

## **We Are All Royalty** *Narrative Comparison of a Drag Queen and King*

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### **Abstract**

Drag performances have been studied time and time again as important visible leisure spaces of gender transgression. Few studies, however, have sought to understand the ways in which drag performers—kings and queens—relate to and shape queer communities. Using genderqueer as a theoretical lens and narrative inquiry as a methodological strategy, in this article we construct a conversation between a drag queen and king to demonstrate the ways in which they engage their drag personas for political and activist purposes, and how the leisure spaces they find themselves performing in influence their lives.

**Keywords:** *Drag performer, genderqueer, narrative inquiry, queer space*

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In recent years, media attention on drag performers has increased dramatically (Schact & Underwood, 2004; Vidal-Ortiz, 2008; Zervigon, 2009), transforming the once-hidden leisure activity of gay men and lesbians into a publicly recognized phenomenon. Television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*; films such as *To Wong Foo* (Brown, 1995) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (also a Broadway musical) (Hamlin, 1994); and popular press books like *Diary of a Drag Queen* (Harris, 2005) are all examples of the increasing attention paid to drag performers in the public sphere. Yet, these depictions among others often characterize drag performers (and transgender people more broadly) as suffering at the hands of heterosexism and transphobia or as outrageous social actors whose lives are carefully (re)constructed and edited to create marketable images for mass entertainment. Many of these contemporary mediated representations of drag performers (mostly drag queens) have fallen short, however, in offering reflective illustrations of the everyday lived experiences of people with nonnormative gender expressions. Given the misconceptions and misunderstandings circulating around queer lives in general, any intervention that attempts to more fully represent their lives can contribute to the project of rehumanizing people who reject gender binaries (Ivie, 2007). In response, we find ourselves studying the lived experiences of drag queens and kings across North America to illuminate the variety of experiences that shape their lives on and off the drag stage and to understand the social consequences that result from gender nonconformity in play, recreation, and leisure spaces (Johnson, 2009). Adopting a feminist lens, our purpose is to highlight the stories of two drag performers and demonstrate how they both undermine and/or reaffirm dichotomous notions of gender (Butler, 1990, 1993) within the specific realms of politics and queer space, illustrating how gender presentation functions within and against a broader cultural project.

### Setting the Stage: Genderqueer as a Theoretical Framework

A pervasive and longstanding tradition of gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer leisure, drag performances represent an important social and political arena for people marginalized on the basis of gender and/or sexual identity (Newton, 1972; Barnett & Johnson, 2013). Shifting between entertainment, comedy, and political commentary, established drag performers serve as some of the most visible members of LGBTQQ communities and are regularly invoked as spokespersons for local struggles both in and outside the LGBTQQ community (Barnett & Johnson).

As a term, drag performer warrants unpacking. Cross-dresser, transvestite, and (female/male) impersonator are occasionally used to describe the same subject, but we use drag performer throughout this essay since it is the most recognized and frequently used identity marker. In everyday parlance, the first part of the moniker, drag, means making oneself appear to be someone of another gender. The drag look might be generically gendered, based on another person specifically (e.g., Cher or Michael Jackson), or designed to emulate a social role such as grandmother or housekeeper (Newton, 1972). One common misconception about drag is that it necessarily involves movement across gender presentation; for example, a biological female *must*, for instance, make herself appear (more) masculine to engage in drag. Although most drag kings are biological females who assume a masculine aesthetic, it is not always the case. Bio-kings and bio-queens are people who perform their own biological sex through a heightened or exaggerated gender presentation. Rupp and Taylor (2003) argued that drag performers “are people who create their own authentic genders” (p. 131). Read as a definition, Rupp and Taylor’s assertion honors the agency of drag performers to construct and present gender on their own terms.

The second half of the term, performer, points to the theatrical component of drag. Whether staged or not, drag takes on characteristics of theatrical performance since it requires the performer to assume a different persona, aesthetic, and attitude. In most cases, drag performers can be found in leisure spaces such as bars, restaurants, parties, pride parades, political rallies, fund-raisers, and so on. And though many performers do count on the income generated from their performances to sustain their livelihood, most performers still characterize it as a leisure practice performed primarily in leisure spaces for the purposes of entertaining others.

Although drag performers may be best known for their staged performances, drag queens and kings are people with complex lives. Drag performers are routinely identified as and conceived of as either transgender or transsexual, despite the fact that many performers do not identify in these ways. *Transgender* (or simply *trans*) emerged in popular and academic contexts in the 1970s and 1980s (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Valentine, 2007). The use of the word varies across social actors and social contexts. Some use the term to describe people who have altered their gender expression in everyday life, while others use the term more broadly to discuss anyone who presents their gender in nonnormative ways—including those who have genital reassignment surgeries (transsexuals), those who cross-dress (transvestites), and those who present gender outside the male-female gender binary (Stryker, 2006; Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Originally invoked to draw a distinction between *transsexuals*, people who undergo surgical procedures, transgender eventually came to represent a radically open term for anyone who did not quite fit into their ascribed gender (Valentine, 2007).

Some activists and scholars contest the term transgender for being both too inclusive and too exclusive, and for subsuming a range of gender variations under the term's purview (Valentine, 2007). Namaste (2006) has articulated the difficulties associated with the word transgender, noting that its strengths and weaknesses derive from its "catchall" (p. 60) nature. In other words, what began as a way to establish common ground has lost much of its definitional import as the category itself has expanded beyond its original meaning. In response to these criticisms, feminist and queer movements invented another, more specific term to describe particular people who fall broadly within the trans category—*genderqueer*.

Genderqueer has only recently entered the lexicon of feminist scholars and activists. Despite the lack of a formal definition, at least a few characteristics are recognizable for people who identify as genderqueer. Refusing to categorize themselves as either male or female, genderqueer individuals may opt to identify "as both, or somewhere in between" (Beemyn, 2009) to challenge the male-female gender binary and the assortment of norms and roles that are associated with gender concepts. However, genderqueer, transgender, and transsexual are not synonymous. Genderqueers do not necessarily transition from one gender or sex to another. They may, however, visually express themselves in ways that are non-normative. For instance, in Corwin's (2009) study, one participant simultaneously drew attention to his/her breasts as well as the facial hair she/he had grown into a small beard. Highlighting features that are normally associated with two different genders, the participant effectively illustrated that not only are corporeal understandings of gender superficial, but that they can be melded or re-appropriated despite limiting biological conceptualizations. This is, of course, a founding tenet of queer theory (Butler, 1990).

Oftentimes, people who identify as genderqueer actively engage the trans movement as a means of political resistance and use their ambiguous expressions to contest binary constructions of gender and sexuality. Genderqueer, like the term transgender, refers not to biological sex or sexual orientation, but rather to the gender expression (or lack thereof) of those who identify "beyond the sexual binary" (Nestle, Wilchins, & Howell, 2002). Thus, genderqueer is more or

less about unHINGING the possibilities of gender expression and embodying an understanding of gender that questions what it means to live and interact with others who are similarly or differently situated with regard to gender (Corwin, 2009). Genderqueers do not simply reject gender, they regularly tinker with it to confuse and gesture toward the fluidity they feel marks it. That is to say, genderqueer illuminates the malleability of gender and reminds us that social constructs can be easily transgressed and transformed, and that no one is biologically or culturally bound to any one set of gender expectations.

Genderqueer also allows for an explicit politicizing of gender insofar as it recognizes gender expressions that are ambiguous and attempts to not reify traditional binaries. In so doing, genderqueer is an outright challenge to core assumptions about “womanhood” and “manhood.” As Wilchins (2002) points out, “gender is the new frontier: the place to rebel, to create new individuality and uniqueness, to defy old, outdated, tired social norms” (p. 13), and it is this particular space that provides genderqueers with an opportunity to express themselves in ways that they see as appropriate. By deliberately calling into question the qualities that make it easy to visually characterize someone as male or female, genderqueers simultaneously call into question the foundations of many of the more insidious social systems, namely patriarchy and essentialized notions of gender roles. Since so much of Western culture is dependent on the maintenance of the female-male gender binary and the roles associated with each end of that two-type spectrum, genderqueer as an identity, a politics, and a theoretical tool creates opportunities to transgress and expose the inadequacies of such a system.

### Method

This feminist project adopts a genderqueer lens and the methodological approach of narrative inquiry to better understand the complex lives of enduring drag performers. Narrative inquiry seemed most appropriate for our study of drag performers because of its inherent potential to position the gendered subjectivities of participants, illuminate examples of agency and cultural contestation in leisure, reveal human transformation, and promote advocacy through connection with the reader (Costa & Matzner, 2007). Narrative inquiry may also empower participants by emphasizing their shared humanity through personal stories of joy, sorrows, struggles, and the activities of daily living (Costa & Matzner).

There are several styles of narrative inquiry and we selected the experience-centred approach (Squire, 2008) because it “assumes that narratives: are sequential and meaningful; are definitely human; ‘re-present’ experience, reconstituting it, as well as expressing it; (and,) display transformation and change” (p. 42). This approach is especially pertinent to the participants’ (human) focus on meaning making of life events in relation to genderqueer expressions. Also, the approach provides the discursive space to explore how local and global social contexts are inextricably linked (Phoenix, 2008).

Consistent with other feminist approaches, our narrative inquiry put participants in the center of the research process as the experts of their own life stories (Riessman, 2007; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). The narrative platform allowed the participants to both create and become “part of a written document—a testimony of what occurred at a particular moment of history” (Stuhlmiller, 2001, p. 75). This sense of empowerment is especially salient in feminist inquiry where the participant feels like their voice and/or story was originally silenced or ignored and may be even more significant for participants who additionally find themselves in the social margins for other stigmatized characteristics (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). The methodol-

ogy (Riessman, 2007) and dialogic form of Creative Analytic Practice (Johnson & Parry, 2007) used in this project were deliberately selected to help address this silence.

Once human subjects' approval was secured and we had permission to use the public persona of the performers (with their consent), we employed both purposive and snowball sampling strategies to recruit queens and kings from across North America. Our goal was to have a cadre of performers who represent the diversity of the drag community in terms of race/ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, size of city, motivations for performing (career, charity, etc.) and length of career. However, we did want participants to have enduring involvement in drag, so we set five years as the minimum number of years performing. Both locally and as we traveled, we would scour the web and Facebook to learn about well-known drag performers in any destinations we visited. Once we identified the notable performers in that city, we made contact to request an interview. Depending on the notoriety of each performer or the difficulty in our recruitment efforts, we sometimes offered to donate \$100 in the performer's name to a charity of their choosing to compensate them for their time. We made donations on behalf of two queens and four kings in total. Upon consent to participate, we scheduled an interview at a time and location of convenience including living rooms, hotel lobbies, restaurants, bars, and dressing rooms.

Interviews were conducted in a semistructured format, where participants shared their stories in ways that allowed them to focus on what was most appropriate and/or relevant, providing an opportunity to be heard in ways that might otherwise be dismissed or redirected (Gysels, Shipman, & Higginson, 2008; Riessman, 2007). Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours and were digitally recorded and accompanied by researcher field notes, which captured contextual descriptions and researcher thoughts, emotions, and early interpretations. Topics covered during the interviews were wide ranging, but always included the first time they performed drag, selection of their drag name, their most meaningful and memorable performances, and their relationships with other performers.

After verbatim transcription of the interviews, the analysis involved looking both at specific storylines occurring throughout the large set of interviews and specifically for these two performers. Analysis was initially aimed at identifying multiple narrative trajectories relating to politics, activism, and space using Tamboukou's thematic narrative analysis to examine stories of gender at the social level to promote an alternate way of seeing leisure (Aitchison, 1999; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). Focused narratives were carefully evaluated for the way Dickie and Dominique describe social negotiations in relation to the two themes: politics/activism and queer leisure space.

What follows is a brief biography and description of each performer followed by a constructed dialogue between two of the participants (Johnson & Parry, 2007). We have chosen to put only 2 of the 14 performers we interviewed into conversation here in order to highlight their lived experiences and perspectives more robustly. Recognizing the possibilities of these new models of representation (Glover, 2007; Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson, 2005), we wanted to explore a form of depicting our findings in ways that would contextualize our participants' experiences, honor a multiplicity of perspectives, and explore the overall complexity of drag culture. Epistemologically, we appreciate a more dialogic and polyvocal approach to representing our participants' stories, and we encourage our readers to consult the criteria related to judging this work (Richardson, 2000; Johnson & Parry, 2007).

In constructing the conversation below, we selected noteworthy portions of the much longer interviews and conceptually grouped these sections together. The result is a coherent conversation that leaves the original wording and phrasing of our participants intact. As was the case

in the actual interviews, our role is minimal and serves primarily as a means by which to move the conversation from one topic to another. We occasionally insert nonverbal cues in order to more fully convey the attitudes and personalities of our participants. We present two thematic conversations, which are each followed by our analysis of the genderqueer politics enacted by the performers. We have shared this piece with both Dickie and Dominique and incorporated their feedback to build trustworthiness in the data representation. We are pleased to have their blessing.

### Welcome to the Stage: Introducing our Drag Performers

#### Dominique Sanchez, Little Rock, Arkansas

I finished eating my meal at one of several steakhouses lining the Arkansas River in downtown Little Rock and left my colleagues in order to make my nine o'clock appointment with Dominique Sanchez at Trinité Bar.<sup>1</sup> "Can you drive quickly?" I asked. "I'm running a bit late." Eventually, we pulled up to a dimly lit building where I was greeted by an older man who led me through a maze of hallways that eventually ended in Dominique's dressing room—a pink-walled, mirror-lined cave of a room with wigs and dresses and CDs and caboodles full of makeup.

"Born and raised in Little Rock," Dominique told me as the radio blasted top-40s in the background. "I was always a very ... kind of an in-between type of person," she said. "You know, I definitely wasn't masculine at all ... and a lot of times I was mistaken for a girl ... so I was kind of in that in-between stage." Her family always knew that the little boy's body that Dominique occupied as a child did not quite fit. Dominique remembered, "It was never a secret ... who I was." When she was a little older, in the spring of 1997, a local performer saw Dominique working at Pizza Hut and suggested that she consider performing sometime. Dominique laughed, recalling her response to the stranger in drag: "What is that?" Not long after, Dominique signed up and performed at a talent night in Little Rock. Fortunately, she says, "nobody knew [she] was underage." Because Paula Abdul was "still kind of hot" in 1997, Dominique's debut performance was *Cold Hearted Snake*. And although she was admittedly unprepared for the show, Dominique jokes that her background as a dancer helped her get through the number without any fatal flaws. After several drag performances at local gay bars and in small pageants, Dominique says she felt confident enough to take part in some of the larger national pageants.

Dominique left me alone in her dressing room while she ran to the bar to fetch drinks. Taking a swig of the Jack Daniels she brought me, I asked, "Can you tell me about your experience in the pageant world?" Five years ago, Dominique competed in and won the Miss Gay America pageant, arguably the most well-known and respected drag pageant in the United States. She told me this was her most meaningful performance because it proved to others (some whom she says did not believe in her) that she had the skills and beauty to become a success story in the world of drag pageantry. She procured another title in 2010 when she won the Miss Gay USofA pageant, which helped secure her status as a model figure in the drag world. As she listed off her accomplishments with great modesty, Dominique fixed her hair while moving her body to rhythms emanating from the radio. Foundation, mascara, eye shadow, lipstick, and a whole assortment of items were laid on the counter in front of her, the tools of her trade.

Dominique chose drag as a career path at an early age and said that the profession has enabled her to travel the country in ways that would not have otherwise been possible. As an African American transsexual woman, Dominique also noted how drag has allowed her to share

<sup>1</sup>Author 1

her story with countless audiences across the United States. Though she has intermittently taught dance and cheerleading, when we spoke, drag was her primary source of income. Dominique lives her everyday life as a woman: She has been taking hormones for more than a half-decade and has had breast implants.

Dominique and I sat together for a couple hours while she prepared for the Friday night show. I asked a question every now and then, but mostly Dominique told me stories and asked about my life. It was just the two of us sharing the dressing room, and I thought how divine it must be to have her own space, if only just for the night because of her commitment to me. Considering the lowly dressing commons so often appropriated for performers, I thought, “How fabulous this must be! These queens are living like royalty!” The metamorphosis occurred right before my eyes: layers of foundation, highlights, eye shadow, faux eyelashes, and gobs of lipstick and lip gloss. I was fascinated and surprised at how Dominique managed it all, transforming her appearance and not missing a beat in the interview. I was, simply, mesmerized by the queen in the room!

### **Dickie Jaxx, Durham, North Carolina**

It had been a long time since I had conducted an interview given that I had spent the last few years mostly in ethnographic observation or focus groups settings.<sup>2</sup> I was a bit anxious as my car crept down the street and my eyes darted back and forth trying to locate the house numbers. 832, 835, 834, 837. I pulled to the side of the road and inspected the place to try to determine what sort of person might be inside and wondered if they would be in drag. I was surprised that she had invited me—a researcher on drag performers, a stranger, a man—to her house on a Sunday at such an early hour.

She met me at the door and I was caught off guard; she was handsome, cute, and softly masculine—not in drag. I found her incredibly attractive, which is not something I usually find women. I am certain I became more awkward as I recognized my uncomfortable attraction. We exchanged pleasantries as she offered me a seat on an oversized couch. Immediately, her dog offered his company by laying at my feet and one of her cats, Raymond, moseyed up for some affection. I saw her sit up ready to swat the cat away, but I quickly assured her I love animals. After reminding me she had another appointment in two hours, a scheduled phone conversation with her dad, I asked her to tell me a little about herself. “What do you want to know?” she asked back with a smile that made my heart sink a bit with affection. “Vegan, Asian-American, Drag King. I am working on my undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies at UNC Chapel Hill” ... which led to a tangential and lengthy admiration for our shared alma mater and my anxiety decreased as my admiration grew.

The child of a special forces operative, Vanessa (her given name) described her childhood as a form of basic training as she moved a lot, over 30 times before she was 13 years old. Some of the time, she noted, was in Central America during the Noriega Campaign and Panamanian Occupation. Regardless of their location, however, Vanessa said her parents appreciated her affinity for sports and never asked her to wear dresses. In fact, in her younger years, her father wore her tomboyish nature as a badge of pride as he was impressed his little girl could “beat all the boys.” With respect to sports, there is only one she says she hasn’t played—“softball, which I avoided on purpose, for obvious reasons.” Vanessa described herself as a Southern California Surfer Chick, who began exploring her lesbian identity when she met a girl in high school and thought to herself, “Do I want to be you or fuck you? I can’t tell the difference.” Regardless,

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<sup>2</sup>Author 2



she came out living “on base” with her parents, which was challenging especially given that her father became violent toward her and eventually kicked Vanessa out of their home. During that time she was forced to live with teachers, friends, and others who would take her in, which resulted in a new family of people in her life—a queer family, which she says helped her become more “out.”

In the face of economic hardship and given her athletic prowess, she was able to secure a basketball scholarship to attend San Francisco State University. While she was there she struggled to balance an athletic and academic career, but did not sacrifice having a good time—it was San Francisco after all. Eventually she was asked to leave the University. She was unable to secure government financial assistance due to her young age and her parents had disowned her, but not before she experienced the queer scene—the street parties, drugs, sex, and all. Wanting something more than the party life and working three jobs to survive, she used a geographical break to create a psychological shift and moved to Asheville, North Carolina, or what she calls Ashevillegas. Over the past ten years she has oscillated between California and North Carolina, but when we met she was living in Durham and said it felt like she was finally home.

Now reconciled with her family, Vanessa enthusiastically described her recent marriage to her partner of six years, Natalie, whom she met doing drag. Although for Vanessa drag started as just something to do at house parties in her early 20s, it has taken serious root in her life in her late 20s because she believes “we can change this [sexism/heterosexism], we can heal this.” In her early years, she performed without consciousness or critique of gender, wearing whatever was in vogue. Pleather, Ricky Martin, taped nipples, Trent Reznor, duct-taping down, George Michael.

And so, as these things happen, Dickie Jaxx was born into a full-fledged identity. From New York to Chicago, Minneapolis to San Diego, and even internationally in Canada and Europe, Dickie Jaxx has performed all over the world with the troupe she helped form, the Cuntry Kings. So, why “Dickie Jaxx?” “Its not really fascinating enough to detail,” she says, “just the typical porn name equation: your first pet plus the first street you lived on”—except in this case it was the equation of a close friend whose she liked better than her own, so she asked to co-opt it and it has been her drag name ever since.

## Dominique and Dickie Chat: A Narrative Comparison

### Politics and Activism

**Corey:** [Bending over and hitting the record button, sits back and says,] We’re curious about how drag is sometimes political and activist-oriented. Can you both discuss how you may or may not have incorporated this stance into your performances?

**Dickie:** Sure, I’ll start. After coming out as lesbian in high school and dealing with familial tensions, that definitely sort of catapulted me into being out and queer. So, when I started performing, it was sort of a very typical beginning, I think. [pausing briefly] I mean, I had no critique of masculinity I was performing or what I was saying, or what I was doing. I mean, as long as whatever I was wearing was sexy then, that is what sold [sitting more forward in the chair]. But the Cuntry Kings [Dickie’s drag king troupe] literally changed my life and they saved my life. I was not political, I was not aware. They literally opened my eyes to the world through performance.

**Joshua:** What about you, Dominique? Has drag brought about a political life for you?

**Dominique:** My performances aren’t as political. [waving her hand dismissively]. I wouldn’t



say being a drag performer will do that. At least not around here [in Little Rock, Arkansas]. Well, period. I don't think so ... because I think that ... that comes ... the more notoriety you get as a performer. You know, when you become one of the popular ones, or you become one of the titleholders, people tend to listen to you more in that avenue. Because, you know, when you're a titleholder people look at you as a spokesperson for the community so you can kind of use that as a way to make your voice heard.

As Miss USA, I make sure that every time I visit wherever the preliminaries are, I try to say some type of message ... I try to speak about something. I've just been trying to get people to understand that one of the biggest obstacles for being a gay person, or transgender, or whatever the case may be ... one of the biggest battles that we have to fight is getting along with the people that are in our same community. Because, in my opinion, that's where I feel we receive the most discrimination and the most bullying ... are from other gay people!

**Dickie:** [nodding in affirmation] I agree about the political progression of drag. Over the years, I think I just sort of morphed into whatever we needed. Do we need an elder? Do we need a politician? Do we need a tin man? What is it that we're trying to say?

**Joshua:** [addressing Dickie and Dominique simultaneously] So, you're able to say something to the audience? Are these things you wouldn't be able to say if you weren't performing?

**Dickie:** It's not just sending the message, but getting the audience to really engage with the fact that yes [these issues are] real and yet there is something you can do about it ... and you can do something about it everyday.

**Dominique:** Right, because people don't understand that there's a lot of power in the words that they say and you never know what you're doing to somebody ... because ... you never know when you're going to push somebody over the edge to do something.

**Joshua:** What is it that informs your drag activism?

**Dominique:** [pondering the question] I wouldn't necessarily call myself an activist, but I would say that I'm very interested in people. And I'm very interested in treatment of people. But as someone that was mistreated growing up, I hate to see other people mistreated. So if I ... I just ... I'm nosey! [everyone chuckles]. I'm real nosey. And so like if one of ... if I see somebody that's having a fight with their boyfriend or something like that ... you know, I'll pull a person to the side, and I don't have to know them. And I just be like, 'What's going on?' And you know, they'll start telling me ... people just talk to me for some reason. I would say that I'm more of a matriarch as opposed to being an activist.

**Joshua:** And for you Dickie?

**Dickie:** The Cuntry Kings basically work as a feminist collective. We perform masculinity and we feel as though we have a responsibility to talk about some of the deeper issues, you know? We are able to put ourselves into a position of power that we don't normally exist in so we are able to talk about things like patriarchy and misogyny in really clever ways. Oh, and also racism in really clever ways that we wouldn't have access to if we weren't perceived as male. So that is where the feminism comes from ... because we feel we have a responsibility. It comes into this really interesting place of entertainment and education and I think ultimately what we are trying to do is put on stage a world we would really like to see or critique what is already existing.

**Corey:** [after a moment of awkward silence] Would you each mind sharing an example or two about what these different types of activism and political consciousness look like on stage?

**Dickie:** Our first show was actually somewhat significant in the sense that it was also around the same time that the first march on Washington to protest the war in Iraq, which I think was 2003. So um, we literally did the show ... and it was ... you know, we had already planned when

we were going to do the show, it just so happened that the march was going to be that day. So we literally did this fantastic show. We sold out. We told the audience, 'We're going to this march, if you want to come, we will find cars. We will caravan. And people did. They did come. And that was important because the Cuntry Kings are very political.

**Dominique:** Something I do on a regular basis is to try to desegregate my home bar.

**Corey:** Can you tell us more about that?

**Dominique:** Okay, like, sometimes we'll be at a show and then, you know, like the black people be sitting, like, in a group over here [motioning to the right]; and then you have the college kids sitting over here [motioning to the left]; the Hispanic people are sitting at the back—standing up in the back [waving over at Joshua]. And then I'll just say ... I'll say something like, 'Why don't we integrate this whole area?' I'll say, 'Why is everybody separated?' And stuff like that. Or I'll say things like ... like I'll make up a joke about food stamps or being on, you know, government assistance, and then I'll say, 'But don't misunderstand the fact that black people and other minorities are the only ones on government assistance.' You know? [waving her index finger in a telling fashion]. I say stuff like that. And then sometimes you'll have people that'll be like, 'Oh my god!' And it's just really funny how people react because whenever you're saying things about blacks, it's okay. When you're talking about how ghetto people are, when you're saying stuff about eating fried chicken and watermelon and all that type of stuff that is stereotypical about black people, they're okay with that. And that's funny. Everybody thinks that's funny.

**Joshua:** So, do you ever push further with your commentary?

**Dominique:** Oh, yes! One time this guy was acting like a complete asshole. I mean a complete asshole—this straight guy. He was acting like a complete ... he was just being totally out of control. And so I said ... I didn't call him that, but I said ... what I said was, 'You are acting like an ignorant cracker.' [room full of chuckles]. I said that. He was pissed! And he wanted me to be fired and everything. So I mean ... so I think I purposefully try to provoke people sometimes ... just to make them think. And what I have noticed ... that the more ... because, at first, I think it used to bother Norman that I used to do stuff like that, that I used to say such crazy things to the audience, but what I've noticed is that it's not as separated as it used to be.

While drag has mostly been understood as an entertaining leisure activity for both performers and audience, it also demonstrates how leisure can be used as a site of political transgression and resistance (Shaw, 2006). Both Dominique and Dickie understand drag as a political act, although the subjectivities they assume as performers and the methods they employ as sociopolitical actors varies. As a theoretical lens, genderqueer provided a point of entry for thinking through the ways in which drag queens and kings engage differently in political work. As Beemyn (2009) noted, genderqueers exist in a liminal space, "somewhere in between," as opposed to occupying a static gender identity (p. 1). As both an identity and a politics, genderqueer promotes movement within this "in-between" space as a productive means of resisting constraining discourses like those that force women and men to constantly "bring their bodies and appearances into line with [society]" (Wearing, 1998). Instead, moving in between gender identities and representations affords Dominique and Dickie the ability to take up gender presentation intentionally and strategically (Spivak, 1987) in leisure regimes, which enables them to reinterpret and deploy socio-political and historical embodiments (Wearing, 1998).

Dominique, who identifies as a transsexual woman, sometimes engages the social role of "matriarch" as a political subjectivity. For Dominique, the idea of the matriarch functions in the political economy of queer leisure space as both foundational and progressive. In many drag

queen communities, the moniker of “mother” is assigned to drag performers who give care and advice to younger or less advanced performers on topics ranging from how to do one’s makeup to how to survive in what can be a harsh world for people who present their gender outside the binary. One key role of the drag mother is to offer protection, both to her fellow drag performers and the patrons in the space where she performs (for a satirical interpretation of the drag mother, see Gibson et al., 2010). As a performed identity, matriarch functions performatively to constitute a set of practices and expectations for the social actor who takes it on as an identity (Butler, 1993). In performing the matriarch, Dominique constitutes herself as a matriarch, complete with the advantages and limitations of such a subject position while perpetuating the values surrounding the “ethic of care” (Wearing, 1998) as those belonging to women. Despite the feminist critique of motherhood, Dominique engages her own “motherly” disposition in productive ways.

Dominique moves between her identity as an entertainer and her identity as a matriarch both on and off stage, thus shedding light on important issues for the broader LGBTQQ population. Drawing on both matriarchal and “strong black woman” personas (Haris-Lacewell, 2001), Dominique is able to situate herself as both an outspoken individual and a point of contact for a range of social concerns. She noted, for instance, that one of her primary goals is to share a “message” with the many groups she speaks to around the country. Recently, that message has been about in-fighting and queer-on-queer harassment. As she travels the country sharing this message, Dominique evokes the matriarch as a subject position worth listening to, based on her years of experience performing and her investment in the leisure community. The matriarch persona allows Dominique to make assessments of her peers in a way that is both confrontational and caring (both motherly) at the same time. As a subject position, matriarch-performer endows Dominique with a strong sense of authority and agency. When a drag mother speaks people listen.

This subject position has its benefits in Dominique’s local setting. At Trinity Bar, where she performs each week, Dominique engages in conversations with patrons about things that are happening in their lives. The conversations range from very personal to those that are communal in nature. Either way, by engaging in these conversations, Dominique’s performance (or work) constructs a leisure space for queer people to come together, to feel heard, and to organize collectively. Because people come to Dominique with their concerns and issues, she is uniquely situated to understand what is happening within the LGBTQQ community. We argue that the “in-between” work/leisure space created by drag personas is what encourages individuals to open up to Dominique as well as what encourages Dominique to take part in political commentary. In other words, the conversations she has with other drag performers and community members equip Dominique to speak both on behalf of and to the larger community.

Beyond individual conversations, Dominique also endeavors to start a broader conversation about overlapping and intersecting oppressions within the space of her local gay bar. Enacting feminist politics, Dominique uses her genderqueer subjectivity, which relies on both notions of masculinity and femininity for its authority, to ask controversial questions and make critical comments from the stage. One way that she does this is by calling attention to racial divisions present in Trinity Bar. In one recounted story, Dominique asked patrons, “Why don’t we integrate this whole area?” Taking up the subject position of matriarch enables Dominique to ask these questions and to make evaluations of the audience in a way that may offend some but that ultimately paves the way for important conversations about race, class, and gender (hooks, 2000). This action contributes to Pedlar and Haworth’s (2006) ideas that “communal politics

[in leisure] requires a committed and energetic citizenry with an ability to make their voices known and heard. They need to be not just knowledgeable, but must have the ability [and we argue authority] to act on that knowledge” (p. 528). Dominique uses the conversations she has with others to construct messages that are relevant to LGBTQQ communities, which she then deploys in her performances and as she travels in the pageant circuit. Sometimes these messages are controversial, but ultimately Dominique’s reputation enables her to shed light on some of the most troubling aspects of queer sociality—sexism, racism, and in-group violence.

Dickie also oscillates between subject positions and political methods, but does so with more reflexivity about her feminist intentions than Dominique. Ayoup and Podmore (2002) noted that, “While on the one hand [drag kings] are appropriating masculine values and attributes, they are, on the other hand, seen as the ‘true gender radicals’ because they are ‘women’ challenging a patriarchal gender system by appropriating male power” (p. 66). By assuming a masculine subject position, Dickie appropriates the agency and authority attributed to male sociopolitical actors to advance her own feminist agenda. She noted, “We perform masculinity and we feel as though we have a responsibility to talk about some of the deep issues.” Dickie is intentional about her invocation of the masculine persona, strategically taking up masculine characteristics and appearance while acknowledging that, to some degree, it is the masculine persona that permits the commentary to take place.

In Dickie’s case, political commentary and explicitly political performances of resistance provide the tools for constructing new ways of being and interacting (Shaw, 2006). She recounted her first show with the Cuntry Kings,<sup>3</sup> which came at the same time as a march in Washington, DC, to oppose the war in Iraq. Dickie and her drag troupe encouraged the audience to get involved, to go to the march, and to protest the war. The Cuntry Kings are enabled, in part, to engage in political work of this sort because of their appropriation of masculinity. This process is akin to Spivak’s (1987) notion of strategic essentialism in which marginalized groups temporarily identify with an essentialized notion of identity to advance a position, although in Dickie’s case it involved the temporary invocation of masculinity as a performance identity to garner support for a political cause. As Wearing (1998) suggested, this possibility

opens up the way for challenging and transforming the binary opposition of male and female bodies so that the male body is always imbued with power and the female body inferiorized, due to its lack of phallus... [making it possible] to move beyond subjectivities for both men and women which are rigidly based on bodily sex difference. The sphere of leisure seems an obvious place for this to be done (p. 114).

Dickie and her drag troupe enact a broad-based political/activist messaging system when they take to the stage, addressing national issues like the war in Iraq as well as local, individual issues like misogyny in their bar. Politics for Dickie is explicitly rooted in a feminist perspective, which enables her and her troupe to make political statements that deal with gender and race, for example. Such a perspective also allows for a deliberate reflexivity about their performances that may not be possible for performers or troupes that are not aware of or intentional about their politically motivated work.

While both Dominique and Dickie assume different subjectivities and employ different methods for political action, they both move through the “in between” space afforded by genderqueer politics (Beemyn, 2009). Key to genderqueer’s political potential is its emphasis on

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<sup>3</sup>The spelling of the name of Dickie’s troupe, in and of itself, could be considered an act of resistance (Shaw, 2006).

an explicit politicization of gender, enabling people to “defy old, outdated, tired social norms” (Wilchins, 2002, p. 13). In the case of these two performers, both draw strategically on performative repertoires of gender expression in queer leisure space to engage in important political work, a move that gestures to the fluidity of gender itself and to the productive potential of conceiving gender more broadly (Barker, 2006).

### Queer Leisure Spaces

**Joshua:** That moves us into another area of interest. We’re both quite fascinated in how drag performers make use of space. Can you start by discussing what space means to you, Dickie?

**Dickie:** Queer space is something very important to me. The Cuntry Kings’ mission is creating space. I hope that it definitely brings in people who normally wouldn’t get to see each other, get to be out, get to be fabulous ... whatever they are ... or dykey, or bi, or whatever they want to be. Hopefully that creates like a safe space.

We were like, ‘Queer space needs to happen, performance needs to happen’ ... and even at this point I still was not aware of the political implications of what would be important.

And actually, we ended up having this venue called Bullies, which does not exist anymore, but ended up being our venue because we ended up befriending the owner and he was just like, ‘You can have it.’ So we performed there. It was a sell out show. It had one boiler ... it actually was connected to the hot water so every time you went to go to the bathroom you got a little steam bath ... that’s how dirty this place was. But it is where we made our home.

**Dominique:** For me, the bars are very important because if we didn’t have them I don’t think we would ever see each other. I think that it’s really important because if we didn’t have them, the community here would be nonexistent.

**Corey:** Why do you think the bars are so important?

**Dominique:** Because the community here [in Little Rock, Arkansas] is not very big and, you know, outside of the club scene, you don’t see very many people. You know, you don’t really spend a lot of time with everybody because other than the club scene there’s not really any places just for gay people to get together and hang out and all that type of stuff. Because ... they try to have events here. You know ... gay pride events ... nobody comes. And you’ll be like, ‘Where is everybody?’ But when you come out to the club, the club is packed ... and the club is full. But then you try to have little events like that and nobody wants to come out and participate. But then everybody wants to bitch and complain that, ‘Oh my god! There’s not enough to do for gay people here.’ Then why don’t y’all ever participate when they have stuff? So I think that it’s really important because if we didn’t have them, the community here would be nonexistent.

**Dickie:** I think the bars are really important, too. They provide the venue to put on stage a world we would really like to see or critique what already exists. I can’t say that I’ve had too many problems, even with straight bar owners. I think it just comes down to economics. We’ve been putting on these shows for a really long time in many different areas, in many places, and I always find that, gay or straight, people just want to know ‘Is our cut 20%?’ Do I keep the bar? I mean I can’t say that I’ve really had a lot of backlash due to our content. I think that people have generally been like, ‘That’s a novel idea.’ You know? Like, ‘Do you really think that you can get that many people?’ I’ve definitely had that question. You know, ‘How many people do you think you’re going to get?’ You know? That kind of stuff. I’ve always been able to say very confidently like, ‘We will sell this place out.’ You know? Or come very close. I think that really sways people.

**Joshua:** Can either of you think of a time when spaces other than bars were important to you?

**Dickie:** Yeah. Actually, my entry into the drag world was not at a club at all. So we [friends] would always hang out and do that [perform] in our houses. And finally another person who was from Florida and had performed with some Florida drag kings ... who is actually trans ... was like, 'Have y'all ever thought about, like doing shows?' And we were like, 'For people?' [Chuckles]. I remember when he said 'drag,' I was like, 'I don't even ... what?'

Bars are perhaps the most commonly studied sites of queer convergence (Barnett & Johnson, 2013; Halferty, 2008; Hindle, 1994; Johnson, 2008). Primarily, scholarly attention has been given to them because, as Johnson (2008) argued, "gay bars offer a place where patrons can find and/or build community" (p. 399). Moreover, as Wearing (1998) suggested, leisure often creates the spaces for "positive, self-enhancing experiences, which are for the good of all" (p. 119). For both Dominique and Dickie, queer leisure spaces are about bringing people together who otherwise would not get to see each other because the communities they live within are not gay enclaves that support a large, active, and out LGBTQQ population. Additionally, both identify bars as the key leisure space in their communities that foster and harbor queer interactions, making it possible for a genderqueer subjectivity to arise, even if it is limited to the local context of a third space (Oldenburg, 1997).

Queer space involves not just "sites" but also practices that constitute those sites as queer (Halberstam, 2005). Although the practices vary, queer spaces do not exist *a priori*, but are created and preserved with more or less success depending on the practices engaged. Drag is one such practice. Dickie is interested not only in occupying and performing in queer leisure spaces, but also in creating them. Genderqueer is a creative and intentional identity and politics, which helps to explain Dickie's focus on carving out spaces where a genderqueer identity might flourish. She noted that bars offer a space to put "on stage a world we would really like to see or critique what is already existing." Adopting a genderqueer perspective allows Dickie to re-imagine the role of the stage and her role as a performer. Just as the genderqueer body is malleable and constantly capable of change, so too are the spaces and social contexts where that body moves about. Thus, bars become more than sites for entertainment, but also for politics, organizing, and in(ter)vention.

Dominique's use of the bar is similar, although she has a home bar where she hosts and performs in drag shows on a regular basis. Thus, rather than inventing new queer spaces, Dominique works hard to maintain the bars as an important queer space in her community since, as she put it, "outside of the club scene, you don't really see many [LGBTQQ] people." By identifying the local gay bars as the (only viable) space for queer convergence, Dominique assumes the matriarchal role of preservation by doing what she can to ensure that the space continues to exist. And the primary way that Dominique can preserve the bars is by performing in them and drawing large crowds who spend their money and keep the bar profitable. Thus, while the bar offers the "one place" where, in Dominique's view, LGBTQ people in Little Rock are likely to come together, the space remains constrained by the laws of capitalism. It is here in its interactions with capitalism that genderqueer loses some of its revolutionary capacity.

As an identity, politics, and theory, genderqueer revolves around the democratic notions of choice and agency—the choice to decide how to act and interact in the world and the agency to make and sustain those choices. As Dickie demonstrated, she has been able to maneuver on stage in a way that re-imagines the world, but recognizes that her performances happen within a marketplace. Dominique, too, invokes the drag stage to re-shape the contours of her community, but does so in an effort to preserve the very space of the bar *as it is*. Relying on bars as a point of

convergence limits the democratic possibility of genderqueer since, by its very nature, it excludes some people and favors others. Most drag performers rely on entrance fees and tipping to support themselves and the bars where they perform. Those who go to drag shows are usually more than happy to pay these fees for access to the show, but others are unable to attend because of the costs.

Despite this level of exclusivity, Dickie points to bars as “homes” for the performers, and Dominique refers to Trinita Bar in this way as well. Although infrequently, homes can be seen as a place of exclusion (e.g., “homeland security”), but mostly they are places where people come together. bell hooks (1990) wrote about “homeplace” as a feminist concept of belonging and community: “We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole” (p. 49). Thus, while both Dominique and Dickie view their queer bars as homes, a more productive move might be to (re)imagine them as homeplaces where a genderqueer subjectivity and politics might flourish. For Dickie, her friends’ homes were the first places where she did drag, assumed a masculine persona, and performed for others. The innocence of those early performances in friends’ homes draws attention to the subversive potential of space: Living rooms and bar stages can be both dangerous and safe spaces to tinker with gender, but in either case it is the space that provides the context in which gender becomes politicized and transformative.

Transforming bars into “homeplaces” can make space for genderqueer subjectivities by re-imagining the political and social functions of the particular space. Dickie noted that, “Queer space needs to happen [so that people] get to be out, get to be fabulous ... whatever they are ... or dikey or bi, or whatever they want to be.” Dickie’s imagined space is one that encompasses all possible subjectivities; all are welcome, “whatever they want to be.” By re-thinking the gay bar, which has its own history of exclusiveness and marginalization (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005), as an accommodating queer space, Dickie gestures again toward the political and social import of genderqueer itself as both an identity and a politics capable of overcoming strict, hegemonic conceptualizations of gender and space.

### The Curtain Call

Drag queens and kings function within the political and spatial realms of queer life as both entertainers and sociopolitical actors. As a queer leisure activity, drag performances straddle this divide, oscillating between the dual functions of bringing people together in a community and setting out political goals for those convened (Wearing, 1998). As we have argued, both Dominique and Dickie enact a genderqueer politics as they maneuver between identities, political endeavors, and leisure spaces. This maneuvering draws attention to the malleability of gender itself, illustrating the always already constructedness of identities (Butler, 1990, 1993). And by shifting within these categories or denouncing them entirely, drag performers like Dickie and Dominique also point to the agency embedded within the notion of genderqueer (Beemyn, 2009). Their ability to move as such also positions them as political actors and key figures in the creation and preservation of queer leisure spaces, parallel activities that demonstrate the crucial function of drag queens and kings within queer communities.

This analysis adds to the growing feminist leisure scholarship in a number of important ways. We have brought drag performances as leisure activities to the fore by focusing our attention on a drag queen and king’s lived experiences. In doing so, we have positioned the voices of our participants within the ongoing academic conversation about gender, sexuality, and leisure.



We have also illustrated how leisure is an optimal space to “move beyond subjectivities for both men and women which are rigidly based on bodily sex difference” (Wearing, 1998, p. 114). By looking at and through a drag performer as an identity category, we have also extended Barker’s (2006) work on “identity as a project” by engaging with the “narratives of self identity” (p. 500) as told to us by our participants.

Our project also contributes to feminist and queer scholarship more generally by connecting drag performers as sociopolitical actors to the specific leisure contexts within which they normally perform. The narratives of Dominique and Dickie illustrate the function of bars as simultaneously leisure and political spaces, supporting Halberstam’s (2005) assertion that queer space is not just a site, but also a practice that is continually embedded within broader social dynamics that may be more or less friendly to queer world making. We have highlighted our participant’s roles in that struggle to create and preserve queer spaces. Additionally, by examining how Dominique and Dickie shift between identities, we have strengthened Butler’s (1990, 1993) claim that gender is performative. Dominique and Dickie activate various identities (drag king/queen, matriarch, gay, lesbian, transsexual, etc.) in their own efforts at queer world making, and these identities are (sometimes) constituted discursively in the context of queer leisure.

Our goal in this essay was to highlight the lived experiences of two drag performers, but also to demonstrate how drag queers the work/leisure dichotomy and queers leisure spaces in ways that mix politics and pleasure. Our small sample offers the opportunity to focus on the particular lived experiences of two differently gendered subjects (Mohanty, 2003; Smith 1987). Nonetheless, we hope that others will examine the lived experiences of drag performers individually and as an amorphous group. The relationship between identities (e.g., transsexuality, race, class) and how drag performers both affirm or obfuscate the divisions between identity categories within queer leisure should continue to be of interest to feminist leisure scholars. Drag queens and kings have much to say about the world around them and are constantly re-figuring it in their own vision.

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