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Drag Kinging in Amsterdam: Queer Identity Politics, Subcultural Spaces, and Transformative Potentials

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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LIST OF FIGURES

“In fact, it is not exaggerated to compare masculinity to a nobility.”

Pierre Bourdieu (1998/2001:60)

INTRODUCTION

Locating the Drag Kings—S’not 2 Cabaret

It was a cool night but the gusts of wind that brought our bicycles to a standstill did not hinder our spirits. My friend Caitlin and I were ripe with excitement and ready for a show—if we could only find the place. We must have passed by the entrance twice before we noticed the double doors with bars over the windows. One of the doors was propped open but a red curtain barred our view. We chained our bicycles together and joined the small group of people headed toward the entrance of the squat. It was only 11:30 p.m. and the performances were not due to start until midnight.

> *I had never been to a squat before. I could only imagine how one would look, let alone the types of people who inhabited it. I had this image of a group of commune folk with dreaded hair living like a co-op, creating art and music inside a cave-like enclave. What I had imagined was not far from the truth.*

Upon entering there was a table with a sign that read, “3 Euro Donation.” The performances and party that night were a benefit to help raise money for Belgrade Pride. Two women were at the table accepting the donations, but before we could get our money out of our pockets one ran outside in a hurry. The remaining one was middle-aged and had dark brown hair gelled over to the side and a penciled-on mustache resembling that of Charlie Chaplin. She was carrying a bowler hat and was wearing a gray vest with a bow tie accompanying her black dress pants and short black heels. She looked at us confusedly for a moment, perhaps wondering whom we were or why we were there, but gladly accepted our donations. Greeting

us with a smile and a nod she ushered us in past the cloth curtains. Before we stooped under the hanging fabric she handed us a sheet of information explaining the situation in Belgrade and how the event would function as a benefit for a Turkish Gay and Lesbian Pride event. As I began to take off my jacket I stuffed the information sheet in a pocket and stopped to take in the space.

The squat smelled musty, like old sawdust in a cement basement. A haze of smoke floated about a huddled mass of heads, wafting from the stage area and out the front door. Although in all other venues in Amsterdam smoking cigarettes indoors would be frowned upon, clearly this was not a place that worried about disapproving patrons. The entire squat was dimly lit by strings of Christmas lights strung up in every which way across the walls. The lights came in every color imaginable from gold to teal creating a strangely romantic effect that illuminated all the stenciled graffiti-like paintings on the peeling white walls.

Lining a wall of the foyer area were huge clothes racks bursting with apparel from suit jackets to feather boas and miniskirts. A hundred pairs of used shoes, boots, and heels littered the floor. An unlit back room contained large collapsible tables with old IBM computers. I barely noticed the few people using the computers as I wandered around looking for a bathroom. Beyond the computer room was another room that was functioning as the dressing room for the evening, with long mirrors set up on counters. Peeking in I could see a few performers hoisting up their slacks and fixing facial hair to their faces. Luckily, I stumbled upon the bathroom, which was near the dressing room, and stepped inside. There must have been

almost thirty toothbrushes in a bunch of coffee cups and nearly ten tubes of toothpaste on the stained ceramic sink.

> *I wondered how many people could live here. What were those people using the old IBM computers doing in the midst of a party? Where do people sleep and cook?*

Walking back to the foyer I turned to look at the stage and bar area. There were around fifty or sixty people in the large room mostly chatting in Dutch, drinking beers or punch. The crowd was made up of a range of twenty-somethings and older people, the oldest of whom were probably nearing fifty. Everywhere I looked there were boys in tight spandex shorts, silly oversized hats, tutus, pumps, many wearing some makeup. There were women in suits and ties, leather jackets, combat boots, tank tops, with slicked back hair. Some had mustaches drawn on their faces or facial hair applied with spirit gum. Fashionably dressed young folk littered the crowd with their Buddy Holly frames, skinny jeans, and Chuck Taylor sneakers. Not everyone was in full drag, but nearly everyone had dressed to impress, sporting the newest vintage find from the flea market or designer shoes.

> *Upon receiving an invitation to the party by a graduate student at the Universiteit van Amsterdam I was consumed and anxious about what I was going to wear. Should I dress up and/or gender bend? The poster for the event* (Figure 1) *encouraged some sort of gender play, announcing, "it's a queer party / lets dress the / fuk up / up!" I most certainly did not have my supplies to go in full drag so I decided to dress relatively blandly since I was approaching a field site for the first time and planning to meet possible participants for my study. After about ten minutes in the squat I horribly regretted my decision. In fact, some partygoers looked at my friend and me as if we had been left out of a joke. For the first time in my life presenting as a male, albeit a gay one, I was just too normal. As I sipped my beer, sitting on a couch near the stage area with my friend, the irony of my situation dawned on me: In a queer space where people are allowed to play with and display radical embodiments of gender, where every performance is celebrated, there are still rules to which I must adhere if I had any chance of being welcomed into this realm of possibilities. I could not help but laugh aloud.*

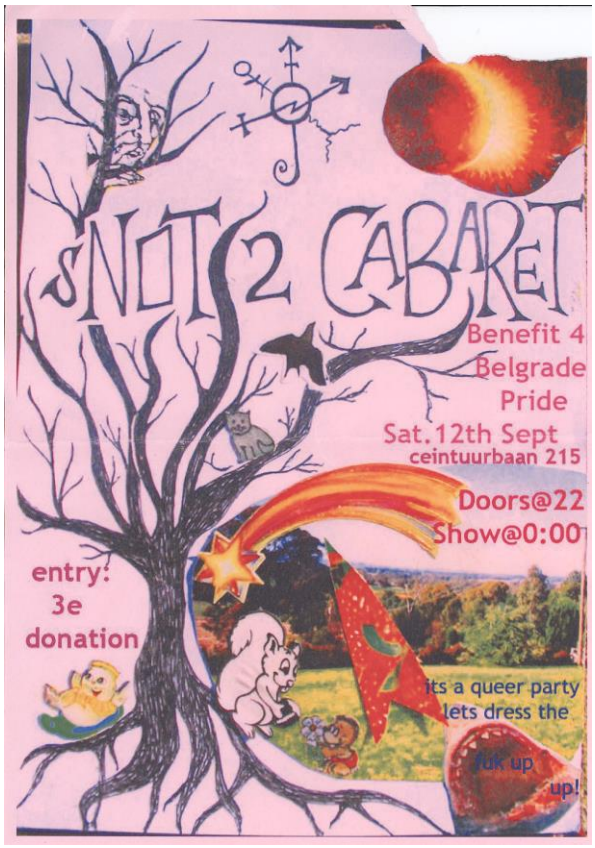

Figure 1: Poster for S'not 2 Cabaret squat event.

Beyond the racks of clothing was a bar with two men behind it. One was wearing some kind of dog bodysuit with a hood and the other had hair that ran down his shirtless back in a ponytail. The beers were only a Euro, same for the punch. We decided to try the punch but after the first taste I left the cup on a table near the punch bowl. The bar wrapped around a corner and was complete with barstools occupied by a group of five drag kings who would soon perform an act.

A huge wooden ramp led down to the stage area that was also functioning as a dance floor for the time being. The stage area was marked off by a string of Christmas lights in front of a giant painted mural of a man's face wearing huge bug-eyed sunglasses. Two young women

in dresses were dancing in the stage area, jumping over the string of lights over and over. Next to the stage area was a DJ station and speakers operated by a young man with huge headphones. The music itself was quiet and included a mish-mash of tunes from the 1980s, techno mixes, alternative rock, and punk. Around the edges of the room were old couches and chairs with coffee tables littered with plastic cups and beer bottles, ashtrays and cigarette butts. Many partygoers were sitting on the couches speaking enthusiastically and laughing, waiting for the show to start.

> *It is frustrating and difficult to describe the 'queerness' of this space—the conglomeration of properties, potentials, and alternative aesthetics that create a mood and shape experience. The squat that night was buzzing with excitement, and I could almost taste the electric energy in the air. Despite being one of the few attendees who did not radically challenge traditional gender norms and presentations through androgynous or cross-gendered costumes, upon entering the squat I could feel a weight lifted from my shoulders. The conforming pressures of society and the scrutinizing eyes of those on the street were left outside and barred from entry. Later a participant would describe the experience of a similar space as an 'understanding'—a self-awareness and communal recognition that gender is a difficult and complex thing, as well as an agreement that something so serious must also be fun.*

Sitting on a couch that smelled faintly of mildew, Caitlin and I sat discussing some of the partygoers' outfits as I scrawled observations in a notebook. A highly intoxicated drag queen in a muumuu with a giant green wig and clown-like red lipstick stumbled in her chunky heels and eyed me nervously. The drag kings who were at the bar ran back to the dressing room for final preparations. The DJ was conducting a sound check on a microphone. The string of lights that marked where the stage began flashed on and off, signifying the performance would soon begin. People ordered another round and gathered to stand in front of the stage. We hurriedly jumped up from the couch to get a better view but the crowd was too thick. I

nudged and squeezed my way to the front, just left of the stage by the DJ, behind the group of drag kings who had just returned from the dressing room.

Suddenly, a rotund woman wearing a shiny silver leotard that was cinched by a white belt (displaying an impressive “muffin-top”) ran onstage and grabbed the microphone. The outfit was complete with white legwarmers and pumps. Her blond hair was piled atop her head in a beehive that rivaled that of Amy Winehouse and her face shone with layers of glitter saturated makeup. She introduced herself as Rojandra and greeted the crowd, welcoming all of us to the squat and yelping with excitement as we applauded. After explaining the nature of the benefit event she starting discussing her precarious position of loving dance and loving aerobics and thus creating dance-aerobics. Little did we all know she would soon be making—and when I say making, I mean it—all of us participate in a dance-aerobics class to the tune of Olivia Newton-John’s “Physical.” By the end of the lesson, which prominently featured high kicks, we were all gasping for air, people were lighting cigarettes, and a boy had taken off his heels and was rubbing his feet. Rojandra laughed and taunted us with glee and then turned the stage over to the kings, introducing their performance—The Magic Act…

According to Halberstam & Volcano, “A Drag King is a performer who makes masculinity into his or her act” (1999:36). Anyone can be a drag king. What makes drag kings different from drag queens is the embodiment of a queer potential to disrupt and destabilize multiple constructions of social identity simultaneously. Drag queens embody this potential, but drag queen performances, characterized by camp aesthetics, do not regularly feature the *layering* of gendered possibilities that drag king performances highlight. The bodies of drag kings can

also inhabit and project a multiplicity of genders and sexualities. Drag kings can titillate and invoke a multitude of sexualities and desires. They even blur the lines between onstage and offstage. Within the past year drag kings have 'come out' of underground spaces and become visible in mainstream gay and lesbian Amsterdam.

After four months in Amsterdam seeking out queer venues, parties, and clubs, I was able to locate a few spaces that regularly appealed to a diverse group of people who may or may not identify as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), yet the partygoers would definitely fall under the queer umbrella[1]. A few spaces in Amsterdam, such as the squat described above and a former squat that is now a legal club called *De Trut Disco: Vereniging de Potten & Flikkers* (Bitch Disco: Association of Dykes & Queers), are unique in that they host "queer performances." These performances, unlike those that take place in commercial gay male venues, do not only represent drag queens but also include an array of artistic performances that invoke discussions about gender and sexual desire. Drag king performances, while not exclusive to the squats, mostly occur in these spaces.

Queer parties, such as the S'not 2 Cabaret squat event, occur about once a month in Amsterdam at a variety of venues. Most feature some kind of performance or theme, but sometimes the event is simply a social gathering. The majority of the parties labeled "queer" on flyers throughout Amsterdam, however, merely signify that the party is open to both men and women, and is friendly to people of any sexual orientation. Dutch gay men, affluently dressed, cruising for sex, and socializing, dominate many of these events. Sometimes there are nights that attract a larger female audience. Women present at the more commercial "queer" parties may or may not identify as lesbians or dykes, but from my observations of a

[1] I use the phrase "queer umbrella" to denote anybody who falls in the non-normative spectrum of gender and sexual identities: gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, trans people, heterosexual allies, partners, and the rest of those for whom it is never easy to check a box.

variety of “queer” parties most of the women tend to be heterosexual friends of gay men who come to dance and socialize. In Amsterdam specifically lesbian venues are far and few between. I found merely two bars that cater to a specifically lesbian crowd. The lack of lesbian bars is not unusual in many urban spaces,[2] however, since Amsterdam has a reputation as a top gay and lesbian tourist destination this realization came as a surprise.

“Queer” has a multitude of meanings and uses depending on who is using it and what it is describing. Attempting to unpack the term can even be seen as a contradiction to the multiplicity, simultaneity, and the fluidity that the term allows. Queer can simply serve as an umbrella term and is often used to signify the wider LGBT community. However, when used by gender theorists “‘queer’ names or describes identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire” (Corber and Valocchi 2003:1). Simplistically, queer can be said to signify ‘things’ that fit outside of normative constructions of gender and sexuality. The ‘things’ that queer can describe include spaces, communities, relationships, identities, and practices (e.g., drag, sado/masochism, fetishes, etc.).

In Western culture the binary divisions of masculine/feminine, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual give us a discursive framework with which to understand and communicate someone’s gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation (Butler 1990a/1999). It is a widely held belief that these dichotomies are mutually exclusive and always align. For instance, a ‘man’ is understood and expected to be masculine and attracted to women. In theoretical terms queer describes the slippage between these categories and is meant to bring attention to their instability as social, cultural, and historical (re)constructions. In this sense, queer can denote that a space or place is welcoming to those who do not live their

[2] See Browne (2007; 2006) and Podmore (2006)

lives in accordance with the dominant gender paradigm. When I use queer to describe the environment of S'not 2 Cabaret it signifies the subversive potentials and possibilities to defy normative constructions of gender and sexuality and the cultural baggage that follows such practices and experiences. Drag kings and their bodies represent a contested political site where cultural constructions and discourses are disrupted and reconfigured through performance (Koenig 2002:155-156). Non-normative configurations and layers of gender significations are materialized, made visible, and celebrated.

The processes of making drag king subculture visible in Amsterdam began with the formation of King Betty, an organization started by three women with a mission to represent bisexual, lesbian, transgender, and queer people of all backgrounds in Amsterdam's Gay and LesBian[3] Pride celebration. This organization hosted the very first Amsterdam Drag King Contest in the summer of 2009 on the *Regulierdwarsstraat*, the main commercial gay (male) street in Amsterdam, throughout the week of Gay and LesBian Pride. Since the inception of the King Betty organization and the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 there has been a revival of interest in drag kinging throughout the Netherlands. At this event drag kinging was a political act meant to represent lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities, with the specific focus on uniting queer women[4] and serving as a space to gender bend. It was at

[3] The capitalization of the "B" in LesBian Pride was only added in past years with the effort to include and make visible the bisexual sector of this community.

[4] I choose to use the term "queer women" to encompass a rather large and diverse body of individuals who are female-bodied and/or socialized female and/or female presenting and/or female identified. A few of my participants identified strongly with being a 'woman' but rejected labels such as lesbian. While the category of what is a 'woman' has been a major discussion in the history of feminist and queer theory, due to the effects of patriarchal structures, 'female' people (although a very diverse group) are still subject to discrimination and subordination. Of particular attention here is the degradation of femininity in Western society (Serano 2007). This too is the case within the LGBTQ communities in Amsterdam. Finally, because the categories of woman and man are widely used and ascribed to in Dutch society (especially because of their predominance in LGBTQ communities), I feel it necessary to highlight the patriarchal structures of gender roles by drawing attention to the unstable but predominant gender binary system.

the Drag King Contest of 2009 that many of the performers with whom I spoke met one another and began to form a drag king troupe, briefly known as the Kings of the Lowlands[5].

The spaces in which drag kings perform in Amsterdam represent a trend in the larger queer community that rallies around radical queer ideology. Influenced by academic discussions of 'queer' and the instability and fluidity that the term supplies, radical queer ideology and activism advocates the deconstruction and problematization (even the eradication) of (normative) gender roles and the binary constructions that yield oppressive social hierarchies. Unlike in the mainstream, these independently created political arenas privilege ambiguous gender expressions that challenge gendered assumptions. The people that attend and organize events like the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 and S'not 2 Cabaret embrace radical queer ideology and advocate for social change by connecting a specifically queer community, often in opposition to mainstream or commercial gay and lesbian communities and identities. The potential of these environments to invoke discussions of queer ideology and politics, gendered structures of oppression, and the multiplicity of queer subjectivities are embodied by the drag kings and exemplified in their performances.

It is with these considerations that drag kinging in Amsterdam has a transformative potential to create much needed spaces for lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals (especially queer women) to explore their gender expressions and identities through masculinizing their bodies, all while having fun. Through a synthesis of anthropological methods and queer theory I draw some conclusions about my participants' diverse experiences of the small but growing community of drag kings and queer performers in

[5] The Lowlands is a colloquial reference to the Netherlands, a country that is almost completely under sea level. Specifically, the Lowlands refer to the northern area of the country.

Amsterdam. My observations are based upon four months of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with active performers and organizers, attending queer parties and performances, and even becoming a drag king for a participant's photography project. Drag king performances in Amsterdam demonstrate the (in)visibility of marginalized sectors of the LGBT community, celebrate diversity within that community, connect queer and transgender networks internationally, and make a radical queer political statement about (hetero/homo) normativity in Dutch society. Finally, drag kinging in Amsterdam serves as a demonstration of the state of queer life and politics in Amsterdam, and possibly the Netherlands.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before approaching the drag king community in Amsterdam it is vital to understand the history of queer politics in the Netherlands. Many of the Amsterdam kings use drag kinging politically to express their beliefs about gendered structures of oppression. Without a temporally specific context with which to analyze their practices much of the meaning and potential of drag kinging is overlooked or misunderstood. Importantly, there is a revitalization of drag king performances in Amsterdam at a variety of venues for diverse audiences. Everyone who attends, organizes, and performs at these events is given the opportunity to network with other people who share similar queer ideologies and identities. Others, who do not identify under the queer umbrella or who are new to queer performances and spaces, have a similar opportunity to actually meet and see queer people, as well as better understand queer subcultures and identities. This push to connect and expand a specifically queer community must be addressed within the historical context of Dutch gay and lesbian communities and organizations.

The Netherlands and specifically the capital city of Amsterdam have a long history of progressive and liberal policies. The progressive propensity of Dutch politics and the practice of “pragmatic tolerance” in legislation attend to the general level of tolerant beliefs toward socially dissident groups and identities. Pragmatic tolerance or *gedogen*, a Dutch word brimming with cultural significance, means, “declaring *in advance* that under certain specific conditions offenders against a particular norm do not need to fear punishment” (Godijn 2001:230). Although Godijn is referring to legal definitions of pragmatic tolerance, such as the Dutch policy that addresses the sale and use of marijuana, it is notable that the dissident offender is understood within the context of norms. These norms can be understood as cultural and societal expectations for behavior that represent a common morality, even if these norms are supported and maintained by hierarchical structures of oppression.

Furthermore, Godijn reminds us that those who ‘offend’ these norms are only protected within a certain (acceptable) context. He states, “there has to be a real need for cooperation across differences as well as for maintenance of unity and internal peace through which a sense of collective responsibility and a culture of political negotiating can develop” (2001:231). It is only when the emancipatory desires of specific culturally dissident groups and identities are made visible that the general public can come to understand and appreciate the need to address their issues. Despite the left-leaning tendencies throughout the history of the Netherlands and social application of pragmatic tolerance, sexual and gender variant people still require political and cultural movements to affect change in legal and social arenas. Many of the battles that gay and lesbian movements still face in the United States have already been won in the Netherlands. For instance, same-sex couples were granted the right to legally marry in 2001. Nonetheless, bisexual, transgender, and

queer people of all varieties (and especially queer women) require even more rigorous efforts to enact social change, as these identities and gender expressions are often forgotten by or blatantly ignored by mainstream gay and lesbian movements. The social and political needs of these groups remain to be fulfilled in Dutch society. Simply put, tolerance is not acceptance.

Throughout the 20th century there has been a debate about the morality of homosexual identities and practices in most modernized Western societies. Gert Hekma (2004) describes the radical queer politics of the Society for Integration of Homophiles (COC) and the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform (NVSH) during the 1960s. The COC and NVSH advocated for the abolition of marriage, gender dichotomies, and even homosexual and heterosexual identities (2004:276). The COC and NVSH took an assimilationist turn as homosexual identity was consolidated and gradually became more acceptable. This move toward assimilation spurred the formation of organizations such as Purple September, Lesbian Nation, and the Red Faggots that militantly supported the visibility of specifically gay and lesbian identities. Queer political movements must grapple with the incongruent approaches of assimilationism, the "we're just like you except in the bedroom" tactic, versus radical queer ideology that demands social recognition of difference with the goal of acceptance of gender and sexual variance.

Hekma describes how "The faggots experimented publicly with gender fuck (i.e., gender blending) and with a Deleuzian[6] promotion of gay desires and cultures that was designed to make straight domination waver and to expand the fairies' queer world. The lesbian groups, moreover, criticized gay sexism and feminist homophobia, while racism

[6] Refers to a freeing of desires with the recognition that all human identities are the effects of difference. Here then, Hekma is referring to a proliferation of sexual identities, desires, and practices that are critical of the production of difference. He refers to a utopia for fulfilling desires, if you will.

became still another issue" (2004:276). The radicalism of the militant groups described above is founded in the realization that to change the current regime we must address both gender *and* sexuality reform. "This radicalism, however, evaporated in daily political practices and in compromises reached with other political partners, such as the national government. Most legal prohibitions were abolished, and subsequently the radicalism dissipated" (Hekma 2004:277). One can argue, as Hekma does, that because gays and lesbians were able to attain legislation that protects them and guarantees their human rights, "The Netherlands, unlike other places [such as the United States], witnessed no resurgence of queer or gender radicalism in the 1990s" (2004:277). Hekma points to a couple of dichotomies within Dutch culture that perfunctorily police and suppress queer political ideology.

The first is that dichotomous constructions of man and woman are rigidly controlled in heterosexual society as well as within and between gay and lesbian communities. These gendered policies are best observed in the fact that most "queer" spaces in Amsterdam, for example, are marked as either for gay men or for lesbian women. A few exceptions, such as the former squat, De Trut, the mainstream Club 8, and the mostly gay male club, April, host "M/V" (*Mannen/Vrouwen*) or "mixed" parties and events regularly. Most of the leather bars on the *Warmoesstraat* exclusively cater to a male clientele. The gender dichotomy is also policed concerning medical and social constructions of transgender and transsexual identities (Cohen-Kettenis et al. 2008).[7] Hekma states, "Conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity remain the norm, leaving little room for unmasculine men or

[7] Peggy Cohen-Kettenis, one of the true experts on transsexualism and endocrinology, works and lives in Amsterdam. The article here specifically addresses the prevalence of hormone treatment of young boys compared to girls, which effectively polices the gender binary (especially the construction of normative male masculinity).

unfeminine women, intersexuals, transgenders[8] of all kinds, and their lovers. This dichotomy is firmly in place, and the Dutch think that it is founded in biology" (2004:278).

The second dichotomy that poses a hindrance to queer political efforts, communities, and identities, is that the naturalization of sexually variant identities has eliminated the political need for queer visibility. The split between public and private life has created a "new closet" according to Hekma, who believes that, "The new closet means that whether one is gay or lesbian matters only in the bedroom. In the past, silencing was directed at public homosexuality and private homosexuals; now it is directed at anything queer beyond personal identities… which means that the public culture remains straight" (2004:278). Gay and lesbian people have found a comfortable niche in Dutch culture where they are mostly accepted by society. I was told multiple times that Amsterdam, however, is not representative of the Netherlands. The specific urban environment and history of Amsterdam, like many large cities in America, allows for more progressive and liberal local flavor. Currently, some Dutch people feel that their practice of tolerance and the tradition of liberalism are threatened by 'outsiders' and immigrants.

In contemporary Dutch politics there has been a veer to the political right as the Islamic immigrant population grows. After the murders of Pim Fortuyn, an outspoken anti-Islamist neo-conservative gay politician, in 2002, and Theo van Gogh, the director of a short film depicting brutalized Islamic women, in 2004, by a radical leftist and a fundamental Islamic immigrant, respectively, many Dutch people have felt a need to strengthen their borders (Buruma 2006:67). The impact of these murders is still being felt. A conservative politician named Gert Wilders has been pushing anti-Islamic policies with the help of

[8] Dutch people often use the descriptor/identity 'transgender' as the noun 'transgenders' to refer to trans people of all varieties.

naturalized homosexual identities. The argument follows that because the religious doctrine of Islam opposes homosexual identities and practices, Islamic people are not tolerant of gays and lesbians. The Dutch feel their society to be mostly post-religious, and the low numbers of people who actively practice religion show this. The visibility of Islamic communities in Amsterdam and Holland at large has created a relatively xenophobic environment toward multiculturalism. This strain of conservativism is most certainly found amongst the queer population as well, for they fear acts of violence on the street. After the brutal murder of Van Gogh in downtown Amsterdam while riding his bicycle, the street can no longer be the paradise that the Red Faggots and Purple Nation attempted to create. It is a contested site with an ever-present capacity to transfer ownership.

It is within this contemporary context of Dutch queer life and politics that the King Betty organization formed and the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 occurred.

One of my informants, who played a major role in the success of the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009, told me that in the 1990s the COC based in Amsterdam hosted up to three or four parties per week aimed at LGBT communities. Volunteers who worked with the COC and other active community members ran these events. There was space for parties, art studios, and performances, since the venue they used had a large stage. She described a massive drag king party where about four hundred people (mostly lesbian women) came dressed as men. At the event there was also a contest. This event was held yearly, according to my informant, but only happened a few times.

She could only describe the event as “Awesome!” and was pretty positive it was the largest drag king event ever in Amsterdam. I also heard about drag king workshops in the cities of The Hague and Rotterdam before the Amsterdam Drag King Contest from a number

of participants. Drag king events in the Netherlands were not unheard of, but rather were not a regular part of lesbian and gay events. With the initiation of King Betty at the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 kings are on the rise. In fact, one of the drag king workshops that occurred in The Hague took place during Pink Week as part of Bisexual and Transgender day. According to a participant of this event this queer focus was new to the Pink Week celebrations.

METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

My first contact with drag kings in Amsterdam was through a website that advertised the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 and King Betty. I managed to find the site near the end of the summer, shortly before I would be leaving for Amsterdam. On the website there were pictures from the event and contact information for King Betty. I thought it quite the coincidence that I had randomly found the site and immediately contacted the email address at the bottom. I explained that I would soon be arriving in Amsterdam and was an anthropology and gender studies student who was attempting to contact drag kings in the area. After some weeks of worrying, I was sent a reply by an organizer of the event named Margriet who agreed to meet with me upon my arrival to chat. Margriet became one of my most invaluable informants and introduced me to nearly all of my other contacts in Amsterdam. After searching more gay and lesbian tourist sites, blogs of many varieties, and websites about venues, and finding nearly nothing, I began to focus on the participants of this drag king event to springboard my immersion into queer subcultures in Amsterdam.

Soon after my arrival in Amsterdam Margriet invited me to the S'not 2 Cabaret squat party where drag kings were to perform. I received a second invitation via e-mail from a

graduate student who was studying at the Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA). A professor at UvA contacted the grad student for me about locating queer performances. The S'not 2 Cabaret party and the performances that took place represent my only observations of drag king performances in Amsterdam. A party that included more queer performances was cancelled at the last minute due to the legal battle for the deed to the space.

However, throughout my four months in Amsterdam I attended queer parties at a number of venues and clubs throughout the city. It was at the S'not 2 Cabaret squat party that I made my initial contact with drag kings in Amsterdam and introduced myself as a student and an anthropologist. After this initial meeting I used email as my primary method of contact to arrange interviews and answer questions about the intentions of my research.

I find it also important to highlight that my inclusion and immersion in the queer community in Amsterdam was contingent upon my sexual identity and gender presentation as well. My politics as a queer activist and experiences with queer communities as a gay male ethnographer also encouraged prospective participants to agree to be interviewed. The idea of queer membership and solidarity—being welcomed into these spaces due to my own 'queerness'—is especially worth consideration when dealing with safe and anonymous spaces such as the squats and De Trut. The effect of my own gender and sexuality was that I was immediately considered a patron—someone who too needed and wanted a 'safe' space. Though as an ethnographer and an American I was an outsider to these groups, my gayness and/or queerness trumped the distancing effects of my American ethnographer status. From my experiences in 'queer spaces' in Chicago and Amsterdam, there is a level of solidarity, even camaraderie, between queer presenting and/or identifying people. This solidarity, however, is highly contextual. For instance, my gayness or maleness may have precluded

my entrance into specifically lesbian spaces. My female friend, Caitlin was denied entrance into gay male spaces repeatedly because she is female. I believe that because the squats and De Trut are such intimate spaces, once membership is granted and once one's queerness is recognized or merely understood, a small community invariably forms. I was free to converse with anybody in those spaces whether they were gay, lesbian, trans, or a drag king. Spaces such as De Trut and the squat that hosted the S'not 2 Cabaret event work to create this sense of queer solidarity. We may be different from one another but in terms of gender and sexuality we are the deviants, and we know it and honor it.

The participants of the study included drag performers, troupe members or managers, and/or venue employees. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling and respondent-driven sampling methods (Bernard 2006:192-194). Margriet was able to introduce me to many of the performers with whom I spoke at the S'not 2 Cabaret party in September 2009. Her connections with the group of drag kings that are active in Amsterdam provided the main means of initiating contact with participants. Participants were chosen based upon their experience with drag kings and queer communities in Amsterdam and their availability and location. Due to lack of funding and time for travel I was restricted to interviewing those who were located in Amsterdam or willing to meet with me within cycling distance. I was conscious to diversify my sample by interviewing individuals who had a range of experiences as drag kings.

My sampling frame directly included five individuals, two of whom were amateur performers, a more experienced drag king, the drag king workshop presenter at the Amsterdam Drag King Contest, and Margriet, one of the organizers of King Betty. By

attending an assortment of queer parties I was able to meet and hold informal conversations with venue owners and employees, as well as other performers and community members. Through participant-observation in these environments I came to meet a range of local LGBTQ[9] (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) individuals and better understand 'queer spaces' in Amsterdam. I anticipated that most participants would be drag kings or troupe performers of many ages and diverse backgrounds who are female-bodied and lesbian or fall into the trans masculine spectrum. Most participants fit these criteria with variations in how they identified. My goal was to speak to as many performers and community members as possible while building rapport with those who were actively performing drag kings.

All participants were asked to conduct one interview, due to time constraints, at their home or a public space, such as a coffee shop, café, or bar, for the duration of approximately one hour based upon their convenience. Participants were not compensated for their time, but were offered coffee or a drink upon meeting for an interview, unless the meeting took place in their home. All participants that were interviewed consented to the study and signed a form agreeing to be quoted directly. The anonymity of my participants is a constant endeavor and no identifying features of my participants will appear here; pseudonyms will be used when necessary. Other participants, such as a venue owner, partygoers, and other performers, were merely made aware of my status as an anthropologist and informal

[9] I choose to use "LGBT" and "LGBTQ" to signify different categorical approaches to the wider queer community. LGBT is an acronym predicated on specific sexual and gender identities and is often used in 'inclusive' commercial and political contexts. By including "Queer" into the acronym, LGBTQ signifies a wider community that includes gender variance (not just people who claim a distinct identity based upon this variance) as well as the partners and allies that support LGBT factions of the larger "queer" population. While the "T" or "Transgender" can be said to encompass gender variant people and partners of trans people, the "Q" or "Queer" encompasses crossdressers, drag performers, and other gender variant people who may not qualify their identity as "Transgender."

conversations informed my study as well. These conversations will not be quoted or featured due to lack of formal consent.

I conducted five semi-structured in-depth interviews (Johnson 2002), one with each participant. Each interview lasted anywhere from an hour to two hours depending on their availability. I elicited open-ended questions based upon a page of topical questions that attempted to gain a personal understanding of how the informant creates meaning through performance. Questions ranged from asking about their experiences with/as drag kings, to how they would describe their own embodiment of masculinity. I asked questions such as: "How would you define masculinity?" "And how would you characterize your relationship with masculinity?" "What is a drag king?" "What is queer?" Sometimes I would have to push the interviewee to question his/her own logic with the goal of educing more self-reflection. For instance, when someone would simply answer my questions with a sentence I would pose, "And why do you say that?" or, "What exactly do you mean?" although their answer was perfectly clear. Our interviews would often devolve into conversations as we laughed about silly performances or awkward experiences of gender play. I made a point to share my own experiences with drag, as a drag queen and in theatre, in order to build rapport and align myself with them as a performer. It was also important to discuss my own thoughts and theories about drag kings, but only after they had articulated their opinions in order to minimize my influence. I was conscious not to introduce terminology, such as 'trans man' or 'queer' and instead let them classify themselves and their opinions on their own terms. When possible, and here arises the issue of intelligibility, their terminology will be privileged in my analysis.

Throughout the interviews I inquired how performers and/or community members came to be active in drag (king) performances and what they seek to achieve through their participation. I asked questions concerning the urban environment in which they live and perform and how the context of Amsterdam affects their drag performances of masculinity. I also inquired how participants believe their gender and sexual identities intersect with their drag performances and personas. Other aspects of identity, including but not limited to class, race, ethnicity, and nationality were discussed in the semi-structured interview as they arose. We also discussed their involvement with the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009 extensively, talking about their motivations to participate, what occurred, and how they experienced the event. Furthermore, we discussed queer communities and identity politics in general, with special attention paid to their thoughts about and relationship to masculinity.

As I do not speak Dutch, all interviews were conducted in English. This did not pose an issue for my participants as everyone spoke English proficiently. On occasion it was difficult for a few participants to find the right word in English to describe their thoughts or feelings. This minor difficulty was not an obstacle to our conversations and we were able to negotiate language barriers through non-linguistic communication. All interviews were audio recorded to maintain accuracy in transcription and analysis upon the consent of the participant. Informal conversations and email correspondence with participants also informed and enriched my data.

Participant-observation was also a key component in my data collection. My experiences exploring the queer scene in Amsterdam over four months have intricately shaped my own thoughts and theories of drag kings. As Fife states, “Long term observations are necessary in order to gain some understanding of the unwritten ‘rules’ that govern human

interactions among a specific group of people" (2005:72). While I could not actively participate in the daily lives of my participants because of my ongoing studies at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, I was able to achieve a rudimentary yet sympathetic understanding of queer life during my stay.

Because many of the queer parties are standing room only and relatively underground, it was not an environment in which I could actively take notes. During the performances at the S'not 2 Cabaret, on the other hand, I was able to use a journal as a memory aide. Although I always carried some kind of notebook with me when I went to queer parties, it could be seen as insensitive or intrusive to actively take notes in these spaces. For instance, at De Trut disco there are "old school rules" that prohibit the use of cameras, cell phones, or any recording devices. These rules come from a long tradition of guaranteeing the safety and anonymity of queer people whose sexual or gender identities, expressions, or practices deviate from the norm. Rules like this help to forge a 'queer space' where people are free from the consequences of their practices within mainstream society. Rules of the clubs, like those of the street, are actively regulated, and partygoers were constantly being told to put away their cell phones by the staff. Often I would find those people in a corner of the smoking room cupping their ear in secrecy. I made the conscious choice not to take notes and respect the general ideals of spaces, such as De Trut disco, which are actively constructed as safe and anonymous spaces. Like someone who had recently 'come out' and began exploring 'queer spaces' as an outlet for that identity, I too had to 'come out' as an anthropologist and so had to learn the rules and culture of 'queer spaces' in Amsterdam.

The adaptive techniques that I adopted during my stay in Amsterdam originate in anthropological discussions that reconcile the epistemological tensions between radically

deconstructive queer and poststructural theory and the ethnographer's humanistic endeavors. Humanism and queer are ambiguous and loaded terms that can be both contradictory and complimentary when applied to ethnographic methodology. Humanism, in general, is embedded in the ethics of "justice for all" and "do no harm" (Plummer 2005:361). Humanists find value in empathy and give meaning to subjective experiences. In essence, humanism is a cornerstone of anthropological ethical guidelines.

Queer theory, on the other hand, is often concerned with the realm of texts, both literary and popular, and the critical, almost alien, deconstruction of these texts. It can be said to "prioritize the oppressions of sexuality and gender" over racial and class disparities (Plummer 2005:370). Writings from the discipline are often overly verbose and academic, impenetrable from outside the walls of the Ivory Tower of the academe (see Butler 1990a/1999; 1990b/2004). Queer theorists often abstract and make metaphysical the lived experiences of oppression instead of documenting it. However, the methods of humanist research and queer theoretical critiques can align in ethnography.

Both ideologies "would ask researchers to adopt a critically self-aware stance… Both would seek out a political and ethical background… And both assume the contradictory messiness of social life, such that no category system can ever do it justice" (Plummer 2005:370). Some theoretical approaches to ethnography supplied by reflexive, interpretive, experiential, performance anthropology relieve the tensions discussed above.

Reflexive anthropologists (Davies 1999) believe that the ethnographer should maintain a level of self-reflexivity throughout fieldwork and work to examine biases and preconceptions while relying on the doctrine of (sub)cultural relativism. Interpretive approaches to the texts ethnographer's produce (i.e., field notes, interview transcripts)

depend on the pursuit of meaning as knowledge (Denzin 1997). Interpretive readings of these texts inscribe cultural meaning to mundane social occurrences and interactions. In terms of queer theory, interpretive approaches make room for the contradictions between subjective experiences of gender and sexuality (e.g., not all 'men' are 'male-bodied' but they are indeed still 'men').

Trends in experiential ethnography also value subjectivity as a source of knowledge and include the ethnographic experience as an important precursor to knowledge production. Experiential ethnographies work to highlight the role of human agency, memory, and sensation by evoking psychological and visceral responses in the reader (Turner and Bruner 1986).

Finally, performance-based approaches supply a framework to "use the constructs [of performativity] to acknowledge and engage the study of human nature as both an issue of *being* and *doing*, to explore the social structure and human agency as mutually constituted" (Alexander 2005). Performance-based approaches stress the productive role (both material and symbolic) of the human subject. The ethnographer too plays an active role in this cultural (re)production. By drawing techniques from reflexive, interpretive, experiential, and performance anthropology I fuse the domain of intellectual abstract queer (radically deconstructive) theory with humanistic (socially constructive or civically engaged) ethically driven goals that aim to reveal and disintegrate structures of oppression.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Poststructuralism, Performativity, and Gender

Poststructural theories of power, knowledge, and discourse give anthropologists a philosophical framework with which to approach the study of human behavior. Michel Foucault excavates the history of sexuality from the Victorian age and deduces that sexuality is historically and culturally constructed through discursive processes (1978/1990). Locating his study in the dialectic of a 'positivist truth' and 'pleasure,' Foucault posits that our concept of sexuality consists of "a proliferation of discourses, carefully tailored to the requirements of power" (1978/1990:72). Foucault's theories are important to any study of gender and sexuality in that his definition of knowledge is inextricably linked to exchanges of power. This "knowledge/power" is a culturally, historically, and contextually constructed set of discourses that allow us to understand and conceptualize our place within the world and society. Discourse not only determines how we conceive the world, but also how we conceive of our selves, our bodies, and our identities within a given context.

While relative in its effects, power is pervasive and omnipresent (Foucault 1978/1990:93). Power operates through discursive mechanisms that produce 'knowledge,' such as religious, legal, or moral texts, and increasingly in the modern era, the efforts of the biomedical and psychological communities. The discursive products of these institutional mechanisms are continuously (re)inscribed into our cultural cosmologies as we alter and employ them. Discourses, however, come to hold power over the individual in how they dissect experiences and bodies into categorizations that box us into certain roles. The individual also plays a part in the (re)production of discourse. Through our own acts,

practices, and experiences individuals inevitably engage with discourses and project their own desires, ideas, and subjective understandings and/or interpretations on and through said discourses. For example, the word 'queer' was used as an insult toward effeminate and/or gay men and gender variant people throughout most of the twentieth century. The reclamation of the word 'queer' within academic discussions of gender has bound our conception of 'queer' to LGBT identities in a more positive light. Furthermore, 'queer' now holds a sort of discursive power as its definition demands an explanation of things which are unstable, fluid, and frankly, indefinable and inexplicable. Gender presentations and practices that are more 'queer' are sometimes privileged in certain circles of LGBTQ communities. Many of my participants expressed their desires to push drag kinging in queerer directions by performing with a drag queen or by also adding femininity to their acts.

Keeping the dialectic of knowledge/power in mind, gender and sexual identities can both empower and inhibit our agency (or the ability to control one's life, body, and thoughts) due to the infinitesimal categorizations of self that are constantly produced and institutionalized. Because Foucault locates his (assumedly male) subject in an "economy" of pleasures and politics, he implies that the "requirements of power" must be understood as products of capitalism, meant to maximize the output of labor. Undoubtedly (or supposedly), this means that reproduction plays a central role in the success of this "economy," and is thus promoted at all costs. This regime of power has been termed "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) and more recently the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990a/1999). Whatever it is called, these systems rely on binary constructions of man/woman, hetero/homo, and masculine/feminine—to which I would add normative/queer—that aggrandize and ritualize institutions such as heterosexual monogamy (and more drastically, marriage) that 'maximize'

reproductive capacity. The mythology of capitalism tells us to conform to this script and we will all be fulfilled, nourished, and honorable citizens of a harmonious society. However, we do not live in a vacuum. We are still subject to the discursive effects of history and culture on these subject positions. When subject positions are defined by their diametrical opposite one always gets the better side of the deal and becomes privileged within Foucault's discursively politicized, and embodied, economies.

Foucault contends that power is exerted in the form of discipline on the body, using prisoners and soldiers (again, assumed to be men) as examples (1977/1995:18, 166-169). Developing how power relates to the body he proposes,

> *One would be concerned with the 'body politic,' as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes, and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge* (1977/1995:28).

The body and discourses that surround and describe it refer to individuals within a political economy, where these "technologies" or "knowledges" of the body reign supreme (1977/1995:26).

Importantly Foucault states, "Discipline is a political anatomy of detail," which even places my ethnographic efforts within the framework of institutional power (1977/1995:139). My descriptions and definitions of drag kings can be viewed as both an attempt to make visible (or intelligible) 'the queer' and describe (or detail) the 'queerness' of certain visible bodies among the 'invisible.' This ethnographic attempt can also be seen as a form of discipline due to the politicized nature of drag king practices in Amsterdam and the context of its LGBTQ communities. Despite the inexorable tendency of deconstruction to whittle down a solid concept into a pile of shavings, Foucault's ideas help ethnographers to speculate upon

our own creative (and possibly destructive) potential. Moreover, poststructural theory allows researchers to approach the study of gender and sexuality as a *constantly changing* socially constructed set of identities and practices that prescribe and transmit meaning through, on, and by the body within a discursive historical context. The critical examination of discursive (re)production within the contextual flows of knowledge/power oblige ethnographers to be cognizant of the effects of their own biases, identities, languages, and potentials while in the field and later while writing. This level of reflexivity can help to maintain sensitivity to the way accounts and analyses of (sub)cultures are produced.

Considerably important to the anthropology of gender and sexuality are Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Following Foucault's theories of discourse and knowledge/power in relation to sexuality, Butler addresses the 'problem' of gender identity (1990a/1999). Butler critiques Foucault's analysis noting, "By maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality prior to signification and form" (1990a/1999:166). While Foucault's notion of the "body politic" is useful, Butler enters the metaphysical realm by drawing attention to the cultural (re)production of our conceptual understanding of said body. For example, when a baby is born the first proclamation is, "It's a girl/boy!" From the moment of life's inception our bodies are hailed into being, or disciplined, by the prevailing cultural discourse of, in this case, gender.

Because of the supremacy of cultural inscription, or discipline, Butler places gender and sexual identities within the hegemonic *heterosexual matrix*, where the dominant identities in society rely upon dichotomies of male/female, masculine/feminine, and homosexual/heterosexual to sustain superiority (1990a/1999:12-13). Butler maintains,

> *Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through the stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self* (1990a/1999:179).

These repetitions of stylized acts that are understood within historical and cultural discourses create an *illusion* of an essential gendered self through their projection and interpretation within the heterosexual discursive matrix. Therefore, these culturally defined and interpreted sets of acts that we call gender, due to their pervasiveness, work to create the idea of an authentic, original, or 'true' gender identity that is stable and relatively unchanging—what Butler calls the "constituted effect of discourse" or a *performative* (1990b/2004:124). Of further importance is how the *performativity* of gender "constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express," thus creating an exclusive gendered subject position predicated on discursive frameworks (1990b/2004:130). Finally, these 'performances' of gender are compulsory (Butler 1990b/2004:130). It is nearly impossible to make it through the world without claiming a gendered subject position. The English language is structured by the gendered subjects of she/he, him/her.[10] One simply cannot exist in our discursive framework without having a distinct male or female gender. Given that our gender performances are compulsory, our identities are ascertained by our bodily stylizations—our performative utterances. We understand the world through the lens of the subject position that these performatives (re)create. This theory of gender performativity leads Butler to famously conclude, "Gender is a copy with no original" (1990a/1999:25).

[10] Dutch language also relies upon gendered subject positions of *mann/vrouw*, the pronouns *hij/ze*, and possessive pronouns *zijn/haar*. It is worth noting that *zijn*, while functioning as the male possessive pronoun, is also used as the neutral possessive pronoun, 'its,' as well as the root for the verb 'to be.'

Butler points out that subversive identities and performances of gender, such as drag performances, could be viewed politically, in that they destabilize the dichotomies in which we understand sexuality and gender identity (listed above) and denaturalize these 'either/or' identities through the use of parody, imitation, and mimesis (1990a/1999:44). By displaying the imitative structure of gender, drag can be said to dethrone, if I may, the dominant Western ideology of an essential—read *prediscursive*—gender identity. Drag displays that all gender, in essence, is a derivative (Butler 1990b/2004:127-128). If we accept that gender is performative and (re)constructed through a series of stylized acts or utterances, subversive performances of gender and sexuality represent the body as a contested site of transformation where political discussions concerning the essence, construction, and performativity of gender and sexuality can take place.

With that on the table, how do we then define which performances are subversive? Which performances work toward (re)creating a heterosexual matrix maintained by hierarchical systems of social relations? Which performances have the power to reconfigure, question, or destabilize these dominant discourses? Is drag's subversive potential shattered by defining the queer subject in direct opposition to these hegemonic structures of oppression?

Butler states in the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*:

> *I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive…such judgments cannot be made out of context, but they cannot be made in ways that endure through time…Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to* (1990a/1999:xxi).

Subversion, then, is contextually constituted within a specific time and place. The power of drag performances, such as the drag king performance at the S'not 2 Cabaret, are speculative and rely upon ethnographic description to invoke their subversive potential. When speaking of subversive performances of gender, it may be easier to think about them in terms of their *potential* to destabilize dominant discursive regimes by transgressing socially constructed norms. After all, the potential of drag performances lies in the subjective interpretations of the audience members. While an ethnographic understanding of the audience falls outside my present scope of inquiry, a careful eye and ear to how and when the audience interacts with the performers is a good indication of how they are reading the act. For example, when a king starts to unbutton his shirt or strip, it is easy to analyze the crowd's squeals and shrieks of delight—they are invoking the potential of and reacting to a sexual act that suggests availability. It is through audience-performer interaction that many of the kings realize the subversive potential of their acts. The full potential of drag is more holistically understood when one theoretically deconstructs identity politics, analyzes systems of objectification and desire, and contextualizes how, where, and when the performance space is used and configured.

Subversive Performances—Drag, Camp, and Kinging

Subversive performances of gender and sexuality can fall under many names and classifications. However, the most illustrative examples of the performativity and fluidity of gender and sexuality are drag performances. Simply put, "drag" is the intentional performance of gender and its intersecting identities (Baur 2002, Butler 1990a/1999,

Halberstam 1998, Koenig 2002, Newton 1972, Shapiro 2007, Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Drag performances are also characterized by their theatricality. This practice has been well documented and theorized in (gay) men who perform femininity, known as 'drag queens' (Butler 1990a/1999, Core 1984/1999, McNeal 1999, Newton 1972; 1996/2000, Reich 1992/1999, Schacht 2002; 2004, Serano 2007, Sontag 1964/1999, Lady Chablis 1997).

Anthropologist Esther Newton (1972) was the first to conduct an ethnographic study on drag subculture, focusing on drag queens across the United States. Newton equates the drag practices of gay men to a subversive act that denaturalizes the gender binary and acts as a form of resistance to a homophobic stigma and heteronormative culture through a *camp aesthetic*. Camp has been "approached as *sensibility*, *taste*, or *style*, reconceptualized as *aesthetic* or *cultural economy*, and later asserted/reclaimed as *(queer) discourse*" (Cleto 1999:2). While camp or 'campiness' is difficult to pin down—this is in fact what gives camp a powerful potential, much like the concept of queer—it can be generally characterized by an incongruent excess that relies upon the intentional failure of the serious (Sontag 1964/1999:54). When speaking of gender, camp transforms cultural ideals into flamboyant parades of artifice. Camp is exemplified by the ironically fabulous drag queen.

Drag queen performances potentially produce new expressions of gender through parody, but can also reify the feminine/masculine binary.[11] Butler locates the subversive possibility of drag in not only the transformation of appearance and style, but also in the powerful laughter that parody, and camp, solicit (1990a/1999:176-177). However, laughter is

[11] The notion of drag as parody is contentious among some contemporary feminist scholars. Serano (2007) responds to Butler's equivalence of drag as parody that highlights gender's performativity. Serano argues within this system of logic all genders could be seen as parody. Drawing from her experience as a transsexual woman, Serano concludes that any trans person's relatively stable gender identity can be devalued as merely parody through this theoretical perspective.

not the only audience reaction that materializes the subversive potential of drag. Theories of performativity have relied heavily on drag to theorize gender as a 'performative act' that is separate from but "done" on and by the body, resulting in the notion of 'gendered subjectivity,' 'gendered embodiment,' or the active subject performing gender (Butler 1990a/1999). Importantly, females performing masculinity have been oddly absent from many of these analyses in spite of the rich history of female crossdressers across cultures.

Although female crossdressing has been documented in war, myth, and religion—tidily summarized by the existence of Joan of Arc—Judith Halberstam (1998) locates when male impersonation became a 'theatrical art' in England and America and took a queer turn in the early 20th century. Halberstam argues, "The fact that some male impersonators carried over their cross-dressing [*sic*] practices into their everyday lives suggests that their relation to masculinity extended far beyond theatricality" (1998:233). The popularity of male impersonators within theatrical and African American blues communities died out in the 1930s with prohibitions against 'sexual perversion' in Hollywood and "no extensive drag king culture developed within lesbian bar culture to fill the void" (Halberstam 1998:234). However, performers such as Storme DeLarverie used male impersonation in their acts from the 1940s to 1960s in America (Maltz 1998, Volcano and Halberstam 1999). It was not until the early to mid-1990s that talk of 'drag kings' came about mainly in urban areas such as New York City and San Francisco and appealed to a lesbian audience (Halberstam 1998, Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Drag kings reached a new level of queer recognition with the International Drag King Extravaganza in October 1999, a conference jokingly referred to as "The Science Fair" (Halberstam 1998, Sennet and Bay-Cheng 2002, Surkan 2002).

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of attention to female crossdressed performers is due to the gender politics of female masculinity. A member of a drag king troupe in Montreal describes this tense relationship between performing and embodying female masculinity, “I have often found that with lesbians that are a little older and who have perhaps, at a particular moment in their own lives, needed to dress to pass as male in order to survive, it is probably less funny to watch us do this onstage” (Ayoup and Podmore 2002:61). There are serious consequences involved in the politics of ‘passing’ as one gender or the other (Maltz 1998:277-279). These consequences are best understood in the historical context of transphobic violence hauntingly described by Leslie Feinberg (1993) in the novel *Stone Butch Blues*.

Feinberg describes the lesbian and butch community in Buffalo, New York during the 1950s and 1960s. Feinberg locates the “stone butch” historically in working-class models of masculinity epitomized by flannel shirts, Wrangler jeans, and steel-toed boots. Feinberg also describes how passing as a male empowers the protagonist, Jes, and even protects her/him from violence targeted at those who transgress gender norms. While the character of Jes is most certainly not a male ‘impersonator’ in the traditional sense, masculinity holds a different meaning for those who performatively embody stone butch and butch subjectivities (Feinberg 1993). It is a very different practice for a lesbian woman to dress in a suit, for a trans man to present as male, or for a drag king to perform a theatrical masculinity (Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Robin Maltz describes this distinction stating, “The drag king is neither a passing subject nor a subjectivity predicated on realness. The performers mock masculinity rather than own it as the male impersonators did” (1998:283).[12]

[12] I do not agree with Maltz’s statement; however, the theatricality employed by drag kings (specifically in the bodily movements and choreography) is a defining feature of king performances.

Halberstam provides an extensive discussion on the politics of female masculinity by attempting to separate masculinity from maleness and from being a man. Halberstam states, "female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (1998:1). From the marginal position of female masculinity we can understand how masculinity can be considered a prosthetic, something that is artificially constructed (1998:4-5). These marginal positionalities make visible the "idea that masculinity 'just is,' whereas femininity reeks of the artificial" (Halberstam 1998:234). The 'naturalness' or nonperformativity of masculinity is exactly what a drag king performance exposes as something imitative and theatrical, like all genders (Halberstam 1998:235-236, Butler 1990a/1999; 1990b/2004). Performances by actors John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart exemplify the stoic lack of theatricality that characterizes the white heterosexual male masculine archetype. Black, Latino, and gay masculinities, however, due to their marginal position in relation to the nonperformative (presumably heterosexual and middle-class) white male masculinity, appear more theatrical by contrast (Halberstam 1998:237). Take the masculinity of a black rapper, such as 50 Cent, which is marked by 'urban' style baggy clothing, associations with gang involvement and violence, as well as generally misogynist lyrics. When juxtaposed with white male masculinity, 50 Cent's version of black masculinity appears far more theatrical, more performative and action-based, which works to bolster the naturalness of white male masculine performances (as well as hide the general misogyny of white male masculinity).[13] Minority masculinities are more readily appropriated by any performer due to their more theatrical (or visible) 'constructedness' in societal discourses.

[13] Note that nearly all male masculinities involve a complex relationship to violence. Often this relationship is emphasized in pop culture when considering masculinities of people (especially men) of color.

Masculinity in Western society relies upon the relationship between maleness and power. Halberstam argues, “Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege” (1998:2). The nonperformativity of white male masculinity dramatically consolidates this power around the male body and maleness as natural, or even God-given. The embodiment of masculinity by a female displays the potential for appropriation and gives drag king performances a carnivalesque ability to (visually and symbolically) reconfigure structures of male domination and power. However, not all female masculinities are an appropriation, as in the case of the stone butch or butch subjectivities. These genders (or subjectivities) have their own history, located in specific communities and performances of masculinity and femininity.

There have been heated discussions concerning butch identities and subjectivities in terms of their subversive potential. The butch identity is historically established in a specific stylization of female masculinity in relation to a lesbian identity and could thus be read as a subversive reordering of heterosexual gender roles and the signifiers of masculinity. In Butler’s discussion of subversion drag, crossdressing, and butch/femme are equated by their potential to disrupt and appropriate dominant constructions of gender and sexuality (1990:137). Halberstam counters this equation of drag (where subversion is located in the camp aesthetic, referring specifically to the drag queen and gay male subjectivity) and butch/femme (which assumes a specifically lesbian subject position). Yet, the conflation of butch with drag queens and butch/femme aesthetics with camp limits the creative potential of lesbian genders and subcultures to critique gender structures outside of gay male aesthetic modes (Halberstam 1998:236-237, Newton 1996/2000). Case (1988-89/1999) takes Butler’s discussion of subversion in relation to butch/femme and attempts to patch together a specific

camp aesthetic for butch/femme. However, Case's direct conflation of butch/femme and camp dislocates butch/femme from its unique historical and cultural specificity. This view also conflates the butch with a drag queen. Case's approach ignores issues of race and class while relying solely upon sexual subject positions and genders to draw conclusions about the commentary butch/femme offers to the traditional construction of heterosexual relationships and genders. As Newton states,

> *My own experiences of butch-femme bar culture in the late fifties and sixties told me that butch-femme was not, as Case asserted, ironic, not a camp, and certainly not as Judith Butler had suggested, a parody, at least not then. It was utterly serious, always 'for real,' completely different in feeling and tone from the fabulous and bittersweet excesses of the camp drag queen* (1996/2000:64-65).

The possibility for the lesbian deployment of camp aesthetics, however, still exists. Newton (1996/2000) describes how a butch lesbian won the title of the Homecoming Queen in Cherry Grove through her impersonation of a drag queen during a drag queen contest. However, this lesbian or butch appropriation of camp is still related to an over-the-top performance of an exaggerated femininity—a femininity located in drag queen performances. For Newton (1996/2000) the lesbian appropriation of camp still operates within (gay) male monopolies (Halberstam 1998:237). While camp is available to female gendered positions, not only gay male subjects, is it only when mimicking or parodying the female impersonator? Where then do the drag kings fit in? Can an exaggerated or theatrical masculinity be considered a form of lesbian camp? Or is this a new aesthetic mode all together? Perhaps, as Halberstam argues, "camp is always about femininity" (1998:238). It is obvious that discussions of a specific "lesbian camp" or a "butch/femme aesthetic" must utilize a different theoretical model than that of (gay male) camp. This need is located in the divergent histories

of gay male and lesbian communities, radically different understandings of the performance (or lack thereof) of femininity and masculinity in society, as well as the (visual) sexual politics of a male versus a female or trans person in drag.

Halberstam proposes the term “kinging” to be used when discussing “performances of humorous masculinity” in order to “distinguish them from the camp humor of femininity” and also to evade “the conflation of drag and camp with butch-femme” (1998:238). The *kinging aesthetic* encompasses performances of masculinity typified by the drag butch (a butch in male clothing) and the drag king whose gender presentations work to make visible the theatricality of masculinity. Drag king performances do contain elements of camp, but often in relation to the performer’s femininity (Halberstam 1998:238). The *kinging aesthetic* is also not camp in that “masculinity on a female is just not as funny as femininity on a male” (Maltz 1998:283).[14] “To “king” a role can involve a number of modes of performance, from earnest[15] repetition to hyperbolic re-creation and from quiet understatement to theatrical layering” (Halberstam 2001:427). King acts consist of paying homage to an idol such as Freddie Mercury or the rappers Run DMC (both acts would feature minority masculinities). Other acts may rely upon a rather humble lack of theatricality, such as the stand-up style comedy of Dianne Torr’s drag personas (see Baur 2002). Other acts that feature what Halberstam terms *layering* work to highlight the performers’ own female masculinity, such as performances by butch performers or at contests where most performers are amateurs. Drag king acts may be carefully calculated and choreographed with a well-mixed soundtrack to lip-sync. Others may involve a more ‘showcase’ type feel where the act is less about theatricality and more about the layering of masculinity. Drag king performances also include elements of camp and

[14] Maltz offers another contention with which I do not agree. It is curious, however, to wonder if Maltz refers to a visual reading of humor or a reading that focuses on subject positions in relation to power structures.
[15] In a Wildean sense (Halberstam 1998:239).

femininity, as a performer will change from presenting as female to male and back to female, all in one striptease!

To better understand the specificity of the humor in “kinging” Halberstam (2001) relates this subcultural aesthetic to mainstream “king comedies” or films where the humor lies in the failure and humiliation of the male protagonist. If we accept that like camp, “kinging” is “an aesthetic mode detached from one type of identity” then we can trace the connections between queer subcultural styles and mainstream blockbuster films (Halberstam 2001:427). Kinging humor can be seen in films by Woody Allen or the Marx Brothers where “male fragility or male stupidity has been tapped as a primary source of humor” (Halberstam 2001:428). Halberstam gives the example of *The Full Monty* (1997) as a king comedy, a British film where unemployed men gather to form a Chippendale’s troupe to earn some money. The men are consistently exposed as lacking, whether referring to penis size, performance anxiety, bodily physique, or dancing ability. The humor surfaces when the protagonists, in essence, fail. Ironically, H.I.S. Kings, a troupe based in Columbus, Ohio, performed the final act from *The Full Monty* where the men go “all the way” and strip bare for a female audience (Piontek 2002). However, in the H.I.S. King’s version the performers were endowed with massive felt phalluses that they flashed at the end, although the film only shows the naked rears of the men. In this sense, in could be argued that H.I.S. King’s were deploying a sort of camp as they “refuse to accept the limits imposed by biology and the body by privileging an extravagantly exaggerated and comical version of masculinity over a realistic representation” (Piontek 2002:132). The film *The Full Monty* centers on the failures of British white male masculinity, illustrating the humorous effects of the *kinging aesthetic*. When this heterosexual version of kinging is (re)appropriated by the H.I.S Kings we can see

the irony inherent in their campy interpretation. The boundaries are blurry, but in general one can think of “kinging” in relation to making visible and humorous the failures, awkwardness, and (often homophobic) anxiety of (mostly dominant) masculinities. Conversely “camp” overstates the discursive signifiers of (artificialized) femininity through artifice.

Within the past ten years there has been a proliferation of writings about drag king subcultures. The effects of queer theory within the discipline of anthropology are certainly paramount to studies of queer subcultures (Boellstorff 2007). The *Journal of Homosexuality* published *The Drag King Anthology* containing a handful of regional ethnographies on drag king troupes in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Surkan 2002), Columbus, Ohio (Piontek 2002), Santa Barbara, California (Shapiro 2002), Canada (Ayoup and Podmore 2002, Koenig 2002). Other studies of drag kings focus more on theoretical dilemmas of power and marginality (Piontek 2002, Schacht 2002, Shapiro 2007, Halberstam 1998; 2005) drawing from anthropological models of liminality and mimesis (Rosenfeld 2002) or by placing the act of kinging within a lesbian historical context (Maltz 1998). Some researchers have drawn on theories of style to use drag kinging to analyze pop culture (Halberstam 2001; 2005) or to specifically locate the process of identity formation (Shapiro 2002, Kumbier 2002). There is an interest in an archival documentation of drag kings that give precedent to their own voices (Ayoup and Podmore 2002, Baur 2002, Crowley 2002, Sennett and Bay-Cheng 2002). Critical to the growing literature on drag king subcultures is the anthropological emphasis on (sub)cultural relativism in terms of the subjective experience of drag kinging (Halberstam 1998, Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Drag king subcultures in Europe have been mostly

overlooked, with the exception of Halberstam and Volcano's study that touches on kings in London, Milan, and Berlin (1999).

DRAG KING VOICES: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Magic Act—A Drag King Performance in an Amsterdam Squat

In order to comprehend the theoretical discussions of drag and specifically the processes and techniques of kinging, one must actually experience a drag king performance. The performances that I observed took place at the S'not 2 Cabaret party, the environment of which is described above. That night there were four performances, two of which featured drag kings. I will focus on the third performance on the evening, which has been referred to as "The Magic Act" and involved the participation of four drag kings. All four performers were participants in the Amsterdam Drag King Contest 2009 organized by King Betty. It is because of the performers' connection to the Contest as a meeting point that I view them as a cohesive group, although they describe themselves as a fledgling troupe. Spring-boarding off the success of the Drag King Contest, these Amsterdam kings aim to use drag kinging as a political act as well as a source of gender exploration and celebration. This performance at the squat was their first organized group performance since the King Betty Contest but the kings were ready to make the audience cheer. Without further ado, I give you "The Magic Act."

Two kings got onstage in order to begin their act. Valentijn[16], the 'Magician,' was wearing a windswept, hay-yellow (not quite 'blond') wig and square framed glasses. He was sporting a white collared shirt that was partly unbuttoned and straight-legged black dress pants. I overheard someone in the audience comment that he was supposed to be a stereotypical 'Dutch' man. [17] I was later informed that Valentijn was impersonating Hans Klok, a world-renowned Dutch magician who just so happens to be gay.[18] Valentijn also had a small goatee made from his own blond hair to match the wig. The other king, Henrick, appeared to be a bit older than Valentijn and was playing the part of the magician's 'Assistant.' He had very short buzzed brown hair and was wearing oval glasses that would often reflect the lights on stage. Henrick also had applied facial hair with makeup, in order to create a scruffy beard shadow. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a black unbuttoned collared shirt over it. He donned black and white striped Y-front briefs over black leggings with white socks and flip-flops. The two kings stood facing away from the audience and the music began.

The sound erupted from the DJ station and the theme from the film *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) swelled triumphantly. Henrick pulled out a deck of paper cards from his pocket and began passing them out to all of the audience members, including the two other

[16] When discussing the drag kings I will do my best to denote whether they are their king persona or just themselves by using different (and often gendered) names. Some performers, however, blur the boundary between self and persona by choosing to be referred to by one name only. When describing a drag king/persona I will always use masculine pronouns, yet some participants force one to think outside the categories of he/she or his/her.

[17] Over four months stay in Amsterdam I began to notice trends in the way adult Dutch men and women styled themselves for a night out at the clubs or a morning commute. In terms of a general observation of (white) Dutch men, the fashion was printed button-up shirts and slacks. Because the majority of people in Amsterdam use bicycles as their primary method of transport the wind-blown (and gelled) back shaggy hair was ubiquitous among the crowds of businessmen cycling to and from work.

[18] Hans Klok has also toured America and had a spot on "The Tonight Show with David Letterman." He was famously rumored to be involved with both Pamela Anderson and Carmen Electra, who each played the role of 'showgirl' or 'volunteer' in his Las Vegas show. Only later was it revealed in America that Klok was gay, a fact that was well known in the Netherlands.

kings that were in front of the crowd. He then grabbed a massive deck of cards the size of his head from the side of the stage and showed the cards to the audience, guessing the number and looking for a match. People cheered randomly as their card was called, but the kings merely waved them away. I had the two of clubs, which was pulled from the large deck, and I cheered as well but was dismissed by the performers. Then the final card, a nine of hearts was shown and a drag king in front of me was recruited to be the 'Volunteer' for the magic act.

Our third king, Lieve, had dark hair parted to the side with plenty of gel. He was wearing a maroon button-up shirt with a popped disco style lapels and a suit jacket. He had on flowing slacks and leather dress shoes, as well as a very thick mustache applied with spirit gum and hair. He strutted up to the stage and began posing for the audience, popping his collar, snarling, and flipping back the wings of his suit jacket. The audience hooted and applauded. Valentijn and Henrick then handcuffed Lieve to the stand, a kind of clothes rack. They threw a drape over the stand so that only Lieve's hand stuck out while he crouched behind the stand.[19] Henrick suddenly slipped his hand under the curtain, switched hands with Lieve (without the audience knowing) and waited as Lieve began scrambling on the floor. Henrick flexed his hand and shook it around, proving that 'Lieve' was indeed still behind the shroud. From where I was standing I could see that Lieve lost his handcuff and was changing. He stripped off his button-up and slacks while he buckled on magenta pumps over black stockings and pulled a matching jumpsuit over his head. He covered the bottoms of the jumpsuit with a pink and black houndstooth patterned 'poodle skirt.' Finally, he crowned himself with a large Marilyn-esque blond wig.

[19] I did not know it at the time but the 'protruding hand' is a popular magic technique that Hans Klok deploys in a number of his illusions.

Meanwhile Valentijn distracted the audience by posing with his hands behind his head and popping his collar. He whipped his hair back and straightened it with his hands, all while making lusty eyes at the other performers and audience members. He unbuttoned his white shirt, threw his head back and shook out the wig while baring his exposed chest a bit.

Within a moment or two Lieve was completely changed and the next stage of the act was about to begin. To complete the 'magical' transformation they pulled Lieve out from under the curtain now *en femme* (and still donning the impressive mustache). Lieve appeared surprised by his femme appearance and he primped his hair and kicked up his heels. It seems he had also stuffed his dress with some padding in a bra. Suddenly the music changed to "Big Spender" performed by Peggy Lee and the act took a sultry turn. Henrick held a mirror while Valentijn applied lipstick to the transformed femme. Lieve began flirting with the audience by coyly smiling and turning away abashedly and strutting around in circles. Henrick got Lieve's attention and tried to impress him by pulling a stuffed rabbit out of a top hat. The audience applauded the feat and Lieve snatched the rabbit and stuffed it into the bra of his dress.

Lieve then pulled off the poodle skirt and the music changed again. Still en femme, Lieve lit a cigarette. "You're the One That I Want" from *Grease* (1978) began playing and everyone began cheering as Lieve imitated Sandy from the film, strutting with his hands on his hips and still mustached.[20] The final performer, Coby, hopped onstage on cue with the music. He had slicked back greaser hair (black) and long defined sideburns made with eyeliner and spirit gummed hair. He was wearing tight black pants, a black t-shirt, and heavy work boots much like Danny from the film. With a smirk from Coby, he and Lieve began

[20] It is important to know that *Grease*, an emblem of 1950s American greaser style, is still very popular in Amsterdam. I cannot recount the number of times that I heard the thirteen-minute "Grease Megamix" from the *Best of Olivia Newton-John* in a variety of nightclubs across the city (queer and straight).

dancing together as they played out the bit from the film by strutting around each other in a circle all the while maintaining eye contact.

Figure 2: Photo of Coby (left) and Lieve (right) dancing to “You’re the One That I Want” during the Magic Act performance. Henrick appears on the far right in the background.

The audience screamed and cheered as the performers smiled beamingly and snapped their fingers in time with the beat. Lieve ripped off his blond wig (revealing his neatly parted hair) while dancing with Coby. He then turned Coby around, grinding him from behind, miming anal sex. All four kings ran back onstage and stood in a line to dance to the last bit of the song and bow as the audience whistled and howled, singing along, “Ooh, ooh, oh,

honey." Within another moment the song began to fade and the magic act was over. The kings bowed their heads as the audience applauded raucously.

The Magic Act, while a breakthrough performance for the Amsterdam drag king scene, contains many elements that are typical of drag king performances recorded elsewhere. For example, the Amsterdam drag kings utilize two types of performance techniques, *mimetic* and *liminal* (Surkan 2002:214-215). A *mimetic* performance relies upon the appropriation and impersonation of masculine styles or personas from 'male' figures, archetypes, or idols. In this act then, both Valentijn and Coby, in their appropriation and impersonation of Hans Klok and John Travolta as Danny in *Grease*, respectively, follow the mimetic mode. Lieve and Henrick, on the other hand, exemplify the *liminal* mode of performance with their gender ambiguous presentations and the transformation from king to queen. For these two performers the signifiers of masculinity and femininity become enmeshed and confused—they play with both.

This type of gender upheaval is most notable in Lieve's multiple transformations between being female-bodied to a drag king to a drag queen (with a mustache). While Lieve impersonates Olivia Newton-John as Sandy in *Grease* briefly, the mismatched mustache leaves the audience wondering if they are indeed watching a male-bodied person becoming a female impersonator of Sandy. The signified (Olivia Newton-John as Sandy) is incomplete and the very realistic mustache works to detract from the wholeness (or naturalness) of the character (and her historically specific style of femininity). Because of this slippage between subject positions and gender cues, Lieve's performance does not quite fit into the mimetic

mode. The confusion is deliberate and for liminal drag king performances this conglomeration of gender signifiers gives the act subversive potential.

For our mimetic performers, their (re)appropriation of masculinity or masculine styles (i.e., greaser, magician) work to transpose gender signifiers onto their female-bodies, exposing the supposed 'naturalness' of masculinity as artifice. Both modes of kinging act to subvert dominant readings of gender, where the categories of male, man, and masculinity (and female, woman, femininity) align. In order to understand how and why performers choose these modes of performances (or conflate them further) one must turn to the voices of the performers themselves. This rudimentary reading of The Magic Act and the techniques the performers utilized requires further complication in order to comprehend the processes involved in becoming a drag king. To better understand the contextual motivations of The Magic Act performance as well as why these people perform as drag kings, one must turn to the voices of the kings themselves.

The King's Coronation—Motivation, Subjectivity, and Identity

"When was the first time you heard about drag kings?" I asked. Carolien sat cross-legged on her futon searching for a response. She tapped on her English dictionary that sat beside her as she stared off.[21]

"Yeah, maybe I should tell you about my first performance 'cause it was really, uhh, yeah, that was revealing… I lived in a squat, for a few months only. But I really wanted to, hmm yeah," she thought to herself, "To [do] like a performance, like Michael Jackson. Haha! I

[21] For my purposes here I have edited the full transcription of interview material to eliminate 'umm' and 'uhh,' since most of the time any confusion or hesitation was related to a language barrier. Some kings were more fluent in English than others. Any vocal emotionality has been maintained based upon my judgment. I also chose not to correct my participants' grammatical errors or the errors in the King Betty mission statement.

wanted to be like Michael Jackson, so I started prepared all things, I mean dance, choreography, all that stuff and... And in this time, I don't remember this time, it was before Gender Study I think? But, I didn't know at this time that exists something like drag kings. That was really fun—er, funny?" She was questioning her English. I nodded gently in approval.

"Yeah it was funny 'cause, yeah, just, but that was my idea: I wanted to be a Michael Jackson. Okay. I make the performance. I did this and then, I don't know, somebody tell me, 'Yeah that is drag king.'" She looked confusedly at the imaginary conversant.

"'It's something, yeah, drag queen but another side.' And… Oh okay. I didn't know this name. This specially name for this kind of performance. And oh, okay. I am drag king. Oh, okay!"

Carolien went on to recount her travels from living in a squat in Warsaw, Poland and her recent move to an Amsterdam flat in order to go to art school. She exclaimed that Amsterdam was her 'comeback' to the drag king scene she left behind in Poland. Optimism and enthusiasm filled her voice when she spoke of her new life in Amsterdam.

Like many of the drag kings I met in Amsterdam, Carolien, too, had never heard the term 'drag king' before she actually became one. Or perhaps she always was a king after all?

"It was just fun. And it was, I mean it was more about being Michael than being man or something," Carolien told me. She continued, "Year later? Yeah, that was, uhh, one year break, and I thought, 'Alright. So, which persona can I do next?'

"I mean, which, yeah, who is more important for me: like a person. And also who is *more queer*? I mean not—because yeah: I never found it interesting do… Somebody whose *really* man, I mean so, mus[cle-y]…" She raised her arms and flexed them for me. "The

stereotype thing of ‘man.’ But I thought always about persons who are something **in-between**. Like Michael was also not ‘real.’ Hehe, and then came Freddie, Freddie Mercury, and this is most important person.”

She suddenly began laughing nervously and rested her hands in her lap. Whether she was embarrassed about her affinity for and identification with Freddie Mercury or possibly overwhelmed by working out her English phrasing, I am not sure. One thing for sure is that for her these pop and rock idols were important to her conceptualization of what makes a ‘man’ really a man. They did not quite fit the standard criteria and that glitz that sets them apart was what was worth impersonating. The queerness of performers like Mercury and Jackson is what attracted Carolien to impersonating these figures. Their queerness was worth materializing and she was paying homage to their status as ‘something in-between’ by impersonating, or kinging, this aspect of these figures.

“It's a beautiful thing when I first did my first drag king contest.” Renate was leaning on her elbows at the small wooden table in the back of the bar. She rested her hands on the glass of beer while I sat poised, taking notes. “I really was presuming, uh okay: I had 26 years of experience of living as a boy, then man. So okay then. I can win this on my socks! After used to, being a man, you know how that works,” she explained frankly with full confidence.

“But then, when I entered the contest we had this wonderful workshop with Dianne Torr… And she was invited to do a drag king workshop. And then we had a drag king contest. One day for this. And friends of mine asked me, ‘Why you gonna do this?’

“And I was like, ‘Uh, just for fun.’

“‘Are you questioning yourself?’…uhh, uhh, ‘Are you unhappy with yourself?’

"I was like, 'No.' It's because I just want to see how it feels to dress up as a man. And I think I can win this competition! And they were like really confused because the transsexual—so I became-becaming[22] a woman, and then dressing up as a man again."

"You must be out of your mind!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

"For me it was *just fun*. And especially that evening and day and night it was so much fun, because we made wonderful pictures. You can see them on my Facebook by the way."

Renate approaches becoming a drag king from a unique angle, having lived presenting as a man for much of her life. Dressing up as a king for her was enjoyable because of her past experiences. While she discussed how her friends thought of her performing as a king as a regression or rejection of her female identity, she merely sees it as an extension of her identities. Having been an actor and a dancer throughout her life, kinging represents an exploration of what she called the "male side" of oneself.

Motivation to perform is a critical issue to understand when discussing drag kings. Each of my participants had their own unique reason for playing[23] with masculinity. Renate wanted to win a contest, whereas Carolien wanted to dress up as some of her favorite idols. Both performers, though, decided to become a drag king for fun or discover new things about themselves. The fact stands that drag kinging as a practice is both an exploration of self and Other (Rosenfeld 2002). Kings want to learn what it feels like to be a man or wear men's clothing or develop a male persona. Other kings want to get more in touch with their own (female) masculinity through kinging. Even others use kinging as part of the process of coming into a male or transgender identity (Shapiro 2007). Kinging provides valuable

[22] I am still unsure whether Renate was trying to articulate if this drag king experience occurred while she was transitioning genders or some time afterward.
[23] All performers considered drag kinging some sort of 'play,' and said 'having fun' was a driving factor in kinging.

opportunities to experiment and play with masculinizing one's body. Drag kings learn how to make material one's own relationship to masculinity through style and technique.

Henrick sat sipping his green tea at the counter of Betty Too, the site of the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009. He had a look of contemplation, as if he wanted to tell me something but was still unsure. I sat next to him on a stool waiting for his response as to what makes him unique as a drag king.

"Yeah, I think I bring everything I have. I bring, yeah well, quite *literal* kind of performance. When we have the performance we wear these suits or our certain... more a certain *type*: In their persona they have a certain type. I think I'm more—Yeah, that's-that's my problem I think," he said with a smile.

"Yeah I am more—**I'm me**. I'm not my—if you ask what's your persona? Well, I really don't think I have one: it's a part of my, the feeling that it's not the same [for me as it is for the other kings]."

Later he explained, "Yeah for me, and it's what plays a part, for me, it's so *double* for me. One side is the performing side. That is nice, I like the stage, it is fun to do and you know, dress up as a drag king and with a group and all that. But a part of me doesn't have—It doesn't fit there. So that's my problem in this. I don't know... I'm not sure I will continue drag kinging. Because you know, there are people in the group I can feel this is their thing. This is what they want with it and, you know, they want to perform, they want to learn more, get better, stuff like that. But for me it's, it's, it's, uhh, maybe it's, it's, uhh, already history for me to perform. I don't know. I'm not saying I didn't like to do it or something, but there is another

side and *I can never get that out of drag kinging*. Do you understand?" He asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, I think so," I responded sincerely.

He continued, "Some get everything what they want in that part of drag kinging, and for me that's not so. It's a bit sad."

I questioned why he was sad about possibly ending his career as a king.

"Well... for me it's not—it's not an act or something. Or a part of me, what I can express, I can do—of course I express myself, part of myself *now* that way. But that's, that's not enough."

For Henrick kinging holds a personal meaning. He divulged that he was thinking of transitioning from living full-time as a female to living and presenting as male. He was seriously contemplating his gender identity during the time of the King Betty Contest. This was a recent development in his life. In fact, he introduced himself to me with his female name that his parents gave him. Only a month after we spoke I was informed by other kings that Henrick was now Henrick for good.

Repeatedly Henrick would tell me how this gender 'thing' was difficult and takes time to sort out. He told me about when he dressed up as a drag king at the King Betty events and how excited he was to learn how to 'look like a man' at the workshop. It is worth pointing out that for many people dressing in drag meets their gender needs and desires, or perhaps has nothing to do with their gender directly. After all, not all drag queens or kings are seeking to transition to another gender identity.[24] Heterosexual male-identified crossdressers, too, do not necessarily wish to live their lives presenting as a woman, while some choose to transition to living and presenting full-time as a woman (Boyd 2003). Renate, for instance, is

[24] For an interesting discussion of the blending of gender identity and drag persona see Lady Chablis (1996).

a drag king for fun and takes pride in teaching others how to open their minds and bodies to a range of genders. As Renate told me, it was others who thought kinging was an indication of gender 'problems.'

For Henrick, though, kinging was a learning experience and an opportunity to explore his masculinity in a safe space. Kinging can also be seen as a way to legitimize masculinity and, for Henrick, come into an identity as a trans man[25]. However, kinging part-time was not enough to fulfill his intimate desire to live his life as the man he wants to be *and be seen as everyday*.

Henrick elucidated how his masculinity is not quite a drag king masculinity, "That's really a bit difficult 'cause like, more people, have the traditional meaning of 'man.' And then that are the stereotypes. Stereotype kind of things, you know, you are tough and ERRGH," he grunted.

"You know that kind of thing. That's one of the reasons why I had some problems. I also thought before would you like to—are you a man? Would you like to be a man? *Hell no*. You know. That's a part of the world that I don't want anything to do with those people. For me the words trans man means a lot. Because in that, the whole—there is no concept. Who is a trans man? How masculine, how feminine is that man? You don't know. Because there *is no concept*. There is no stereotypes. I can believe in that. And then I went, 'No.' It's a feeling inside and I wouldn't be able to define."

Whether or not there are stereotypes about trans men is inconsequential. Henrick's alignment with the term 'trans man' as a gender identity gives him space to explore multiple

[25] I choose to separate the 'trans' from 'man,' instead of the spelling 'transman,' which is commonly used. I do this because Henrick was never specific about the spelling of his identity and I feel this leaves more space to think about how many types of men there are, which was a point he argued consistently. This spelling also clarifies that a 'trans man' is a type of man, not a different genus than a man born male.

masculinities, and femininities, too. The category ‘man’ is too constricting and as Henrick points out, relies upon arbitrary stereotypes in its social construction. Drag kinging, also, could be seen to box performers into specific masculine ideals and paradigms. Certain recognizable idols and styles are available for the picking (e.g., Elvis, greaser, rapper) and are impersonated tongue-in-cheek. Henrick, like some of the other kings with whom I spoke, feels that (ab)using the stereotypes can be fun as both a learning experience and a subversive performance, but the space to explore his own (trans and/or female) masculinities was more important. As evident from his identification that he does not perform a ‘certain type’ or style, like the other kings, he is always himself. Perhaps this is why it is difficult to perform the exaggerated and theatrical stereotypical masculinities that many drag kings embody.

The border between the stage and ‘real life’ begins to fade. These performers inevitably bring their daily lives with them onto the stage or into the dressing room when they become kings. Sometimes their drag practice is a highly personal one and other times the personal implications of drag kinging are imposed upon the performers by others or the audience. Each king is motivated by different factors and this is reflected in his and/or her performance.

New Dimensions—Selves, Personas, and Embodiment

Still another king, Mirjam, feels that there is something that all the kings she has met have in common. Her observations are in reference to the workshop at the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009.

"And I think the basic thing is... you know, and I think people are very different in what it [drag kinging] means for them. But we all have an understanding that gender is not, for us, not the way it *usually is*… I mean it's not that we discussed it or something. But there's sort of an understanding about gender, well we might, or for the few people I know a little bit better, I know that they come from very different angles to it. But it's sort of an *understanding about gender*… But I think the basic thing is, which makes it very relaxed in this gender bending, that **you don't have to explain**. Which makes it very, very, strong."

Mirjam, who performs as Valentijn onstage, attempted to locate the sense of community that forms when a group of people are working collaboratively to get up in drag. While each person approaches drag kinging subjectively and is motivated by a variety of unique factors, there is 'an understanding' that they do not need to offer an explanation about their practices, choices, or inclinations. Gender for the kings is up for grabs. They can take what suits them, quite literally, and reject the (often dominant) masculinities that do not reflect their marginal position in relation to the mainstream.

"Because I find it so extremely fascinating. And especially, the performativity of gender."

"Okay." I replied with a raise of my eyebrow. This was the first time I heard a king in Amsterdam reference Judith Butler. Although I knew that Mirjam studied gender, the sudden

theoretical was surprising.

“How do we do that?” She asked me. “How do we... ehhh, you know in one way, you know, I can really exaggerate, like yeah now, masculine is this and then feminine is, you know, those big opposites.”

Her arms were tense and she was striking the air in short quick motions, only to contrast this movement by rotating her wrist and elbow in long flowing strides, like a Balinese dancer.

“But also, you know, looking actually a lot of men sit like this.” She mimicked how I was sitting. We were now both sitting with crossed legs, our ankles resting together. I felt like we could be on daytime television, the way we were perfectly posed, angled, and postured.

“Or looking even further than that. I just find it very, very fascinating. Also, how we defi[ne], you know, how we take certain qualities or aspects and then label them masculine or feminine, and I find it quite problematic. And this is a way, I mean, I can think about it, but this is also a way to deepen the experience. Because thinking about it is one thing, but kind of doing drag, brings a whole new dimension to it.”

As she discussed her history as a dancer and how in dance all movements are labeled masculine or feminine, I began to wonder, “Maybe this is ‘the understanding’ that she was referring to earlier?” Do the kings all recognize how arbitrary gender labels are? Or do they simply not fit (or see themselves fitting) into the socially defined gender roles of woman/man?

Mirjam also brings up the issue of gendered discourse. Gender gives us a way to make each other and our (sexual) identities intelligible. However, gendered discourse does not stop at identity. It pervades our entire conceptualization of the self in relation to society. In

Western societies gender relies upon a binary system of classification and these gendered constructs (masculine/feminine) are reiterated in how we think about movement, speech, and our bodies. The power that the gender binary holds over our agency and our bodies is ubiquitous. Drag kinging affords the opportunity to blend, confuse, and detach these formidable cultural constructs from their historical affiliations, emancipating gender (and its signifiers) from a hegemonic taxonomy.

Furthermore, Mirjam points out that theorizing about gender is one thing but intentionally performing gender brings a 'new dimension' to understanding how the performativity of gender works.[26] To test my hypothesis as to whether or not the 'understanding' or community factor of kinging was related to this 'new dimension' of understanding, Mirjam and I conducted a drag king experiment.

As part of a series of portraits Mirjam was compiling for a photography class, she asked me to become a drag king. At first I was hesitant. I knew as an ethnographer the experience would be invaluable to my understanding of drag kings. After a little encouragement from Mirjam in our email correspondence, I agreed to participate. I did want to see what it was all about. I thought about it for days before our meeting, at a loss as to how I was going to pull this off. I had never been the most masculine man in the room.

She asked me, "What kind of man do you want to be?"

I stared blankly back at her and began to giggle awkwardly. She pushed me to think of people with whom I identified. As someone who has lived his whole life as a male, identifying

[26] There is an important distinction between the concepts of 'performativity' and 'performance.' A performance is an action that applies to an actor (or agent) actively and consciously embodying and enacting a role for an intended audience. Performativity, on the other hand, is a principle of gender that explains the *compulsory* performances of gender that we do every day in relation to societal, cultural, and historical discourses.

my male role models was incredibly difficult. I realized how unconscious many of my role models were. I never liked superheroes and action stars, with the exception of Indiana Jones. In fact, when I was younger I never really had any direct role models that I worshipped or plastered on my walls, except for maybe the astronaut John Glenn. After about twenty minutes of brainstorming and discussing possibilities we decided to try out many 'types' or personas to enact and photograph. We decided that four masculinities worked well for me and would be relatively comfortable for me to embody: a Bohemian style inspired by Johnny Depp, a proper dandy *à la* Oscar Wilde, a club-kid 'scenester' like Andy Warhol, and finally, a leather clad rebel reminiscent of James Dean or Marlon Brando.

After coming up with the list I realized that like Carolien's identification with Michael Jackson and Freddie Mercury, I too chose to impersonate or imitate masculine idols that were more than a bit queer. I supposed that maybe Carolien, like myself, sees more of her/himself in these figures who do things their own way. These men could never be packaged and sold as Mattel's cookie-cutter Ken dolls. They are unique and flamboyant, incredibly individualized and spectacularly styled.

We began picking clothes from my closet and suitcase that would signify these types of masculinities. From derby hats and skinny ties, to tuxedo shoes and a motorcycle jacket, we amassed a pile of clothing on the floor and began to sift through the layers of fabric. Once I was dressed as my Bohemian persona, I found it staggeringly difficult to move the way I thought this man would move. I tried to take up more space and open my stance. I arched my shoulders back with a relaxed sense of pride and my unbuttoned shirt draped over my waist, giving more mass to my thin form. I rolled cigarettes and tried on different pairs of glasses trying to find the right mixture between a confident and playful, possibly pretentious

artist and the subdued yet sturdy, nonperformative aspect of masculinity that I never really felt nor found in my everyday life.

Becoming a drag king, replete with a fake mustache and goatee over my stubble, was an epiphany for me. I had experienced performing as a drag queen and for me that was easy, maybe even natural. But I slowly began to realize as I switched from persona to persona that this sort of drag required much more than drawing from my acting skills. I had to bring myself into it as well. Mirjam's favorite photo was my favorite as well and it appears below.

Figure 3: Ethnographer as a Bohemian drag king. Photo courtesy of Mirjam.

The photograph depicts me as a Bohemian type king with a fake moustache and goatee rolling a cigarette, but due to the angle of the shot it's difficult to discern exactly what I am licking. The moustache matches my darkened eyebrows making it appear that the applied hair could be natural. The fact that my bangs hang over my eyes adds a layer of

mystery, almost androgyny to the image, softening the contours of my face. The curtains in the background are reminiscent of a stage despite the naturalistic lighting. The image demands the viewer to question, “Is this really a drag king?” even, “What is a drag king then?”

This Bohemian masculinity was the most comfortable persona for me to perform, the most ‘natural’ masculinity for me to embody. It was a difficult experience attempting to inflate myself, take up space, appear taller, stronger, more stern or aggressive. Even having facial hair was physically uncomfortable when it tickled my nose as I smiled. When moving, my body suddenly felt heavier, my movements were sharper and more emphatic. After some time embodying and performing this Bohemian style of masculinity many of the anxieties I had felt subsided, and I found myself moving through space more easily and comfortably.

What was it that I had found? Had I tapped into my masculine ‘essence’ or merely begun to perfect my imitation? Or was I simply starting to critically examine the discourses of masculine performativity of my own body?

Our little gender bending experiment enriched my own identification with my participants. I realized that maybe I too have that ‘understanding about gender’ that Mirjam discussed, as she guided me in my quest to find my own drag king persona. Like the drag kings who work collaboratively on getting ‘dragged up,’ I felt as if I now had some idea of the powerful potential of these practices to form a connection or a community. It was comforting and also thrilling. Slowly I was becoming a part of the community my participants had established and, like Renate’s first flirtation with kinging, I have photographs to prove it.

After the photoshoot, Mirjam and I were deep in conversation about her persona, Valentijn. I was still wearing my mustache and goatee as we chatted.

“I think Valentijn is very feminine in a way. Also, not trying to be much more over the edge. It's much more, like the inner experience of being much *more centered* or something and being *more quiet*.”

“It's very interesting to play with, you know, how much space you take, how you—or how I—*how much space I take*, how I walk—with that. And what I find most is as Valentijn I'm really learning to, more *hold back*, move less, move ehhmm… And I'm only, by that I mean, I find it hard to separate that experience from my life as Mirjam. I really take that with me. That's something I really learn from that too. I can very like this,” she shook her arms erratically in the air, ”And to move less, which is really more,” her arm movements became softer. Mirjam would often avoid using the words masculine and feminine to describe something and instead substitute arm movements as a means of communicating gender performativity.

“I don’t see myself in everyday life as Valentijn, but more **in-between**. But it's, kind of the embodiment of it. In the times that I've been Valentijn, I've really noticed that it's very beneficial for me to take that with me in my life as Mirjam. So that's the same.”

She told me about how it was advantageous to merge her drag king persona with her everyday self.

“And, yeah, since about ten years ago? Yeah, ten years ago I was really ill for a year. Very, very ill. I couldn't do anything. Then I went on a diet to help my blood sugar. So, very healthy thing. But I noticed, in drag, I have way less problems with my blood sugar. And that's very fascinating. So that's also the part of taking that with me in life. You know, how am

I more umm... and, and I haven't figured it all out to, to put it in words, but how I'm much more... I keep things much *more closer to myself* or something—to learn that. If that makes sense at all, if you don't understand it, I don't know. Ack! So, in terms of body and embodiment I find that, very interesting also. Learning how to deal with my body and my energy and things. That's from that internal, so taking on as Mirjam. So in a way Valentijn is very different. And at the same time I wonder if he's not much closer than, uhh, *what I feel I need to be*, I think. So that's the kind of thing I'm still working and trying to figure out."

Mirjam's account of how drag kinging has helped her control her blood sugar and abundant energy is remarkable. While the medical value of drag or masculinity has yet to be explored, her discussion of her body is enlightening. Like Foucault's idea of discipline (1977/1995), Mirjam was learning the discourses of masculinity through her own (truthfully, unconventional) means. In time she found that this sort of discipline, a self-imposed and self-reflexive bodily discipline, was exactly what could help her live the life she wanted. She described how her masculinity or gender, like Henrick's, was not the typical stereotype, but something highly subjective.

"I don't know, in daily life, I think I'm a little, I think I have definitively very feminine qualities, whatever they are, and some masculine things as well. So, I think of myself much more **in-between**. If I had to identify somewhere, I like the word androgynous as well, but sometimes some people don't like it. So I like to be much more, yeah, I don't know if even in-between? But kind of *take from both*, and be flexible with it and take whatever I like in them. But to, to have a fluidity there, or a flexibility there."

Mirjam's philosophy or theory of gender fits with Butler's ideas. Gender is always (re)appropriated. Because she is conscious of the 'constructedness' of gender norms she is

able to ‘take’ what she likes and discard the rest. Importantly, she identifies as ‘in-between’ genders (male/female). This ambiguous identification offers freedom for gender to be variable and continuously changing.

We concluded our interview with a discussion of gender identity and sexuality. In reference to the protagonist in a film called *The Girl* (2000) Mirjam told me, “I like her persona and some of the friendships she has. And at one point, she writes it down, she doesn't even say it, just, **‘In my heart I'm a gentleman.’** And I can't—that, that, that kind of sentence, I really like. Not so much meaning I want to, or in this stage of my life seriously considered taking medical steps or something, but I like this. I like this sentence and I think that that's sort of a key sentence for me in the drag kinging also.”

“I see myself as much more **in between genders** or wanting to be *more*, you know, *different* with that. And also, I don't—what I'm attracted to is also—I'm not mostly *not* attracted to women who identify as a woman. So I am then a lesbian? I mean I'm in a lesbian relationship. It's all fine to use the word. But if I’m really honest in how I feel and identify, it's *more queer than lesbian* identified. Hehehehe, oh okay, you quote me on this. I'm almost, what I would say is: I'm a drag king who falls for drag kings.”

The practice of drag kinging, for Mirjam, has allowed for an exploration of her gender and sexuality. While she told me she has always questioned gender norms and tried to live outside of them, kinging gives her a way to live out and find meaning in her thoughts and philosophies. The idea of the ‘gentleman’ is appealing to a queer theorist as it encapsulates both masculine ideals and issues of class. The role of the gentleman relies upon chivalry, generosity, and often benevolent sexism (i.e., holding or opening the door for a woman), yet the role is usually reserved for the well-dressed business*man*. The stereotype dictates that a

'gentleman' would wear a fashionably cut suit, pay close attention to details of his appearance, and exude an air of worldly cosmopolitan excess. Stereotypes of what is masculine (at least in Western media) rely upon rugged violence, an identification with the traditional working-class patriarch figure, and an even stronger connection to one's employment and work. The butch role and/or identity in butch/femme lesbian relationships often relates to the butch's charming chivalry toward a femme (Feinberg 1993, Newton 1996/2000:65). Drawing from both mainstream representations of masculinity as well as histories of female, butch, and trans masculinity, drag kings can appropriate from masculinities that cut across classes, races (in the case of the Michael Jackson with Carolien), and sexualities. Drag king performers, though, may not be able to transcend the normal discourses of gender, class, race, sexuality, etc. in their daily lives. Drag kinging is an outlet for these explorations and embodiments of a multiplicity of socially defined roles and categories.

Mirjam's discussion of her sexuality is intriguing in terms of social identity and discourses that rely upon strict classifications. Because she is female-bodied and presents herself as a woman (and uses female pronouns for herself and male pronouns for Valentijn), Mirjam is invariably 'read' as female. Also, Mirjam is dating another drag king who identifies as (gender) queer, but this king too mostly presents as a woman. They are thus read as lesbian despite that the term does not encompass their sexuality and identification with masculinity as driving factors in their sexual desires and daily lives. Their queerness is visible, yet their identification *as queer* is overridden by dominant discourses of sexuality. Although a king may have a very specific gender (e.g., queer) or sexuality (e.g., drag king

attracted to drag kings), these internalized identifications may not fit into socially and historically constructed discourses depending on how they are seen by others.

These complicated intersections and webs of identities come from both the internal (or felt) gender and sexuality of the performer as well as the politics of how they are signified, and thus interpolated as a subject by the audience. It becomes apparent that the lines between self and persona are not immutable. One may feel one thing everyday and perform another as a king or as Henrick stated, maybe they do the same onstage and off. When I attempted drag kinging, it became impossible to disentangle the identities I project everyday and the identities I wished to make into a performance. Although the kings are projecting a specific stylization of themselves and their bodies onstage, the sexual and gender politics of these stylizations inevitably include the way they live and identify offstage. How does this process of identity/persona disentanglement begin? Or does kinging generally embellish the complexity of one's identities?

Mirjam has already begun to critically analyze how her persona affects her everyday life and vice-versa by focusing on her body more than external and social factors. Many of the kings with whom I spoke were very aware that the transformation of self to persona (or drag king) is more fluid (even in the social realm) than their dramatic appearances and theatrical performances lend to a cursory glance. These transformations are ongoing, continuous, and changing the way drag king performers view themselves, their own gender and sexuality, as well as (dominant male) masculinities in general.

Working in the Shop—Masculine Transformations and Making Connections

I took a sip of my beer and suddenly noticed Renate's was nearly gone already. I had just asked her about the first King Betty Drag King Contest. Renate ran the workshop this past summer and I questioned her about how she ran it, what kinds of activities the kings did, and what her goals were. This was not the first drag king workshop she had given. Earlier in 2009 she met Mirjam at a workshop she ran in a nearby city. Renate had also invited Henrick to this workshop, who was a longtime friend. Months later Renate began preparing for the King Betty workshop, where even more potential kings arrived to learn the techniques.

The King Betty drag king events began with a showing of *Venus Boyz* (Baur 2002), the most comprehensive documentary about drag kings, the night before the workshop. There were so many people that showed up to see the film that they had to turn people away at the door because Betty Too was over-crowded. After the success of the film showing Renate knew that the workshop was going to be busy and there might not be enough space. Although the workshop took place in such a congested space, there was plenty of opportunity to play with and explore masculinity.

Renate explained how she begins her drag king workshop with a focus on the body and movement, in the tradition of method acting and Dianne Torr's infamous "Drag King for a Day" workshop. She also draws from her own experiences living as male and transitioning to presenting and living as a female for inspiration.

"First physical before you can get into a persona, a character. So if you become a woman, you have to dress up as a woman, behave like a woman, talk like a woman, and then you can find *all the little details* that make you **become** a woman. And so, that's how it

works for me. And then there are getting to the slapping each other on the shoulder and…" she flexed her arms for me like a body-builder.

"But that's one of those things. Slapping each other on the shoulder and then you're like, 'Yeah, cool!'" she said in a baritone vocal register.

"That's something I learned because first I was a guy, had to behave like a man. Will that go automatically? *Because you copy what you see*. You try to pretend to be a man because people think you're different. You are called names. And you get beat up if you're really effeminate. So it, it, it's a survival mechanism. Because at a certain point you know how to, both how to behave like a woman or to behave like a man. And then you just start thinking about all these little details, *why a man is a man*… And that's what I love to teach to the people that come to my workshop: the little details that make it all *look real*."

"And make them [the workshop attendees] also become aware of their testosterone, uhh, feelings. Their behavior, their male part of them, and then we can work and do the makeup. And then you can get it together. But you have to do it so quickly, since most workshops are two hours, three hours maximum. And mostly that's way too short to do a good workshop."

Much like Simone de Beauvoir's famous anti-essentialist quote that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Renate begins her workshop with a lesson in the social construction of gender and its distinction from (the social construction of) biological sex (1952/1989:267). The drag king transformation begins with embodiment. The participants traverse the shifting tides of cultural and social discourses that tell us which stylizations of the body are feminine and which are masculine. These are distinctions we learn through socialization. As Renate said, we copy others to learn our gender role. Only once we

understand what gestures and stylizations of the body signify man or woman (the gender roles) can we begin to analyze the ‘little details’ that bring a man or woman into social being and make these roles intelligible. The workshop is concerned with authenticity or the ability to pass as a man. The goal is to instruct the attendees in the techniques of creating an artificial, yet believable, version of masculinity.

To illustrate her point, Renate elaborated, “And knowing little details like why a man carries his dick on a certain side of his underwear. Do you know why you wear it left or right?” she posited.

“I don't know.”

“Let me ask you: Do you wear it left or right?” she snickered and looked at me inquisitively.

“I gotta think about it, uhh, left. Left.”

“Okay, then. You're right-handed, yes? It's very simple because if you would take it on the right side…”

“That would be awkward.”

“It would hahaha, be awkward to get it out of your pants when you go to the toilet.”

These ‘little details’ are products of an understanding of male embodiment. These are the kinds of details that Renate exposes to the delight of her attendees. I had never really questioned why a male-bodied person would position their genitals a certain way or another unless they were doing drag, presenting as female, or were wearing uncomfortable underwear. *Authentic parody* is what Renate preaches, but it does not come from herself alone. The kings, like all of us, learn gender by example. The environment of the workshop allows people to talk about these ‘little details’ openly and critically. Many ‘details’ are socially

constructed stylizations of the voice and body whereas others rely upon Renate's explanation of living as a male-bodied person who was socialized male. Discussions of 'maleness' and masculinity do not stop at embodiment. Throughout Renate's workshop gender stereotypes are revealed as arbitrary and artificial, the (heterosexual) gender norms are theatricalized and appropriated for play, and the participants' "intrinsic inclinations"[27] about gender are elaborated upon through these processes.

Another aspect of the participants' transformation into drag kings under Renate's instruction involves interacting with one another like stereotypical (white) heterosexual men watching a sports game, discussing 'chicks,' or competing to see who is the toughest (or most endowed) guy in the bunch. Renate and the kings knew this was a stereotype of homosocial interaction as they pursued to create an *authentic parody* of this behavior. One must note that homosocial interactions between (heterosexual) men are not reserved for consuming beer, making crude jokes, and poking fun in an attempt to gain prestige as the Alpha male. Is his memoir, Jamison Green thoroughly describes his transition to an FTM (female to male) identity and how he attended a men's group that played drums together during this process. The group was critical of and often discussed their socially defined roles as 'breadwinner' and 'patriarch,' as well the politics of masculinity. The group with which Green worked also approached their experience of 'maleness' spiritually (2004:32-52). However, the drag king workshop is not part of the Men's Movement[28]. It is meant to queer

[27] Julia Serano's theory of gender takes into account our urges, desires, and subconscious influences upon our gender identity, sexual preferences, *and* gender presentations. Her theory of gender identity reconciles the social constructionist and the essentialist models of identity, as well as the theory of the performativity of gender identity (Butler 1990a/1999), by highlighting these 'intrinsic inclinations' toward masculinity, femininity, and/or androgyny (2007:95-113).

[28] The Men's Movement is an academic and social movement in the early to mid-1990s that can be seen as a reaction to the 'demonization' of men by Second and Third Wave Feminist Theorists. See Gutmann (1997), Kimmel (1996), and Rotundo (1993) for examples of works that come out of Men's Movement discussions.

socially accepted notions of masculinity and detach masculine gestures and signifiers from dominant interpretations or assumptions.

‘Homosocial’ activities between drag kings, such as slapping each other on the shoulder, are derived from stereotypical assumptions about heterosexual (white) male masculine behavior and interaction. I can barely imagine a group of gay men performing in this way (although that too is a stereotypical observation or generalization about gay masculinity or even effeminacy). Theoretically, the homosocial environment of the drag king workshop that Renate offers is an excellent presentation of the humor of the kinging aesthetic.

Mirjam told me in reference to the ‘homosocial’ environment of drag kinging as a group, “I also like this atmosphere of kind of a workshop or also before performance. Just getting together and getting, you know, helping each other with the makeup... It's a very interesting mix of bonding. You know it's different than the stereotype of women who are like putting on makeup together: It’s just totally different. So it's this interesting mixture of how you connect with people. So, and helping each other, you know, how do you bind your breasts? And how you know these practicalities, too. It's an interesting kind of atmosphere which I really enjoy, where you talk about these practicalities and help each other in.”

Indeed it is quite a queer sight to see a group of female-bodied people raised female applying sideburns and greasing each other’s pompadours. It completely contradicts the stereotype of how ‘women’ get ready together, accessorize, and do makeup in the mirror while gossiping. Instead, the drag kings punch one another in the arm, grunt, and groan. During the workshop there is a peculiar type of bonding that resists classification as stereotypically feminine (or female-bonding) or masculine (or male-bonding). This unique

atmosphere, which is decidedly queer, contributes to the 'understanding about gender,' discussed by Mirjam above, at the level of a community.

This community of drag kings, however liminal and short-lived the workshop was, began to extend outside of the confines of the small second story room of Betty Too. After everyone was in drag and felt comfortable they hit the streets with their perfectly trimmed mustaches and dapper costumes. The goal was to see how well the participants passed as men and how they maintained their persona outside of the safe space of the workshop. Always pushing the boundaries, Renate led the kings to a commercial gay bar down the street where a large crowd of gay men were mingling out front at cocktail tables, so that the drag kings could interact with men raised male.

Henrick told me, "We went out there to the gay bars and they were actually looking at us!" He implied that some of the gay men thought they were attractive and were perhaps giving them the 'cruising eye.' I thought of Kate Bornstein's discussion of passing and how, as a trans woman, if someone whistles in her direction she knows that she's being read (or gendered) correctly, although the sexism inherent in the act of cat-calling is bothersome (1994:26-31). Henrick recalled, "There was a remark [from a gay man]: all the nice men are women!" Although they were 'read' as drag kings, the kings sure had a fabulous time drinking and joking with 'the guys.'

There is a delicious queerness about a group of drag kings learning to pass by interacting with gay men. Homosociality and homoeroticism collapse into one another and the concepts are disrobed entirely by the fact that half the men are drag kings. The interaction between the kings and the gay men transgresses socially accepted assumptions about who can be sexualized and under what circumstances, what kind of 'men' these gay

men find attractive, and raises a whole host of complications to any generalization about gendered or sexualized communication. In fact, the whole event is just too hilarious to intricately deconstruct in any logical sense. This is the humor of kinging: the doubling and miming of identity and style in an attempt to queer the queer even further.

The drag kings' night out with the 'guys' (of multitudinous varieties and orientations) begs a question. Renate already discussed the dangers of gay selfhood and male femininity by describing gender as a 'survival mechanism.' If she was looking to teach the kings about 'realness' and authentic masculinity (which is apparently still bound to heterosexual signifiers of maleness and male embodiment) why in the world did they not go to a rodeo or a straight bar or club? There are plenty in the area of Betty Too. Surely that would seem the most logical way to 'copy' and learn by example and since there was such a large group of kings there probably would not be any troubling altercations. When contextualizing the workshop and the kings' night out, something screams that copying or learning was not the only goal of that evening.

Establishing drag king visibility and publicizing before the main event of the Amsterdam Drag King Contest is an obvious motivating factor (as there were thousands of tourists in the city for the Gay and LesBian Canal Pride). Their numbers guaranteed the personal safety of the participants, but a gay bar would more likely be receptive to this type of gender bending even if the patrons were not familiar with or disapproved of the kings. Like the communal space that the drag kings established in Betty Too or the queer squat during the night of the S'not Cabaret, this commercial gay bar, too, provided some relief from gender normative society. In the end, all the patrons that night stand at odds with the

hegemonic sexual discourse of compulsory heterosexuality that oppress all members of the LGBTQ community.

Finally, there is a political factor in effectively overrunning a commercial gay bar dominated by gay men. The kings stole the show that night at the bar. All eyes were on them, although, as a group, they stood about a foot shorter than many of the Dutch gay men. The kings were the toast of the town! The *Regulierdwarsstraat* has only ever welcomed drag queens, but not gender variant queers or lesbians and queer women. Showing up to a 'traditionally' all-male 'gay space' as drag kings could be considered an act of protest criticizing gendered spaces within the LGBT community. The politics of drag king visibility as a form of political action or protest was also a guiding principle in the formation of the King Betty organization and the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009.

Machining a Weapon—The Contest, Community Politics, and Queer Space

Margriet was perched on her chair as I sat across the table looking around the second floor of Betty Too. The walls were plastered with photocopied images of Volcano's portraits of drag kings from *The Drag King Book* (Volcano and Halberstam 1999). Someone had painted a mustache on the life-size Betty Boop statue that was in the corner of the room. The room had not changed since the workshop and the contest, as the owners were getting ready to remodel the second floor. Margriet was telling me about how she and her partner, along with the owner of Betty Too, had organized the Amsterdam Drag King Contest during the week of Gay and LesBian Pride.

Margriet told me, "We had this idea. And then we told people, but everybody was, 'Uhh,'" she groaned, "'That's just another idea.' And, 'Do you really think those people exist?'

Hahaha! They didn't agree, but yeah we also didn't know that. But they must be there, most of the people that are interested in this... So, maybe that's even more important, that we organized something for people that nobody has ever organized something for."

As she talked about the workshop and contest I could sense how enthusiastic she was to share how complex it was to plan an event like this. As Margriet said, nobody had ever held such an extensive event that focused on lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer factions of the population during Amsterdam Pride. In order to get some financial and social support for the drag king events, Margriet and her partner began attending Gay Pride and LesBian Pride committee meetings. Margriet relayed how she was frustrated with the committees:

"All these men were constantly talking about all these typical topics like HIV, which is of course important here [in Amsterdam] so... About cruising areas: that they should have more, more of those kind of things. But I got a bit annoyed. Because ehh, hello! Haha. There's much more than this. And you're only thinking about yourself."

So the King Betty crew decided to approach the LesBian Pride organization. She explained, "We had very different ideas. They wanted it to be very distinct from the male Gay Pride. And we would like to see more mixed, because if you always have everything distinct from each other you never get to know each others' problems. There's not a solidarity there, in my opinion. So there were a lot of discussions, and the owner of Betty

Too came as well. Then they were like, ‘Ooo, who's this straight woman here?’ Haha. They were quite offensive in the beginning actually.”

“But afterward we became annoyed by the Lesbian Pride, by lesbians only focusing on lesbians! We thought this is not what it should be about. What now? We still forget about people. So it was actually also like a protest for us to organize something new which was not necessarily for the target group I belong to, but... you get my point?”

Facing problems with both the Gay Pride and LesBian Pride organizations, Margriet and the other organizers of King Betty knew they had their work cut out for them. After weeks of meetings with LesBian Pride it seems they began to understand what Margriet and the others were trying to accomplish. King Betty was able to get a subsidy from a trust fund dedicated to Pride events and their ideas started to gain momentum. She explained that soon after they were included in the LesBian Pride calendar many people volunteered to help them out.

Margriet and the King Betty volunteers began advertising around Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht to entice potential kings from throughout the Netherlands.

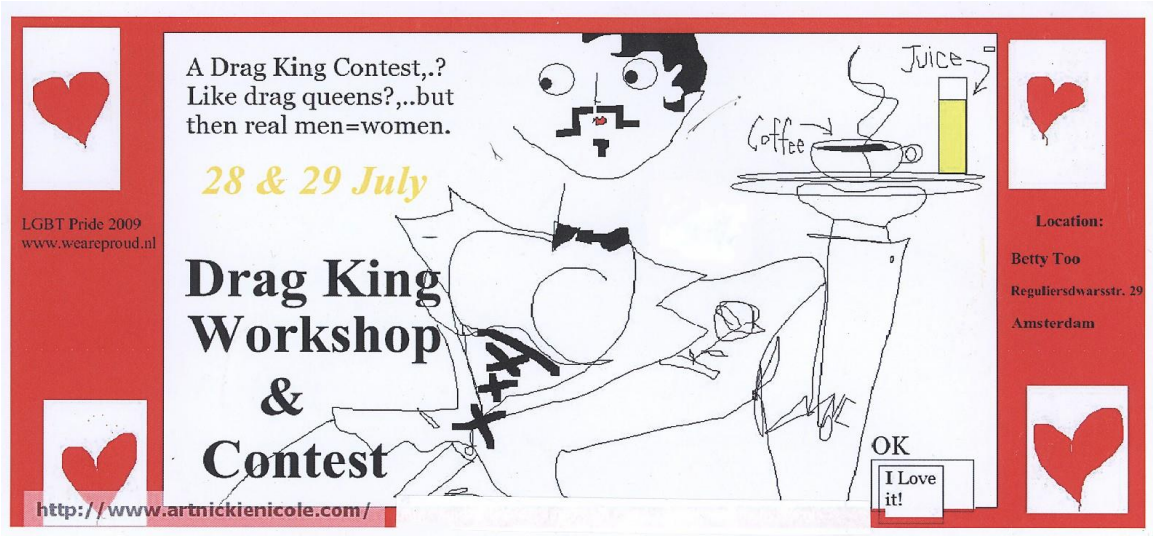

Figure 4: Advertisement for King Betty Drag King Workshop and Contest. The back of the flyer includes details of the event and states, “Give shape to your drag king persona: What’s his name? What’s his job? How does he walk? What are his love interests? Who would he like to fuck?”

The event took place on a sunny afternoon, the day after the workshop. The front of Betty Too had a red carpet rolled out in front of it. There were photographers and tourists flocking to the Canal Pride events waiting curiously as the drag kings were inside readying themselves. I was told the organizers contacted famous drag kings such as Diane Torr and Bridge Markland of Berlin to figure out the logistics of hosting this contest in such a small space. The kings walked the red carpet in three different forums.

First they walked as a group of kings. The individual acts came next. Some kings performed a dance number or simply walked the carpet to a song of their choice. The kings were also given roses to hand out to audience members. Margriet told me that one king, who gave the rose to a young woman in the audience, then kissed the girl while cameras flashed and the audience cheered. She also mentioned that she saw two young children, a boy and a girl, proudly displaying their penciled on mustaches. There were nearly two hundred fifty people present to watch the kings walk and cheer them on. The crowd consisted of people of all genders and sexualities from across the Netherlands. One family had traveled all the way from the town of Maastricht at the southernmost tip of the country to see the event.

The third portion of the contest featured a panel of judges from the local LGBTQ community that would ask the kings questions such as, “What is your favorite *voetbol*[29] team?” Much of the contest was in Dutch, but Margriet and Renate, who were also dressed as kings, read from the King Betty mission statement in English. Margriet was sardonically

[29] Dutch for ‘soccer.’

impersonating Maik de Boer, a bald flamboyantly gay fashionista who is a regular patron to he bars on the street.[30] The mission statement states clearly the political motivations of hosting a drag king event.[31]

> *Our activities are an opportunity to bring together a group of people who are interested in transgressing gender boundaries, exploring the fluidity of gender identity, to discuss these topics and to come out and question the dominant heteronormative gender dichotomy.*
>
> *Our activities aim to bring together lesbian and bisexual women, homo- and bisexual men, as well as transgenders, to get to know each other and (as a long term perspective) to build bridges to help each other for the sake of a joint objective: emancipation.*

These goals were accomplished in two ways:

> *1. Letting the activities take place during the Gay Pride in a particularly 'homosexual' environment, the Regulierdwarsstraat; a street in which few lesbians or bisexual women, not to mention transgenders, find (social and economical) interests.*
>
> *2. By not situating Drag Kings as 'masculine' lesbian women (Drag Butch), or as commercial cross-dress* [sic] *performers (transvestites), or as a 'dress-up' festivity, but as a political weapon and 'embodied' expressions* [sic] *that challenge contemporary dominant (gender- en* [sic][32] *sexuality) presumptions.*

After about forty-five minutes of drag kings walking the red carpet the police arrived. The police broke up the event and the street was cleared. Margriet explained, "The mood was just so positive, and it was also a really new thing 'cause there's also why we also got in trouble with the—not actually with the police, but with the municipality. Because they have

[30] Maik de Boer appears on Dutch television and gives makeovers to fashion needy people. By kinging his "bitchy," as Margriet described it, persona she aimed to poke fun at de Boer. De Boer is well known in mainstream Dutch society as a stereotypically caddy, gay male. I had the pleasure, or rather displeasure, of meeting de Boer at De Trut one evening. Let's just say he was rather touchy and a bit rude when I snubbed him off.

[31] There are a host of grammatical errors in the King Betty mission statement. I did not correct these grammatical errors in order to maintain the authenticity of the mission statement.

[32] Dutch for 'and.'

these really strict rules in Amsterdam and you need permission for really strict things, and we work on something that they didn't think of you could work on something like that. So, we had discussions before with them, 'But is it a stage in or is it a protest, or is it a party? But how come there is no beer then?' And they were confused by that. Because it was a new creative... thing. But all the people on the street they were really upset."

It is important to clarify that the event was not shut down because it was a queer event *per se*, but rather because King Betty could not arrange for a permit to host the event in the middle of a street. Although the Netherlands is well known for their thorough, yet convoluted, bureaucratic government processes, the municipality of Amsterdam could not figure out how to classify the contest. Because the event could not be classified and granted the appropriate permit for closing off a street, technically the event was illegal. The red carpet had to be rolled up and the barricades that blocked off the catwalk were removed.

Margriet's voice was stressed when discussing how the police cancelled the event. She told me how the owner of Betty Too had tried to appease the police when they arrived, but in the end the event was still lacking a properly categorized permit with the municipality. All of my participants relayed the same story to me about the police with dismay, but not anger. Mirjam, for instance, made it clear that this was not an issue of discrimination, but a simple legal issue.

One of the judges of the contest offered a space at the Amsterdam Public Library (*Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam* or OBA) to finish the contest later in the week, since a winner was still yet to be crowned the "Most Talented Drag King 2009." The contest began where it left off and each participant got a second chance to perform for an audience. Although the event was not cancelled or targeted because of its queer focus, this sort of

interference by the municipality demonstrates some of the complications of creating (and maintaining) a 'queer space' that does not conform to set categories.

Queer space can be defined "as a reterritorialization of heterosexual space, it purportedly enables the visibility of sexual subcultures that resist and rupture hegemonic heterosexuality that is the source of their marginality and exclusion" (Oswin 2008:90). However, the "reterritorialization" of a specifically queer space rests upon the assumption of heterosexual domination and homosexual subordination (Oswin 2008, Puar 2002). A system of domination and subordination based on the hetero/homo dichotomy is highly problematic as it does not address that "rarely is that disruption interrogated also as a disruption of racialized, gendered, and classed spaces" (Puar 2002:936). Finally, the idea of 'claiming' space is rooted in the discourses of colonialism that ignore the *re*production of power and essentialize spaces in terms of ownership based on a (sub)cultural identity and membership (Oswin 2008, Puar 2002).[33] While these are difficulties of understanding space as a construction, queer spaces where drag kings perform and play are nearly always associated with the local queer communities.

Like the squat described above, the *Regulierdwarsstraat* was transformed into a queer space for gender exploration and politically oriented performances. In fact, the public space that was (re)appropriated for use by the contest was so queer that the municipality could not even pin down a category under which to file the event. There are, however, many differences between the queer space of the squat and the *Regulierdwarsstraat*. The squat is already a space that was appropriated from a state of abandonment for habitation. People who align themselves with queer (and anarchist) political ideals inhabit the squat. This does

[33] For a critique of the concept of queer space as something stable based upon issues of inclusion and difference see Browne (2006).

not mean that the political function of drag to undermine dominant gender ideologies is lost on the squat crowd. However, because the squat is a relatively private space where queer-identified or oriented people do gather, their relative familiarity with non-normative gender presentations means that drag kinging functions more as a celebration of queer solidarity. Sexual and gender discourses are already disrupted by the fact that a queer squat exists. The kings simply materialize these disruptions during their performances.

The *Regulierdwarsstraat*, as mentioned earlier, has been historically established as a commercial and social space for (mostly) gay male clientele and tourists. The contest, by claiming the street as a catwalk for drag kings, disrupts the stability of the highly gendered and sexualized space that the *Regulierdwarsstraat* provides for gay men. Although the *Regulierdwarsstraat* is a 'safe space' for all gender non-conformists, its commercial focus on gay men excludes specifically lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer factions of the LGBTQ community. As the King Betty mission statement explains, the goals of the event are twofold: to provide a visibly queer space that transcends classifications based upon sexual orientation and gender identity or gender presentation, and to showcase drag king performers as a 'political weapon' that flaunt the instability of normative gender roles.

In order to realize the goals of the mission statement the event needed to be public and well advertised. To be successful the event needed to be a forum for gender presentations and social identities that are marginalized within the wider queer community. Therefore, the fact that the contest was free and open to the public heightens the effects of drag king visibility. By bringing drag kings out into the open the political efforts of hosting the contest can be more fully achieved.

Margriet described the aftermath of the contest, "But there were so many lesbians in

the street, nobody ever has seen that over here [on the *Regulierdwarsstraat*], so it was like this really cool, strong thing, you know? The gay men from there," she gestured out the window, pointing down the street, "they come over here to check out what was going on. There were all different kind of people." After the police arrived to break up the contest "people were started crying. It was amazing! Three hours after it was broken up still a lot of people standing here on the street only talking with each other and having a drink and exchanging email addresses and phone numbers. And it was quite what we wanted actually."

The public forum of the contest provided an opportunity to create queer networks and introduce a wide variety of audience members to drag kings. This was where many of my participants were introduced to one another and decided to form a troupe. Although the event was cancelled, Margriet and the rest of the kings fulfilled their objectives. They made visible lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer identities. They celebrated drag kinging as both an exploration of self as well as a political statement about both hetero- and homonormativity. They networked with a range of individuals who supported drag king performances and began to form a community of drag kings. They materialized intra-communal marginalization by creating a specifically queer space in a traditionally gay male space. They established an organization that has big dreams and overarching goals that holistically expand the queer community. They provided an environment where masculine and masculinized female-bodies are not looked upon with fear, but are applauded for their contribution to deconstructing sexual discourses and hegemonic gender paradigms.

Mirjam sums up the way that drag kinging, as a subjective and a political practice, can free individuals from constraining cultural conceptualizations of gender, "We really want to

know, you know, is it a man or is it a woman? There is this thing that we need to grasp. And I notice this in myself sometimes as well. It's so essential to how we view the world. But I like just those little things where we can open that a little bit more. I find that very nice. Just to kind of… Because we're in this paradigm, or whatever you want to call it, of thinking so strongly in gender. I mean I cannot step outside of that. But where can I just open the gate a little bit more? And I find it interesting if people, if it has that effect on people. Just to also, just this tiny mindsets that might just change. Just a little bit. It can happen. 'Wow! What is that? What is happening?' Yeah."

In Amsterdam the success of King Betty and the events that the organization hosted during Gay and LesBian Pride set the stage for politicizing a radically queer agenda.

"What do you think that drag kings could bring to Amsterdam?" I asked Renate near the end of our conversation.

"Diversity. Haha. Fun. Uhh... enjoyment and... for me it will be totally complete if we can bring the drag king party to the Amsterdam. To bring *total diversity back to Amsterdam*. And show everybody how much fun it is to dress up as guy and eventually understand that we're not so different, although we're different. And we'll have world peace."

"That's from *Miss Congeniality*. Hahaha!" she laughed.

Margriet told me that in 2010 King Betty will attempt to host the contest as an international forum that draws in drag kings from across Europe. She also plans to put their network to use by hosting a variety of drag king and queer events throughout the year. I have heard from participants that life in Amsterdam is going well and they often send me pictures

and videos of themselves performing at parties and events. The troupe that my participants formed is going strong. Last that I heard Henrick is still performing with the troupe. Mirjam is trying to find new modes for drag king performances that transcend the mimetic and liminal performances showcased at the S'not Cabaret squat party by involving drag queens and even singing songs. The troupe also has broken into the drag queen scene in Amsterdam. A few of my participants entered the Annual Drag Queen Olympics in January of 2010, which transformed the event into a more inclusive space for queers of all varieties. The drag kings are actively performing as a troupe across the city and Carolien, the winner of the 2009 contest, was hired to perform a gig outside of Amsterdam. Renate is still hosting drag king workshops across the Netherlands. Margriet already has a permit for the 2010 King Betty contest to ensure the event will take place without a hitch. The scene is established and the drag king subculture in Amsterdam is growing in size and influence.

CONCLUSION

Something In-Between—Pushing Boundaries and Queer Potentials

Based upon the cultural texts presented here drag kinging in Amsterdam is a revitalized practice that invokes a queer potential on a number of different fronts. In order to realize the scope of possibilities that drag kinging offers we must approach the practice holistically while drawing from the voices of the performers and community members themselves. Each of my participants has unique subjectivities of the experience of being a drag king. These accounts of drag kinging draw upon their individual histories and their identities. Despite the differences in how and why they king, each participant recognized that the process is highly

personal and self-reflective. By embodying a range of masculinities and gendered stylizations the kings are able to detect and parody dominant gender and sexual discourses not only for their own enjoyment and personal growth, but also as a political message. The kings symbolically (re)arrange and (re)claim stereotypical signifiers of hegemonic, heterosexually biased discursive constructions of gender and sexuality by displacing masculinity from male bodies, molding their own style of masculinity, and embodying an innovative drag king masculinity in the context of a performance. The compulsory character of the performativity of gender is turned on its head as the kings render gender into a series of varying alternative (copied) stylizations of the body. The social construction of gender and sexuality are materialized through and on the body of the kings. The subversive potential of drag kinging is then realized on the subjective front, where self-reflexivity governs this potential, and the social front, which demands further complication. These two fronts, however, are not diametrically opposed, but feed into one another as the kings blur the boundaries of offstage and onstage, self and persona.

Aside from simply reordering gendered systems of oppression as a subjective ritual, drag kings in Amsterdam have the ability to enact social change through political commentary in their acts. The Magic Act, for example, displayed a number of modes of performance that drag kings employ. From a lurid striptease to a bombastic impersonation the kings appropriate signifiers and stylizations of gender and sexuality that will arouse, stimulate, confuse, delight, and tickle the audience. The kings invoke a queer potential through the slippage of social categories and their signifiers (such as a female-bodied person with masculine facial hair), inducing powerful responses from their audiences that bring attention to the discursive effects of gender and sexuality. Because all gender and sexual

identities and their signifiers must be understood in a political economy of language, symbols, cultures, and histories, drag kinging functions as a political critique of structures and discourses that maintain systems of (hetero/homo) normative domination and queer oppression. The LGBT community, specifically the mainstream, commercialized sectors of the community, erect barricades that obstruct a radically queer ideology from gaining a foothold. Drag kings in Amsterdam are aware of these barricades and actively work to create a queer network and community that embraces the entire range of non-normative genders, sexualities, and practices in order to transcend political squabbles based on the 'alphabet soup' approach to dividing the wider queer community. By uniting a large group of people around a subversive political act, the drag king movement and the King Betty organization have the potential to spread a radically queer ideology that demands abandonment of petty differences in favor of forming connections and learning from others' experiences of oppression.

The political rhetoric of radical queer ideology is powerful, but the kings, through their charming performances, are able to state these goals without the impressionistic and flowery language that political movements rely upon. Instead the kings make visible and celebrate the possibility for a multiplicity of genders and sexualities that we are consistently taught to ignore or invalidate. By creating an annual event for drag kings during Gay and LesBian Pride, King Betty and the kings have begun to transform commercialized mainstream depictions, definitions, and celebrations of queer life (as simply gay or lesbian). Given that the events were so well attended and King Betty created international networks that challenge the divisions within and between the LGBTQ communities, the road is paved for pushing more boundaries and collapsing the partitions that can inhibit emancipation from the

heterosexual matrix that reproduces oppressive social norms. The networks have formed and there is now an outlet for drag kings to make statements to large and diverse communities during public celebrations of what is deemed ‘queer life’ in Amsterdam.

Finally, by encouraging a self-reflexivity toward gender and sexuality and by founding these celebratory transgressions as political acts of defiant visibility, the drag kings and King Betty are initiating the creation of specifically queer spaces and venues. Drag king parties are now happening with some regularity at squats and De Trut. It is unproblematic to assume that these parties will continue to occur as long as there is interest in kinging. With more visibility and more performances in a variety of spaces that also extend out of squats, perhaps drag kinging will become a more established subculture in Amsterdam that rallies support from the array of diversity encompassed under the queer umbrella. Drag kinging is used as a tool toward constructing a more holistic unification of non-normative genders and sexualities that have a common purpose: overthrowing oppressive gender and sexual regimes based upon dichotomous social constructions in favor of bolstering appeal for the ‘in-betweens.’ Drag kings display and commemorate the infinite possibilities for creating new genders and sexualities by reordering discursive constructions. Because drag king acts function as entertainment, my participants and King Betty have the potential to create and establish queer spaces in Amsterdam that host and celebrate a conglomeration of genders and sexualities by catering to a wider queer network and contributing to and maintaining the visibility of the ‘in-betweens.’

Although Amsterdam has long welcomed gays, lesbians, prostitutes, leather-folk, and other sexual dissidents, there are still a lot of boundaries to be crossed, or even erased. Tolerance is an essential cultural component to Dutch society, and the level of acceptance

that has been established for the commercialized sectors of the queer population is tantamount to the history of progressive politics in the Netherlands. The needs of specifically queer communities that focus their outreach on uniting the ‘in-betweens’ of all varieties are still not met, although groups like King Betty, the club De Trut, and the squat that hosted S’not 2 Cabaret have begun the process in a powerful way. By including queer performers and performances, such as drag kings, into a variety of regularly occurring queer events these groups retain a transformative potential to rally support through visibility and entertainment. These groups construct publicly queer spaces, such as the Amsterdam Drag King Contest of 2009, and more private spaces removed from the scrutiny of the general public—both of which are indispensable vehicles in forging a community. Although historically a king rules with undeniable and unyielding sovereign power, the drag kings of Amsterdam are working to depose normative discursive regimes of gender and democratize gendered and sexual privilege by claiming the throne for those who fall somewhere in-between the lines.

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