and my shirt, and make my way onto the dance floor, sweeping past sweaty naked torsos, until I arrive amongst my friends whom I can only see by the light of the disco ball.

After dancing for almost a half an hour Chuck became a bit tired of the music and slipped out of the crowd. In need of another beer and a cigarette, he works his way down a long hallway past the poolroom where the Bears and Leathermen hang out. He recognizes many of these men from Saddlebags and wonders why they come to Sinners on Saturday night, as opposed to Ceasars, the bar that caters to the Bear/Leather counter-cultures. Foregoing his immediate desire for a beer and cigarette, Chuck decides to make a quick swing through the pool room to cruise and be cruised. The men in the pool room are dressed in variety of leather goods in various stages of nakedness and usually equipped with a variety of piercings, some visible and some not. Many of the men wear tight jeans with a leather harness wrapped around their shirtless torso. Other men wear leather pants, leather vests, and leather hats in different combinations.

As Chuck circles the room he gets a lot of stares, and delivers a good number himself. Then just as he is about to exit the pool room he notices a familiar face: the "man of his dreams" is standing directly

in his line of sight. He looks different, but still very sexy! Chuck begins to look at the man up and down; he is standing there in short, tight, white underwear. Yes, underwear. He wears no shirt, but his chest is covered in thick, black hair. On his feet are combat boots that lace up to the knee. He accessorizes with a plain blue baseball cap and a spiked leather collar around his neck. At this point, having had over nine beers and several tequila shots, Chuck has little fear. He walks straight up to the "man of his dreams" and says, "How you doing baby?" The man looks Chuck up and down for a few moments and replies, "I am doing good, my name is Rodney, what's yours?" Chuck quickly introduces himself and says, "You know you are a very handsome man." Rodney, perhaps blushing a bit says, "Thanks, you're pretty hot yourself." "Weren't you just at Saddlebags in a cowboy hat and..." Interrupting Chuck in mid-sentence, Rodney replies, "Yeah, but I had a Costume change."

My observations and discussion of "costume changes" begs the question: Are gay men like Dirk and Rodney really overcoming hegemonic norms or merely being self-protective? On the one hand, their ability to change costumes and thus change their (re)presentation of masculinity highlights the instability of a singular hegemonic masculinity, indicating that in many ways hegemonic masculinity is all about (re)presentation and others' perception of that (re)presentation. On the other hand, if these gay men didn't change their costumes they might feel inferior or even threatened in spaces that value one masculinity over other, perhaps less valued masculinities (or even femininity). Either way, theorizing the performance of masculinity through the dress and migratory patterns of gay men in Saddlebags creates more questions than it does answers.

As Dirk passes by Gary's he checks the clock: 1:00 a.m. A roundtrip costume change in less than 45 minutes, probably a personal record. At home he quickly cast off his "cowboy drag" and put on his Diesel suburban cut blue jeans and a blue and yellow Abercrombie T, a size too small—but perfect for showing off the body he works so hard for at the gym. On his feet, black and gray New Balance tennis shoes. In his new outfit he runs to the mirror for a quick-fix of the hair smashed down by the weight of the cowboy hat and then he is out the door and back toward downtown.

Once inside Dirk heads straight to the bar where he purchases a Jack and Coke for five dollars and fifty cents and stingily tips the extra two quarters. Then he turns around and begins to scan the room assessing the crowd. Dirk sighs and thinks to himself, "The guys here always look the same, and there is only one reason to come here—to cruise." As Dirk thinks about the differences between Gary's and Saddlebags he realizes how much he has come to appreciate Saddlebags over the past few months. When he comes to Gary's "hooking up" is the primary objective, but when he goes to Saddlebags hooking up is not the primary reason for going, instead he enjoys something else, something more. Dirk begins to climb the stairs to look for his friends. Although the large crowd would typically make it difficult to find anyone, Dirk laughs at how easily he spots Darrin, his big black cowboy hat hovering above the rest of the crowd. He definitely stands out! Dirk screams over the loud music into Darrin's ear, "I cannot believe you are wearing that thing in here." Darrin replies, "You wouldn't believe how popular I've become!"

Discussion

Even today, amidst the public outcries for social acceptance and full citizenship rights for sexual minorities, gay men remain stigmatized, marginalized, and oppressed. Consequently, many gay men choose to restrict their social life and their leisure to places frequented by other gay men. In fact, Nardi (1999) stated, "Participation in the gay community's institutions contributes to gay identity achievement, and gay identity

leads to the creation and maintenance of gay communities which, in an ongoing dialectic, provide a context for reproducing identity" (pp. 195-196). For many, one of the most important and prominent social spaces for this gay identity work is in the gay bar.

Although gay bars are central social institutions for gay male life, it is important to remember that they are not monolithic sites. Instead, gay bars, which vary according to the size of the gay community and the geographic location of the bar, provide different kinds of entertainment and activity and often focus on a specific clientele. The variation across context creates different gender norms for different gay bars. Therefore, I approached *Saddlebags* as a physically organized and socially constructed space where individuals and groups of individuals engage the site to create a unique culture.

Early scholars who focused on gay bars as social institutions often failed to recognize the positive impact or significant potential that gay bars offer the gay community. In fact, in their study on gay bars, Israelstam and Lambert (1984) generalized that "gay bars provide a place for homosexuals to meet and drink...and a hunting ground for sexual encounters" (p. 650). Although I don't deny that gay bars contain many of these activities, I think that a larger picture of gay bar culture is necessary and important for undermining popular stereotypes.

Based on my ethnography of *Saddlebags*, I postulate that in contrast to the conclusions of Israelstam and Lambert (1984), gay bars offer a place where patrons can find and/or build community. My study reveals that *Saddlebags* serves as a place where strangers can easily become friends as they join and depart company. And though some *Saddlebags*' patrons discussed drinking and sexual cruising, it was minimal and certainly not their main reason for coming to the bar. Instead, the gay men in *Saddlebags* discussed their appreciation of *Saddlebags* as an alternative to the larger, mainstream, gay bar scene and the ways in which they were able to overcome the stigma and stereotypes typically associated with gay men by investing in the culture of the bar.

Much like the research of Aitchison (1999), Binnie and Skeggs (2004), and Slavin (2004), this study of *Saddlebags* illustrates how a gay space can serve as a site of community for gay men, and offer a respite from normative heterosexuality, but also demonstrates how it retains a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Gay men in my study were active and creative agents who constructed their own subject position in relation to the social practices and cultural discourses that existed in *Saddlebags*. By examining these social practices and cultural descriptions, I was able to discern how the gay men in *Saddlebags* engaged in a negotiation process that included both acquiescence and opposition to heteromasculine ideologies.

Interrogating the ways gay men in *Saddlebags* simultaneously reinforce and challenge hegemonic masculinity helps us to better understand how the idealized (hetero)sexual messages connected to symbolic power, strength, and self worth position gay men; gay men who serve as both the victims and benefactors of a patriarchal society, which maintains the perceived superiority of men.

As Oldenburg (1997) argued, spatial communities made up of men tend to "communicate a clear impression of masculinity....Slipping into a distinctly masculine style of talking and acting, men call out in one another the accumulated male experiences of their past...[showing] themselves to be 'regular guys' and [having] secured the trust of their fellow men" (p. 244). Of course, in this quote Oldenburg was speaking of

heterosexual men; however, as evidenced by my analysis, the same seems to be true in *Saddlebags*. In *Saddlebags* gay men not only want to celebrate being gay, but being gay men.

What is of concern then is if, and how, a country-western gay bar transmits outdated ideologies around masculinity. Does *Saddlebags* perpetuate and/or reshape traditional country-western ideologies such as exchanging women as commodities, white superiority, the rejection of homosocial bonding, survival of the strong (and aggressive), and the glorification of violence (Horrocks, 1995)? The practices of the men I have observed in *Saddlebags* both celebrate and challenge ideologies of hegemonic masculinity.

One social practice utilized by *Saddlebags* patrons to negotiate masculinity is the performative act of dress. Issues of dress in *Saddlebags* can be understood from two differing perspectives. Drawing from Butler (1991), we might assume that the gay men in *Saddlebags* are always “performing drag,” replicating inauthentic images based on inauthentic images essentialized as “the natural one.” Thus, dressing as a “regular guy” or a “cowboy” would be a transgressive practice that parodied assumed social norms. This parody elucidates the way that many gender-based appearances are usually afforded a heterosexual assumption even when non-heterosexuals can also achieve those gender-based appearances.

On the other hand, an alternative interpretation is that when gay men dress as “regular guys” and/or in “cowboy drag,” they are also (re)creating heteromale images that influence both the kinds of men they want to “be” at a given moment, and the kinds of men they want to attract in *Saddlebags*. In dressing this way these gay men are ascribing to a heterosexual male image, and thus hegemonic masculinity.

Regardless of which explanation is correct (and perhaps they both are), the gay men in *Saddlebags* are actively participating in the creation and stylizing of hegemonic male styles that have serious consequences for the gay community and society. In fact, Bordo (1999) suggested that the (re)discovery and social consumption of the male body and its appearance, reactivated by gay men, has idealized a male beauty (and perhaps narcissism) that can only be achieved through consumerism and commodification. Bordo (1999) wrote,

Images of masculinity that will do double (or triple or quadruple) duty with a variety of consumers, straight and gay, male and female are not difficult to create in a culture like ours.... A recent Abercrombie & Fitch ad, for example, depicts a locker room full of young, half-clothed football players...beautiful, undressed male bodies doing what real men are ‘supposed to do.’ (181-183)

Moreover, the appearance of masculinity is what gay men are supposed *to do* in *Saddlebags*.

On the other hand, gay men use *Saddlebags* as a middle ground where they create and access a “heteronormative gay masculinity” away from the stereotypical effeminate practices that exist in mainstream gay culture and/or the hypermasculine practices labeled as deviant in gay counter-cultures. Although the consequences for navigating this middle ground remain to be seen, the study reveals that *Saddlebags* does allow a space for exploring new and different male subjectivities, which is what Connell (1995) indicated would transform the oppressive nature of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, I fear the movement away from heteromale ideologies in

Saddlebags is not enough to truly be transgressive.

My study also reveals that gay men who connect to a leisure community like *Saddlebags*, or who use migration patterns to travel across the gay bar community, can experiment with multiple non-heterosexual identities as they search for safe and communal leisure away from compulsory heterosexuality. In these environments, gay men find themselves surrounded by those who share in their non-dominant sexual orientation, aiding in the creation and affirmation of non-heterosexual identities and permitting them to experiment with and/or perform multiple masculinities.

Darrin starts to notice how the crowd had dwindled. "Boys, it's time to mosey on over to Alleyways," he says attempting to personify the image of his costume. Its 3:30 a.m. and just about time for Alleyways to start picking up. Dirk shakes his head back and forth vigorously. Darrin looks at Dirk and begs, "Come-on Dirk," he says, "what do you have to do tomorrow?" "No, it's too late and I am getting too old to be out until eight in the morning. Time for me to go home, but you guys have fun," Dirk replies.

Dirk turns off 12th onto Garfield Avenue and looks over into the shopping center that houses Saddlebags. As he passes the bar he notices a group of men pouring out into the parking lot and he knows that, like him, most of them are on their way home after a long night of two-stepping. Though he can't imagine having been at Saddlebags for over six hours, he knows that Saddlebags is the only place most of these men go. He wonders what their lives are like, and if any of them are real cowboys. Then, suddenly he wonders if he should have gone to Alleyways. He wishes he weren't going home alone.

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(Footnotes)

¹ A more comprehensive discussion of feminist ethnography and the methodological details of this investigation are discussed in Johnson, C. W., & Samdahl, D. M. (2005). "The night they took over": Misogyny in a country-western gay bar. *Leisure Sciences*, 27, 331-348.