

DRAG KING CAMP: A NEW CONCEPTION OF THE FEMININE

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ABSTRACT

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Drag Kings: A New Conception of the Feminine
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This thesis is an exploration of drag king performance through the lens of third wave feminism and Camp performance mechanisms. The term *drag king* refers to any person, usually female, that is making a performance of masculinity using costume, makeup and gesture. Camp is defined as an ever-changing system of humor and queer parody that works to subvert hegemonic cultural structures in an effort to gain queer visibility. Drag king Camp is posited as a theatrical mechanism that works to reveal maleness and masculinity as a performative act, therefore destabilizing the gender binary, and simultaneously revealing alternative conceptions of femininity. Drag king performance will be theorized in five sections. The Introduction will contextualize drag king performance as a subversive queer performance form. Chapter 1 will give an overview of the history of female cross-dressing on theatrical stages, including the development of contemporary drag king performance. Three types of drag king Camp will be introduced: Pond Scum Camp, Marginal Male Camp, and Celebrity Camp. In Chapter 2, the term Camp will be defined and explained in terms of its relation to feminist theatre. Finally, Chapter 3 will build a framework based on feminist theatre scholarship and third wave feminist scholarship in order to situate the use of drag king Camp as destabilizing the gender binary and revealing multiple femininities. The conclusion will situate drag king performance as a form of cultural performance, engaged in an ongoing challenge to hegemonic cultural structures.

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INTRODUCTION

Drag in Context

The strong scent of spirit gum and hairspray will always mean one thing to me: drag. Not the drag with long, flowing wigs and glittering dresses. Not the drag of the famed RuPaul. It is the drag of drag kingdom. As I applied my very first handlebar mustache and penciled in my extra bushy eyebrows, I was affirmed in my love for the art form. All those pelvic thrusts, crotch grabs and showing off of muscles was finally going to come to life on stage. That February night in 2008, the Rocky Mountain Oysters Drag King Troupe made their debut at Under the Hood, a monthly womyn's performance event. Almost five years later, I have embarked on a journey to better understand drag king performance through its influences and histories. And while performing as Frederick McGee it is the most fun I have ever had, the depth of the art form is worthy of rigorous analysis.

When I first started performing drag, I noticed that many people did not know what a drag king was, and that few acts in the Denver area utilized Camp in their acts. I wondered why the kings tended to be mild mannered and serious in their performances. Conversely, the troupe I performed with, the Rocky Mountain Oysters Drag King Troupe, tended to perform as a group and utilize Camp elements such as songs by The Village People and choreography that implied homosexuality between characters. My experience was limited to the Denver area, and so I sought information on the larger drag king scene and the potential use of Camp by other drag kings. I found that many kings had utilized Camp in their performances, most memorably the H.I.S. Kings of Columbus, Ohio. However, I came across a variety of texts that proved this exploration of Camp to be problematic. First, the term *camp* stems from gay male culture, a

culture that is arguably quite separate from lesbian culture, both in its form and in its history. Some theorists, including Judith Halberstam and Esther Newton, warn that Camp is insufficient to describe lesbian theatre and drag king performance, arguing that the use of the term conflates lesbian culture to gay male culture. Conversely, camp has also been defined as a parodic response to the dominant culture, and as something that belongs to a larger queer culture, which would include drag kings (Meyer 1). Stephen Bottoms challenges Halberstam by describing drag kings as utilizing *high camp*, a “knowingly sexy use of incongruity that unites the best of drag king performances” (Bottoms and Torr 131). These contrasting viewpoints demonstrate the term Camp as slippery and ever-changing.

My research began with an interest in theorizing the way that Camp can be better understood and utilized in drag king performance with the goal of increasing the visibility of drag kings. The drag king scene began to flourish parallel to the third wave feminist movement in the 1990’s and continues to the present. The interconnectedness of this practice and theory is significant as a part of the development of feminist theatre and theory. In my exploration of Camp, I found that it is particularly effective as a tool to demonstrate the performativity of masculinity. When masculinity is revealed as artifice, there is less justification for assumed male dominance. The subversive nature of performing masculinity is all part of the “fun.” Cross-dressing in particular has been pathologized as an “unnatural” activity, associated with “inverts,” starting in the late 19th century. Although the singular act of a women wearing pants is now commonplace, drag performance carries subversive cultural implications to the present. This dangerous flirtation with, and challenge to, the hegemonic structure has long been a project of LGBTQ activists, and particularly a playground for feminist theatre in terms of combating patriarchal hegemony.

In *The Changing Room* (2000), author Laurence Senelick gives a detailed historical analysis of male impersonation, an antecedent of drag king performance. The history of women playing men's roles in the Restoration era will be explored in Chapter 1, so for now I skip to nineteenth-century America with acts more closely resembling contemporary drag performance. The variety style acts of Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner were popular in the 1870's in the United States. Their portrayal of men was daring and filled with swagger and sexual energy. Male impersonators could exhibit these qualities on stage in such a way that was condemned in real life, for both males and females, due to ideals of propriety. As time went on, demand for family oriented vaudeville acts caused a distain for the swaggering male impersonator and the appeal of the illusion of their masculinity waned in mainstream entertainment (Senelick 331-332). Senelick notes, "Not however, for women who were beginning to identify themselves as lesbians...It would appear that the line of business of male impersonator was a safe means of self-advertisement for mannish women, at least in North American vaudeville" (333). The predecessors of American drag kings became separated from what was an increasingly heteronormative conception of acceptable gender expression and performance.

In London, male impersonation continued to flourish and develop, and their reputations and styles made their way to America. English male impersonator Vesta Tilly had particular influence on American lesbian scenes. Her typical outfit included a black tailcoat and white tie, a fashionable and neutral background to the opulence of the female attire of the day (336). This sort of uniform would become popular in lesbian bars in 1920's America, complete with monocle. Senelick describes: "These marks of the elegant man-about-town became fetish objects divorced from their association with the male body, a masquerade for female same-sex desire" (336-338). Oscar Wilde's influential visit to America in the 1880's also left a mark on

lesbian scenes, whose postures and aesthetics were “less censoriously imitated by a young lady” (334). These trends paved the way for such female cross-dressed roles like Peter Pan, capitalizing on the trend from breeches roles of casting females as young boys. Second wave feminist performances would later comment on this trend, including Eve Merriam’s *The Club* (1976), in which females performed male chauvinist songs of the past in moustaches and male attire. Senelick describes their lack of concern, in productions he witnessed, for actually passing as male as having an understated lesbian appeal, which destabilizes the social construction of gender (336). There were male impersonators in America in the 1960’s and 1970’s, most notably Stormé DeLaverié of the Jewel Box Review, but their numbers were few and far between. Historians agree that contemporary drag kings began to appear in the 1980’s. In 1980, at the WOW café in New York, Jordy Mark and Annie Toone performed in drag in a rock revue titled “Sex & Drag & Rock n Role,” and performance artist Peggy Shaw performed a scene as James Dean (andersontoone.com). In the foreword of *The Drag King Book* (1999), Del LaGrace Volcano describes a *BurLEZK* drag show in San Francisco in 1985, which was advertised as featuring women stripping for women. She was confused when a performer named Martin took the stage, seemingly a male born person. After realizing that Martin was in fact a woman in drag, Volcano describes, “Something clicked and from that moment a fetish was born” (Volcano and Halberstam 10).

Connecting back to other lesbian feminist performance of 1980’s and 1990’s, Senelick observes, “The later resurgence of male impersonation...appears to occur whenever there is a strong push to improve women’s status” (Senelick 340). Drag King Night at Club Casanova in New York played a large part in the drag king scene of the 1990’s, with credit given to Diane Torr and Johnny Science as primary instigators in *Sex, Drag and Male Roles* (2009), by Stephen

Bottoms and Diane Torr (Bottoms and Torr 26). Torr was particularly interested in assisting women of all sexualities to embrace their masculine energy. Her work challenges male power by emphasizing perceived male superiority as rooted in performative acts. She describes observing males in public places, as well as what she describes as her uncles' and father's "assumed self-importance" (106-108). Therefore, although there is a strong lesbian and queer element to drag king performance, the destabilization of gender is not always serving a queer purpose, but also a feminist purpose, and is less concerned with sexuality and more concerned with patriarchal power structures. This contributes to my decision to ground my discussion in third wave feminism, further explained in the Methodology section below.

This concern for challenging the hegemonic structures of society is also found in drag queen performance, the near counterpart to the drag king.¹ The development and visibility of Camp as a queer discourse are vital to the later intersections of Camp with drag king performance. A short history of drag queen performance sheds light on these intersections. In terms of female impersonation, Senelick explains that by 1850 in London, the phrase "To go on the drag or flash the drag" was slang for men wearing women's clothing in order to attract men (302). In many cases, if a man appeared in drag in public, it could be used against him in court as evidence of encouraging "unnatural offence," a euphemism for sodomy (302-303). In some U.S. cities, it was illegal to be in drag at all. A common defense for the accused was their use of female clothing on the stage, which was often met with great acclaim. This defense was not lasting, however, and later female impersonators, such as Bothwell Browne in New York, were shunned from the popular stage and limited to the variety theatre where their exercise of "bad

¹ Drag queens and drag kings have intersecting but not identical histories and therefore I do not wish to imply that they have parallel roles within queer culture.

taste” was more acceptable. Female impersonation continued to be associated with perversion at the turn of the twentieth century and to be a practitioner became increasingly associated with homosexuality (310-312). By the 1920’s and 1930’s, drag balls had become major social events in Harlem, and were largely known as the “Faggots” Ball, further embedding drag within a homosexual context (Miller 143). In 1969, riots broke out at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. Drag queens are often cited as playing a prominent role in the riots, representing a particularly subversive and overt example of the homosexual community. There had been discomfort with drag queens within the homosexual community since at least the 1950’s, and by the time of Stonewall, many gay liberationists fought against the association with drag queens. According to Senelick, they were more concerned with assimilation into straight society and “An attendant phenomenon of this march to normalization was the relentless make-over of the gay male body” (Senelick 463-464). It was in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis in the 1980’s and 1990’s that drag queens’ political and subversive potential became more recognized in the United States (469). The conception of drag as a performance rather than a life-style choice opened up new opportunities for drag queens. Organizations such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation found drag to be an effective means to advocate difference, including difference within the queer community, becoming what Senelick describes as “a defiant emblem of selfhood” (469). Of particular note is Chicago drag queen Joan Jett Black’s campaign for the presidency on the Queer Nation ticket. Black’s combination of drag and camp aesthetics exemplify the political force behind Camp discourse.

I will center my discussion on a certain conception of the term *Camp* as it relates, or does not relate, to drag king performance. Camp, in this thesis, is approached as one of many aesthetic elements of drag performance, and is further defined below.

Definition of Terms

Moe Meyer defines the term *Camp* as an ever-changing system of humor and queer parody, a “suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities” (Meyer 1). I will use the term Camp with an upper case C unless it is not listed as such in quoted material. Moe Meyer explains the difference between “Camp” and “camp” in the book, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1996). He defines Camp as queer discourse, and camp as the appropriation of queer discourse by un-queer populations. I am assuming a queer perspective and will therefore capitalize the term as delineated by Meyer.

The term *drag king* refers to any person, usually female, that is making a performance of masculinity using costume, makeup and gesture. This thesis will assume a female born performer, unless otherwise stated. It must be acknowledged that not all drag king performers identify as female. Some identify as male, and some are female-to-male (FTM) trans men. There are also bio-kings, or male born performers that perform masculinity as drag kings. Although fascinating, this thesis will not be exploring this facet of the art form in depth.

The term *drag queen* refers to any person, usually male, that is making a performance of femininity by way of costume, makeup, and gesture. All references assume male born performers, unless otherwise stated. Female born people can also perform as drag queens, and are known as bio-queens.

I will use the term *womyn* to refer to a subset of biological females that identify as lesbian, queer, or otherwise. This may include feminists or other groupings that challenge the hegemonic patriarchal norm. Some of the people that I refer to may not identify as female and it is my hope is to be both inclusive and efficient in my use of this term.

When I refer to *masculinity* and *femininity*, I want to acknowledge that the two concepts are dependent on each other for their signification, and are not as useful when strictly defined. Qualities and behaviors that are historically associated with biological males include aggression, domination, activity (versus passivity), toughness, reason, physical strength, and sexual prowess. However, what is or is not masculine is not so easily confined. In R.W. Connell's book, *Masculinities* (2005), Connell explains that definitions of masculinity are "inherently relational" and do "not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'" (68). Concepts of masculinity are also highly influenced by the contexts of race, class and culture, dependent on the surrounding environment to be recognized. Therefore, I lean most heavily on what Connell identifies as a "normative" definition of the term as it relates to drag king performance (70). My approach focuses on the ways that masculinity is presented to, and recognized by, spectators in mainstream media, with substantial focus on American culture. Connell cites such figures as John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, and Clint Eastwood as examples of recognizable "masculine" figures. More specifically, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77).

It seems then, that *femininity* can therefore be defined as what is *not masculine*. Typical qualities associated with femininity are passivity, subordination, accessories (makeup, clothing), physical delicacy, inability to reason, and gracefulness. This is a rather archaic viewpoint of the term, but that is precisely the point. Femininity is typically put in opposition to masculinity, creating a binary structure to all qualities, assuming that if one quality is considered masculine, its perceived opposite must be feminine. This becomes problematic as the revealing of

alternative and multiple masculinities and femininities are discovered and explored by scholars, artists and others. The line between masculinity and femininity becomes increasingly blurred, as conceptions of gender become more fluid. Some drag king performance leans on normative structures in order to highlight their façade.

Delineation

It is important to acknowledge the many topics that are related to, but beyond, the scope of this thesis. I have personally noticed a growing trend of bio-kings and bio-queens in drag scenes. While this performance form is a completely valid form of drag and gender performance that deserves discussion, this thesis will not focus on these performances.

Drag king performance is often a part of expressing or exploring personal identity. This thesis is more concerned with theatrical mechanisms and strategies than with unraveling the infinite personal motivations and journeys of its practitioners. The scope also does not allow for a comprehensive history of cross-dressing performance forms. I encourage the reader to refer to Laurence Senelick's *The Changing Room* (2000) for further information on that subject. Cross-dressing is a theatrical trend that exists in many countries and cultures throughout the world. This thesis will focus mainly on theatrical forms from Europe and North America.

Literature Review

Drag Kings

The Drag King Book (1999), by Judith Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano, provides an explication of drag king development and aesthetics. Halberstam investigates what makes a drag king, motivations to perform, and critical analysis of the mechanisms captured by Volcano's photography. The book includes an overview of the drag scene in New York,

London, and San Francisco (circa 1998). Interviews with kings as well as examples of performances are given. Halberstam devotes a chapter to race and class within the drag scene, pointing out the larger segregations within lesbian culture.

The Drag King Anthology (2002), edited by Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, and Jean Noble, consists of various essays from the United States, Canada, and the UK. Several of these essays are useful as descriptions of various acts, theories and histories of drag king culture. There are also several responses to, and criticisms of, Halberstam's writing, which will prove useful to start building my own methodology. I will also explore the problems with paralleling butch culture to drag queen culture.

I will use the essay "Seeing Double," by Jean Bobby Nobel, in relation to concepts of play on visibility and invisibility in drag king performance. This concept is related to notions of male as the "original" gender, and particularly white males as possessing *neutral* characteristics. The concept of using this hyper-visibility as an opportunity to subvert invisibility will be explored.

The essay "Whose Drag is it Anyway? Drag Kings and Monarchy in the U.K.," by Annabelle Willox, gives a useful explanation of the genealogy of drag queens and kings, and points to their important differences for the theorist wishing to discuss drag kings. The essay also discusses the development of camp and its relation to butch/femme culture, a topic of concern in Chapter 2.

The essay "Kinging in the Heartland: or the Power of Marginality," by Thomas Pointek, is an exploration of the H.I.S. Kings in Columbus, Ohio. This essay provides a perspective ignored in Halberstam's work, which is focused on drag king scenes in New York, San Francisco, and London.

Sex, Drag and Male Roles (2010), by Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms, gives a more contemporary perspective on drag king culture and history. Some of Halberstam's notions of kings and Camp are challenged, which provides evidence of the various interpretations practitioners and audience members can have. Many examples of national and international acts, histories of media attention, as well as theorization about the art form are also included.

Andersontoone.com is a website by drag artist Annie Toone which contains a chronology of drag king history as well as his own performance biography. He is referenced in *Sex, Drag and Male Roles* as well as *The Drag King Book*, and is credited as a founding father of the drag king movement.

Other Cross Dressing and Drag Performance Sources

The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre (2000), by Laurence Senelick, examines cross dressing as a theatrical technique across cultures and various performance forms including Greek theatre, early Christian religious theatre, the glamour drag artiste, the male impersonator, as well as popular contemporary figures such as Boy George and David Bowie. This book also contains rare photos and claims to be the first cultural study of theatrical transvestism.

Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage (2000), by Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, provides a fresh outlook on the history of breeches roles and specifically investigates cross-dressed females as early participants in the women's rights movement. Mullenix cites Barnard Hewitt in observing that some of the first victories of feminism took place in the theatre; this point coincides with my exploration of drag kings through the lens of third wave feminism and as a continuation of feminist theatre traditions.

Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing (1993), edited by Lessley Ferris, explores cross-dressing in theater, cabaret, opera, and dance. This book contains a chapter on Stormé DeLaverié, an early female cross-dresser with the Jewel Box Review.

When Romeo was a Woman (1999), by Lisa Merrill, gives detailed accounts of actress Charlotte Cushman. Cushman played many male roles on stage including Romeo, Hamlet, and Colonel Wolsey. She is known for her particularly convincing portrayal of masculinity, rather than the traditional breeches performance, which emphasized femininity and was directed to male audiences. Cushman had many female followers and did not direct her performance to the male gaze.

Sarah Bernhardt (1989), by Elaine Aston, contains a chapter explicating the various male roles played by the French actress. Bernhardt had strict opinions about the kinds of male roles that women could play and serves as a useful comparison to Cushman's acting style.

Feminism

Feminist Futures: Theatre, Performance, Theory (2009), edited by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, contains a useful introduction that speaks from a third wave feminist perspective and a theatre history perspective to give insight into this specific methodological lens.

Re-dressing the Canon (1998), by Alisa Solomon, is concerned with approaching theatre criticism from a feminist perspective in such a way that does not simply point out the sexist nature of theatre, but the inherent incongruities of theatre that allow for feminist critique from within that very sexism.

Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity (2011), by Shelley Budgeon, provides a contemporary perspective on the development of third wave feminism.

Budgeon explains the difficulties encountered by third wave feminists including notions that feminism is a movement of the past and that women now live empowered lives outside of the patriarchy. However, Budgeon argues, this empowerment is still dictated by patriarchal expectations and third wave feminism seeks to continue exposing this contradiction. I will use this idea to address challenges faced by drag kings and to also demonstrate the ways that drag kings are able to subvert patriarchal structures.

Performance

In *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (2003), by Marvin Carlson, Chapter 8 breaks down the emergence of cultural theatre, which examines performance oriented toward the critique of general cultural practices. I will use this book in the conclusion to situate drag king performance as cultural theatre, with emphasis on their critique of the patriarchal structure.

Camp

Mother Camp (1972), by Esther Newton, provides a detailed breakdown of drag queen culture and characteristics from the 1970's. Newton describes the way that drag queen culture has grown and become more competitive, and the ways in which the performers themselves have been challenged to become more versatile in order to survive.

Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader (1999), edited by Fabio Cleto, contains several cornerstone articles that will prove useful. "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), by Susan Sontag, is the primary scholarly text on camp and has proven very controversial: has been refuted by countless scholars since its publication in 1964. In "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" (1988), author Sue-Ellen Case argues for a context within which to describe queer women without heterosexism. This article will assist in describing feminist history and the evolution of camp in the lesbian community.

The Politics and Poetics of Camp (1996), edited by Moe Meyer, is an exploration of the definition and history of the concept of camp and comes from a distinctly queer perspective that is interested in including all queer communities in discussing the discourse of camp.

Gender Theory

Female Masculinity (1998), by Judith Halberstam, provides a framework from which to discuss the complexity of the concept of masculinity. Using what s/he² calls a queer methodology, “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (Halberstam 13). Halberstam argues that masculinity is not a trait dependent on possessing a male body and furthermore addresses the power struggle experienced by female-born people that possess and express masculinity. This power struggle is closely tied to feminism, feminist theatre, and finally to the evolution of drag kingdom as it exists today. Halberstam devotes a chapter to drag kings in which s/he describes types of drag kings, gives a historical context to the drag king scene in New York, and defines what s/he calls *kinging* as a descriptor for drag king performance.

Margaret Mead Made Me Gay (2000), by Esther Newton, is a collection of essays from an anthropological perspective and comments on drag, butch identity, and lesbian feminism. “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen” (1996) returns to Case’s argument about the application of camp to the butch-femme aesthetic and will be useful in analyzing the implications of Case’s argument.

Gender Trouble (1990), by Judith Butler, is a pivotal work in cultural studies that posits the concept of gender to be performative, having no origin, and existing only in its constant

² I am unsure of Halberstam’s preferred gender pronoun and thus I will use s/he as a third gender pronoun in this thesis.

repetition. Butler's work is useful as a basis for critique of gender norms as belonging to a particular sex. Making note of limitations of the usefulness of her claims is also helpful in making a distinction between actual performance and conceptions of the performative. *Bodies that Matter* (1993), by Judith Butler, is in part a response to reactions to *Gender Trouble* where Butler clarifies some of her theories.

Gay and Lesbian History

Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History From 1869 To the Present, by Neil Miller, is an overview of gay and lesbian history that will provide context for drag performance in these communities through time.

Gay Life and Culture: A World History (2006), by Robert Aldrich, and *The Dictionary of Homophobia: A Global History of Gay and Lesbian Experience* (2008), edited by Louis-Georges Tin, will also be used as reference materials for establishing queer contexts in history and in a variety of countries.

Methodology

This thesis will explore drag kingdom through the lens of third wave feminism. Third wave feminism is concerned with continuing feminist agendas in the aftermath of first and second wave feminism. Second wave feminism from the 1970's and 1980's is often found to be limited in its dependence on an essentialist definition of "women," and therefore a strict dualism between "men" and "women." Third wave feminism, with its beginnings usually placed in the 1990's, is based around deconstruction of these very categories and positions itself as a discourse of multiple differences. These differences are observed through the lens of race, sexuality, gender identity, and otherwise. Necessarily, this places third wave feminism in close and

overlapping contact with queer theory, race theory, post-structuralism and postmodernism.

Shelley Budgeon quotes Barbara Arneil in a useful definition of third wave feminism in terms of this thesis; “Third wave feminism, therefore, is rooted in ‘the questions raised by feminists of colour and lesbian and queer theorists about the nature of identity, the meaning of ‘gender’ and working through some of the contradictions elicited by such questions’” (Budgeon 8). I am therefore interested in exploring drag kings as a part of the continuation of feminism as an evolving project. The tenets of queer theory are undoubtedly employed by some drag king acts and there is an evident trend of other queer performance happening alongside and in dialogue with drag king acts. While these are fascinating performance forms, they are beyond the scope of this thesis.

I will also be writing from the perspective of an insider and practitioner of drag. In her influential and often controversial essay, “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag makes clear that the practitioner cannot speak of camp from the inside. Sontag writes,

I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intension, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion (qtd in Cleto 53).

I disagree with Sontag and firmly believe that practitioners can be equally astute at theorizing their performances, and the performances of others. As a practitioner of drag performance, I have been given access to both audiences and performers that an outsider may not be able to reach. As I will demonstrate, the use of the term Camp in the context of drag kings can be controversial. However, I forge ahead, making a case for what I call *drag king Camp* as a theatrical mechanism by which to subvert the gender binary in such a way that it implodes.

Autobiography

I am a queer performer and theatre professional. I have performed as a drag king for five years at events both grimy and classy. Some performances have granted the luxury of dressing rooms and technical rehearsals, while at others I find myself changing clothes in a kitchen next to defrosting chicken wings. Drag is a deeply personal experience through which I have discovered aspects of my own sexuality and personal gender expression. I will provide analysis of some of my own experiences in the conclusion, with a focus on theatrical choices rather than as a narrative of my personal identity. My drag persona is named Frederick McGee. I chose this name based on a radio show titled *Fibber McGee and Molly*. My dad listened to the show in the 1950's and used it as inspiration to make up stories about a wacky guy named Fibber, who was always getting into trouble with his haphazard do-it-yourself approach to various problems.

Frederick McGee is a 1980's style hardcore rocker. His hairstyle could be classified as a glorified mullet, described by the popular saying, "business in the front, party in the back." Male celebrities such as Steven Tyler of Aerosmith, and Axl Rose from Guns N Roses, are sources of inspiration for his artistry. More on Frederick will come in the conclusion, so I don't want to "let it all hang out" just yet.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of female cross-dressing on stage, the history of drag kings, and some examples of three types of drag king Camp. This chapter will begin to define drag king Camp by elaborating on what it is and what it is *not*, based on forms of cross dressed females in history. The three types of drag king Camp to be explored are Pond Scum Camp, Marginal Male Camp, and Celebrity Male Camp. Chapter 2 will set up the feminist

lens and explore the term camp as it relates to drag kings specifically and provide further contextualization within the parameters of this thesis. I will elaborate on types of drag king acts that contain Camp elements in such a way to destabilize the patriarchy and masculinity as a natural, original state, belonging to male born bodies. For now I use the term *drag king camp* to describe what I have observed in drag king performance. Drag king Camp is a theatrical style that subverts and deconstructs the gender binary in such a way that it collapses into itself, liberating alternative femininities and beyond. Drag king Camp allows not only for notions of masculinity to be explored through female bodies, but female masculinities and even multiple femininities. In order to circle back to this claim, I will attempt to describe the intertwining histories of cross-dressing, drag and lesbian performance, feminism, queer theory, and theatre. While I will argue that these histories are the foundations of drag king performance, I acknowledge that these are not the only histories and certainly not the only fields of study relevant to drag kings. In Chapter 3, I will respond to Kate Davy's claim that male impersonation is lacking an institutionalized history that says something about women. I will also respond to the need for what Annabelle Willox calls "a new hybrid theory that encompasses the cultural, historical and power-based construction of the King" (Willox 282). I hope to formulate a framework that facilitates an exploration of the relationship between drag king performance and camp, including elements of fetish and female desire. I will endeavor to prove that drag king Camp is a useful theatrical style by which to express multiple femininities, all while basking in the thrill of a deep pelvic thrust or grab at the crotch. These femininities can include notions of female masculinity, male masculinity and alternative femininities. I will also theorize the subversive potential of the drag king performing powerful historical figures such as U.S. Presidents, the King of Pop, and the original King of Kings, Jesus Christ. In the conclusion,

I will position drag king performance as cultural performance as a means of synthesizing the various components of the art form. I will also narrate some of my own personal experiences from workshops and will posit questions for the future.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND TYPES

History

This chapter will provide an overview of cross-dressed female performers in history, focusing on American and European performers. There will be some discussion of sexuality and identity, along with acknowledgement that many females dressed as males in everyday life. However, my focus is on theatrical devices used on the stage, including physicality, voice control, character, costuming and talent: elements that will begin to establish drag king Camp as a particular theatrical device. In some cases, examples are used to define drag king Camp by what it is *not*, pointing up the differences between cross-dressed roles of the past and those of contemporary drag king performance. In other cases, these antecedents are useful in discovering how drag kings “Camp up” masculinity in a recognizable way.

In European and American theatre history, first we’ll explore the evolution of the breeches role, where female actors play male characters and dress in male attire. There are two types of breeches roles. In one, a female character will cross-dress as a part of the action of the play. In the other, a female actress will play a male character. In sixteenth century Italy, *commedia dell’arte* troupes invented the role of the actress. Prior to this, women had been banned from performing on the professional stage in many European countries. Breeches roles became common in France and Italy. In England, women remained banned from the professional stage until the Restoration period, beginning in 1660. At this time, Charles II returned to England from France to reclaim his throne as King of England. It was in Thomas Jordan’s prologue to *The Moor of Venice* (1660) that the first women appeared on the professional English stage (Senelick 209). In *The Changing Room* (2000), Senelick emphasizes that while it is tempting to postulate that women’s presence on the stage is indicative of female

empowerment and attaining male privileges, “the breeches role was first and foremost an effective means of sexual display” (211). When actresses dressed in male garb, it revealed their bodies more than skirts and petticoats allowed. Senelick quotes Pat Rogers in noting that the appeal laid in the performer’s imperfect masculinity. Senelick adds, “The Restoration public did not want to be fooled by appearances into thinking a girl was a boy or vice versa; the costume was always meant to transmit the actress’ most womanly attributes: her breasts, hips, thighs and calves” (212). Particular to the English stage was the caveat that the breeches role is only “justified by the comeliness of the woman who assumed it” (214). As we will see in chapters to come, these conventions and philosophies are quite different from the intentions of modern drag kings, as they typically hide these features through loose clothing and breast binders. Breeches roles at this time seemed to be serving the heterosexual male gaze, and contributed to what Senelick describes as an increasingly polarized libido in the audience: women were attracted to the manly actor, and men to the voluptuous actress (212). The significance to drag kings of the appearance of women on stage in the 16th century lies not only as the beginnings of a convention of female cross-dressing on the stage, but also to women having a place on the stage at all.

One convention described by Senelick, at least in comedy, that does relate directly to contemporary drag performance was the tendency of breeches actresses to claim to “outman man himself” (214). One frequently referenced performance was by actress Anne Reeve delivering Dryden’s epilogue following an all-female performance of *Secret Love, of the Maiden Queen* (1672).

What think you, Sirs, was’t not all well enough,
 Will you not grant that we can strut, and huff?
 Men may be proud: but faith, for ought I see,
 They neither walk, nor cock, as well as we. (qtd. in Senelick 214)

From a contemporary perspective, this appears to be a premonition of the performativity of masculinity. As I will discuss in later chapters, drag kings often exhibit hyper-masculine qualities in an effort to parody societal notions of manliness, a trope that began in vaudeville.

To discuss femininity as performance is more common than to discuss masculinity as performance, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3. For now, it is significant that although the quotation above is an exciting moment of theoretical foreshadowing, the experience of the audience in 1672 was still quite limited to a certain conception of the breeches role. For example, Senelick observes that the female cross-dresser, both in tragedy and comedy, “demonstrates a kind of constancy to her man or integrity to herself at odds with the notion of the duplicity inherent in wearing a disguise” (215). It was considered important that the women portray a certain kind of moral excellence and that clothing emphasized physical beauty. Breeches actresses were rarely considered convincing in love scenes, and Senelick questions, “is there any artistic means by which an actress can portray a rake and make love on stage without suggesting either impotence or sapphistry?” (216). For Senelick, this indicates not a growing gender ideology, but a growing demand for theatrical realism that cannot be portrayed through the artificiality of cross-dressing (216). I wonder if this moment in theatrical history is also a break at which the portrayal of same sex desire between women was further codified. The fact that audiences feared a portrayal of sapphistry points to some acknowledgement of the existence of desire between women. More indirectly this implies to me the existence of Sapphic audiences, perhaps in the wings, watching in silence.

Sapphic allusions eventually took hold in the *travesti* roles of European ballet as well. Beginning with the Romantic movement (c. 1830 to c. 1850), the female *travesti* dancer usurped the place of male dancers in romantic leads (Ferris 96). Romanticism favored the poetic and the

symbolic. Lynn Garafola explains this time period in the chapter, “The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth-Century Ballet,” in editor Leslie Ferris’ *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross Dressing* (1993). For a woman to cross dress in real life at this time would be to implicate that she was assuming the power and prerogatives of a male identity, but on the ballet stage, it reflected a highly poetic ideal of the male romantic lead (96). The aesthetics of Romanticism rendered the dancing style for these roles feminine, and therefore not suitable for a male dancer. The rise of the bourgeoisie public had given rise to gendered conceptions of the busy, man about town that considered ballet itself to be unmanly (98). Similar to some breeches roles in terms of costuming, the *travesti* dancer became an ideal of the young male, while also eroticizing women’s bodies. Garafola comments that, “As shipboys, hussars and toreadors, the proletarians of the Opera’s *corps de ballet* donned breeches and skin-tight trousers that displayed to advantage the shapely legs, slim corseted waists, and rounded hips, thighs, and buttocks of the era’s ideal figure” (100). It is significant that *travesti* dancers were stripped of male power, for they did not impersonate a man’s nature, rather they represented an idealized adolescent (101-102).

One of the most prominent of *travesti* dancers of the 1960’s and 1870’s was Eugenie Fiocre, credited for creating the role of Frantz in the ballet *Coppélia* (102). Garafola notes “As an emblem of wanton sexuality, feminized masculinity, and amazon inviolability, the *danseuse en travesti* symbolized in her complex persona the many shades of lust projected by the audience on the nineteenth century dancer” (100). A convincing *travesti* love scene between two females was prized as erotic, but considered sexless, and remained a spectacle for male desire. The control over the stylization of the *travesti* dancer was an attempt to uphold an ideal of true

masculinity. Breeches actresses of the time continued to both challenge and uphold a similar set of values, taking agency over their own acting styles.

Breeches roles continued to be performed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. Two of the more prominent actresses known for their breeches roles were Charlotte Cushman and Sarah Bernhardt. American actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) presents a break from other cross-dressing actresses of her time. Cushman played both male and female roles, but I will focus on her portrayal of male characters (I will draw largely from Lisa Merrill's *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and her Circle of Female Spectators*, published in 1999). Merrill asserts her focus on Cushman's "performance of gender and sexuality and the way that performance was received" (Merrill xxi). The book contains extensive excerpts from letters and diary entries by Cushman, as well as excerpts from other primary sources related to her various relationships with other women, both romantic and professional. It is of note that in addition to playing male roles on stage, Cushman also assumed male privilege by managing her own career and supporting her loved ones (xvi). Merrill argues that Cushman took an active role "to position herself both within and against the dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexuality and to frame others' responses to her" (xvi). This is significant to this study in terms of the ways in which it serves as an antecedent to the development of drag king Camp. Cushman occupied a subversive theoretical space where her portrayals of male characters appealed to notions of propriety as well as suspicions of "unnatural" tendencies, particularly related to lesbian desire, named at the time as Sapphist. Cushman herself was not Campy, but her appropriation of male privilege and her international acclaim surely influenced performers and broke the mold of her breeches predecessors.

By 1844, Cushman was known as the premiere breeches actress in the United States. She traveled to England in 1845 to play the part of Romeo in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Cushman was not the first breeches actress to portray a male lover of women. Some of her contemporaries included Ellen Tree Kean, Eliza Vestris, and Clara Fisher Maeder. These were all married women, whose husbands were a sign of their morality. In the tradition of breeches roles, Merrill notes that their "form fitting costumes frequently appealed to the heterosexual men in their audience" (113). Since the Restoration, women were permitted to perform male roles, but only in a way that maintained their femininity and even emphasized their female bodies. The emphasis was not on an authentic performance of masculinity, but rather on an unsexed ideal of chivalry. Conversely, Cushman was not in a heterosexual marriage and her style of performance was markedly different due to her superior ability to physicalize masculinity. One critic has praised her as, "superior to any Romeo that has been seen for years...Miss Cushman's Romeo is a creative, living, breathing, animated, ardent human being" (115). Merrill notes that it is important that Cushman was described here as human, not a caricature or a freak; she "was in no way qualified by her sex" (qtd. in Merrill 115). The physical acts noted in Merrill's book include: gait, gestures, figure, a sure stride, a deep voice, and a wide stance. In short, "she embodied masculinity to an extent that impressed British viewers even more than it had Americans" (116). Her ability to engage in a convincing duel with Tybalt was also seen as significant, and showed a virtuosity and agility considered unusual for a woman to be able to perform.

Merrill explains that Cushman's Romeo could be perceived as either upholding a "chaste embodiment of youthful masculinity and heterosexual love or, given the fact that the ardent lover was female, as representative of a possibility of passionate love between two women" (123).

Cushman navigated a time when Victorian notions of gender ironically worked to her advantage. To embody heterosexual love using actors of the opposite sex would have been considered scandalous. Respectable women were considered to be chaste and notions of female same-sex love were acceptable and considered innocent (124). Therefore, for some, staging the play with two women removed the possibility of embodied sexual desire. Others were not so accepting and were threatened by her ability to “unsex” a woman (127). Merrill keenly observes from our contemporary vantage point that, “in her very portrayal of male characters Charlotte raised the possibility that if a woman could so convincingly act the man, perhaps being a man was merely an ‘act’” (124). This early subversion of male power challenged male authority as a biological right, and as even something belonging to the male body. Here I find a direct connection to drag king Camp, where performers attempt to physicalize or “act” masculinity through a female body, itself a marginalized body. Drag kings enter the scene over one hundred years later, in opposition to female oppression, and particularly queer female oppression.

There was a perceived disconnect between Cushman’s female body and her expression of gender through that same body. When Cushman played the title role in *Hamlet* (1851) throughout the east coast of the United States, she was well received; women spectators in particular were intrigued by her portrayal of the role. Some critics were threatened, plagued by the anxieties of sexual ambiguity (133). In the role of Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII* (1857), Cushman attained even more acclaim for her ability to portray men. Unlike *Hamlet* and *Romeo*, who appealed to ideals of Romanticism, *Wolsey* was not a typical breeches role, and had never been played by a woman. In a time when notions of gender were limited to biological distinctions, Merrill notices that Cushman “embodied characters who appeared to confound these assumed inborn differences between men and women” (135). Here Cushman is destabilizing the

gender binary, although notably long before modern conceptions of the gender binary existed. Cushman also confronted gender norms in her personal life.

Cushman was known for appearing in male clothing in public and had many female admirers and lovers throughout her life. Her particular appeal to female audiences is important in terms of a developing a code of same sex desire among women. Merrill observes, “Underneath Charlotte’s disguise, or because of it, her desiring sexual subjectivity, her lesbianism, was visible to anyone who could read the code” (136). But for those that did not know the code, Merrill continues, she was ambiguous enough to be seen as “reinforcing nineteenth-century ideologies of female sexlessness – since she so clearly did not direct her body to male spectators’ desire” (137). Additional antecedents to drag king camp begin to appear in such codes. Cushman’s ability to convey male characters convincingly, beyond the novelty and curiosity typically associated with breeches roles, worked as a living example of alternative conceptions of womanhood, even if limited to select groups.

In France, *le travesti* roles on the dramatic stage were an established convention from the eighteenth century (Aston 113). For example, actress Virginia Déjazet was a famous vaudeville performer, impersonating great French men such as Fousseau, Voltaire and Napoleon. Following Déjazet, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was another prominent French actress (I will be referring to Elaine Aston’s book, *Sarah Bernhardt: A French Actress on the English Stage* (1989) as my primary source). Bernhardt won great acclaim for her female roles, but as she got older, her options for leading roles begin to wane and she sought new opportunities and challenges in *travesti* roles (Aston 113). Her first great *travesti* success was her portrayal of Zanetto, the wandering minstrel, in François Coppée's *Le Passant* (1869). Although she knew that the audience would meet her with more skepticism and criticism than they had in France,

Bernhardt was determined to bring her *travesti* roles to England. Bernhardt was different from Cushman in her strict philosophies and had strong opinions and theories concerning women's portrayal of male roles.

Aston quotes Bernhardt in claiming that, "a woman cannot interpret a male role, unless it consists of a strong mind in a weak body" (qtd in Aston 115). Bernhardt cited Don Juan and Napoleon as examples of roles that would be inappropriate due to their apparent manliness and romantic nature. Appropriate roles were those considered androgynous and non-sexual.

Secondly, Bernhardt believed that *travesti* roles were appropriate where a character is young in age, twenty or twenty-one, but has the mind of forty year old. Aston quotes an article from *Harper's Bazaar* where Bernhardt notes, "There are no young men of that age capable of playing these parts, consequently an older man essays the role. He does not look the boy, nor has he the ready adaptability of the women, who can combine the light carriage of youth with the mature thought of the man" (115). Aston describes this as a "thinking Peter Pan: maturity of thought combined with physical asexuality, which is characteristic of her Hamlet types" (116).

Bernhardt had three major *travesti* roles, which she called the Three Hamlets: "The black Hamlet of Shakespeare, the white Hamlet of Rostand's *L'Aiglon* and the Florentine Hamlet of Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio*" (115).

In playing Shakespeare's Hamlet, a critic in the *Era* wrote, "For it is only the unsexed woman, the woman, who, physically and physiologically, approaches to the masculine – the monstrosity in short – that can deceive us as to her gender on the stage" (qtd. in Aston 118). The reviewer mentions her attempted manly stride, cocking her legs on the couch and gruff voice as better portraying an elderly woman than a young man (118). Aston observes that this review "reveals the widespread prejudicial attitude towards the idea of women playing men's roles and a

highly conservative view of the image of women. If a woman is not beautiful and feminine, then she is considered an aberration of her sex” (118). Bernhardt was criticized for applying feminine qualities to the character of Hamlet, who she conceived of as an “‘unsexed being,’ who ‘must be stripped of all virility’ in order to reveal the anguish of the soul which ‘burns the body’” (120). English critic Max Beerbohm found incongruence in Bernhardt’s Hamlet, finding her portrayal of the prince’s “gentleness” and “lack of executive ability” to be feminizing in a way that devalued the character as remaining a man (120).

Bernhardt’s portrayal of her third “Hamlet,” in Rostand’s *L’Aiglon*, was met with the most box office success and critical acclaim. In this play, Bernhardt played the role of Napoleon’s son. English critics accepted her boyish tones and youthful insolence in this role, claiming that,

[Bernhardt’s] conception of a weak body and tortured mind applied more readily to the consumptive L’Aiglon, whose feverish contemplations on his own inadequacies result in premature death. They recognized the womanish nature of his character, a youth who is “three-parts a woman, with spasms of delirium and power of rapid and passionate rhetoric,” as more in keeping with Sarah’s physique, skills and sex. (122)

Bernhardt was not attempting to be subversive but rather give herself a thriving career beyond middle age. Her concerns related to appropriate vs. inappropriate *travesti* roles point to her interest in delivering a convincing and serious performance of a male role. As previously stated, her physical attempts at manliness were highly scrutinized by English audiences, as were her interpretations of characters such as Hamlet. Bernhardt is an example of a more traditional breeches actress, more benign in her motivations. Like Cushman, her influence and acclaim are significant to the breeches convention. By end of her career, Bernhardt’s fame had traveled the globe and she drew audiences that included ambassadors from the United States, France, Belgium, and Japan. In 1921, she performed the title role of Louis Verneuil’s *Daniel*. Due to

illness, she had to remain seated, but her superior control of gesture and voice captivated her audience (128). She died in 1923.

Concurrent to both Cushman and Bernhardt's careers, the activities of male impersonators and breeches performers in vaudeville and music halls were beginning to occupy an increasingly subversive space in society. Cross-dressing was now sometimes seen as a political act. According to Elizabeth Mullenix, in her book *Wearing the Breeches* (2000), early feminists in 19th century America emerged in two distinct ways. According to Mullenix, there were the domestic feminists, upholding morality through private mission work, and there were the radicals, speaking publicly of women's oppression and who "were either castigated as aberrant or dangerously sexual" (75). Dress codes of the time including tight whale bone corsets, multiple layers of skirts, and impractical shoes, rendered women as "submissive." To dress against this norm was therefore a rejection of such submission and became associated with social and sexual deviance. In the 1850's, a feminist journal titled *The Lily*, "was full of reports (both positive and negative) that linked women who tried to engage in public and civic activities with material displays of masculinity" (80). Breeches actresses desired to keep up with male fashions, a clear material display, not only to expand their possible theatrical roles, but also with the intention of competing with them professionally. Mullenix observes, "Such a desire foregrounds the dialogue that was taking place in nineteenth-century America between the cross-dressed actress and early feminism, between the private and public, between illusion and reality, between 'nature' and gender" (Mullenix 90). Mullenix's perspective observes more agency in the female performers themselves, giving them credit for having a say in their portrayal of breeches roles, as opposed to the role being defined for them, as it had in past centuries. In the

1860's, Lydia Thompson's British Blondes exemplify a distinction between traditional breeches roles and that of breeches burlesque performances:

Thompson and her Blondes would parody honorable and dishonorable male contemporaries, adopt their language and their gestures, and sing songs and dance in imitation of well known artists – all of which was standard fare for the burlesque performer...burlesque actresses' representation of male characters focused not upon conveying the illusion of masculinity or telling a man's story, but instead foregrounded the construction of masculinity, or masculine fable – a dangerous act to perform. (267)

The British Blondes were at the forefront of a growing trend of cross-dressed performance in variety halls, where many acts built around a parody of masculinity were common with male impersonators in vaudeville. This type of subversion did not go unnoticed. Mullenix quotes a 1869 article by Richard Grant in *The Galaxy* describing that burlesque as “monstrously incongruous and unnatural” (268). In the 1870's and 1880's sexologists began to pathologize sexuality and many theories connecting cross-dressing to sexual inversion emerged. In 1870, for example, a municipal ordinance in Atlanta, Georgia, forbade performers from wearing clothing of the opposite sex (Senelick 327).

Another notable nineteenth century music hall male impersonator was Annie Hindle. Hindle was born in England around 1847 and was adopted at age 5 by a woman who named her and put her on stage in male garb to sing love songs (Senelick 329). Her natural talent impressed theatre managers, and this early gimmick evolved into a successful career. She was brought to New York in 1867 and billed as the “first out-and-out male impersonator New York's stage had ever seen” (qtd. in Senelick 329). Due to western expansion and pioneering in the United States at this time, women were more readily accepted as having professions previously occupied by men. At times, they used cross-dressing in their everyday life in order to apply for jobs. Socially, the concept of the “fast woman” began to plague traditionalists. These women were

considered wild, indulging in manly sports, reading sports novels, and possessing what G. Ellington described as having “large amounts of masculinity in their natures” (qtd. in Senelick 328). Senelick continues that some of these women also “often chose to dress a young man-about-town and to attend those stag resorts, the concert saloon and the variety hall” (329). Thus the male impersonator of later 19th century America occupied a time when some women were publicly embracing alternative lifestyles and styles of dress. These women were their audience, and the impersonator was a public figure of representation, for better or for worse.

After a failed marriage to a man, Hindle’s acts became more daring, she began shaving her face in order to encourage thicker hair growth. Senelick describes that in Hindle’s popular act she dressed herself in “fashionable men’s wear and portrayed the standard ‘lion comique,’ the bluff, high living sport, a devil with the ladies but a decent chap at heart” (329). The songs that she performed often contained a second and forth verse that expressed conflicting desires, the second to be fickle and pursue many women, the forth a yearning to find a wife and live domestically. Senelick notes that both male and female impersonators of this time were able to publicly exhibit behaviors that were counter to acceptable behaviors associated with their biological sex. Curiously, Senelick explains, “The objection to sexually aggressive males and females could be counteracted by cross-dressed impersonation, while the personal predilections of the performers were camouflaged by the conventions of the stage” (332). This period of camouflage, however, was short lived and was restricted to the shadows of the variety stage. By 1880, the public at large began to reject the loose living, swaggering impersonations of Hindle and her contemporaries. Audiences demanded family entertainment, and performers with so-called questionable morals were no longer in popular demand in the United States, with one caveat. Women who were beginning to identify as lesbians took interest in male impersonators

and the art form became further embedded in lesbian circles as a safe means to signify oneself as a “mannish woman” (333). The raucous music hall performer remained in the background of the dominant culture and became increasingly less visible at the turn of the 20th century as music hall and vaudeville disappeared.

In London, Vesta Tilly is notable as continuing the tradition of male impersonation. Tilly resuscitated previous traditions for breeches roles such as maintaining boyish charm and palatability to popular audiences. Tilly recalled seeing more brazen performances by male impersonators Ella Wesner and Bessie Bonehill, but as Senelick notes, she “was careful to distance herself from the former’s coarseness and the latter’s lack of variation in modern costume” (335). She prided herself in not being vulgar and maintained her soprano voice without alteration. The appeal of this style has made Tilly the most imitated and mythologized of male impersonators. Consisting of a simple black tailcoat and white tie, her man-about-town style of clothing was popular at the time and served as a background to opulent feminine attire. The simplicity of the clothing allowed for the social climber to be relieved of attaching his identity to his clothing, as there was little difference in clothing of different classes. Senelick describes, “By the 1920’s, it had become a popular outfit at lesbian gatherings, where the monocle, the male dandy’s means of distancing himself from the ruck, was a badge of identification” (336).

It was in black American vaudeville of the 1920’s that the Hindle-Wesner tradition enjoyed its only revival (338). Gladys Bentley (1907-1960) was famous for her self-accompaniment, stiff collar, bow tie and full-dress white suit of tails. Her suit is described by Senelick as “kind of negative or inverted image of the usual black-and-white livery” (338). Her “bull dagger” personality on stage was successful in part due to a freer expression of sex in

African American vaudeville of the time. Her male counterparts, Senelick describes, “lived as unabashed ‘sissies’ and ‘fags’ off-stage” (338). Her songs were improvised lewd versions of popular songs that she had to tone down so that they could be classified as risqué rather than dismissed as downright filthy (338). Bentley stopped performing after the 1920’s (339). Bentley certainly appears to be a precursor to drag king performance, but it is troublesome to reconcile the gap in time between her performances of the 1920’s and the emergence of Stormé DeLaverie in 1955 as a member of the Jewel Box Revue. Stormé was the single biological female in this traveling show consisting of twenty-five “femme-mimics.” She traveled with the show for fourteen years, from 1955 until 1969 (Drorbaugh122). The audience was prompted to try and decode which performer was the “real girl” and two hours of entertainment preceded the scene entitled “The Surprise” when Stormé was finally revealed as such (Drorbaugh 123). She was the MC of the show, sang, and announced the femmes in each act, her voice often being mistaken as male. The revue was unusually diverse for its time, Drorbaugh explains, “which included at one point white, black, Latino and (one) Native American performers” (122). Stormé was the daughter of a white father and black mother. She performed as a big band singer under the name Stormy Dale in the 1940’s and insists that as Stormé she did little else than cut her hair and change clothing. The Jewel Box Revue was an anomaly in a time when cross dressing continued to be marked as a sign of homosexuality, despite their efforts to demonstrate the art form as a part of theatrical history. Stormé was rarely mentioned in reviews, pointing to the common erasure of women as notable participants, and also possible racial discrimination as well (133). She was not a Camp performer, but she is certainly a strong example of the potential of female-to-male drag to subvert conceptions of gender as we reach the later half of the twentieth century.

It is notable that the role of Peter Pan remained a common breeches role throughout the twentieth century. Senelick explains that the appeal of a woman playing a boy that won't grow up was indicative of lingering Victorian fixations on prepubescent boys, "a deeply unsettling cynosure for sexual desire, a prime investment for the emotions" (280). This idea of the adolescent male as ideal for fantasy nods to theorizations of homosexual innuendo in the narrative of the "lost boys." The tradition of casting a woman in the role was in part logistical. If a boy of the proper age were given the part, then all the lost boys would have to be even younger, an impossibility due to labor laws (282). The role of Peter was sometimes given to actresses suspected as lesbians including Mary Martin, Jean Arthur, and Eve Le Gallienne (282-283). The consistent and continued portrayal of Peter by actresses demonstrates remnants of 19th century Romanticism still present today.

In her book, *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam notes that the scarcity of male impersonators during the 1940's, 50's and 60's was in part due to the Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code of 1933 which, "banned all performances of so called sexual perversion, male impersonation died out as a mainstream theatrical practice" (Halberstam 234). While male impersonators may have disappeared from the stage and screen during the 1940's and 1950's, in lesbian bar culture, butches often "cross-dressed" with the intent of passing as male. However, in bar culture, a woman dressing in male clothing was not a performance but rather a personal expression. Halberstam refers to Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, authors of *Boots of Leather and Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1993), to emphasize that gay male culture and lesbian culture do not share parallel histories. Furthermore, Halberstam notes, "Like many other cultural commentators, Kennedy and Davis tend to attribute the lack of lesbian drag to the asymmetries of masculine and feminine

performativity in a male supremacist society” (234). Therefore, there is a lack of Camp aesthetic in lesbian culture, in part because “camp has been a luxury that the passing butch cannot afford” (234). While s/he agrees with this claim, Halberstam is not quite satisfied with this explanation and further argues that another reason for this lack is due to mainstream definitions of male masculinity as nonperformative (234). One reason for this is the cultural assumption that male is the “neutral state,” masculinity “just is,” while femininity is conceived of in terms of the “artificial” and is therefore more easily performed and “camped up” (235). I will return to this discussion in Chapter 2, so I return now to the drag king timeline.

In the 1980’s, lesbian oriented, risqué performances started making a claim in the bar scene. In the *Drag King Book*, Del LaGrace Volcano describes his first experience of a drag king act which occurred in San Francisco at The Baybrick Inn in 1985. The show was put on by the *On Our Backs/BurLEZK* group and was billed as a strip show for lesbians (Volcano and Halberstam 10). There he witnessed Shelly Mars performing as Martin, a welcome surprise to Volcano after a succession of thin, long haired women had taken the stage: although few and far between, a movement had begun. The San Francisco scene of the late 1980’s revolved around Mars, and continued to grow in the early 1990’s as a result of the popularity of Leigh Crow (Bottoms and Torr 27). Crow performed under the drag name Elvis Herselvis and was known for her lip-syncing and eventual singing of Elvis songs in lesbian nightclubs and bars. This routine was what she described as an inversion of a drag queen act and an impersonation of the King, thus she started to call herself a drag king. In New York, performance artist Diane Torr and makeup artist and musician Johnny Science (a female-to-male transsexual), began teaching female-to-male workshops in 1990. Unaware of Crow’s San Francisco performance, Science simultaneously coined the term drag king around this time (27). Throughout the 1990’s, the drag

king movement continued to gain momentum and coincided with an increase of male identified people in the lesbian community, otherwise known as transgendered (25). The first drag king ball was held in New York in 1992, with the first drag king contest taking place in San Francisco in 1994. Maureen Fisher (aka Mo B. Dick) held regular drag king nights at Club Casanova in New York in 1996. Fisher was in part inspired by Torr's protégé Tracy Blackmore (aka Buster Hyman) (26). According to Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms's book, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* (2009), by 1996, drag king fraternities started appearing all over North America and Europe. This is likely due to Torr traveling, teaching and performing in cities ranging from Boston to Berlin (27).

On October 15-17, 1999, the first International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE) was held in Columbus, Ohio. This annual event consists of a drag pre-show called Dragdom, a main drag showcase, a conference, a brunch, and an art show. In 2004, the event name was changed after a call from the community to be more inclusive of all gender performers, and it now titled the International Drag King Community Extravaganza. The showcase now features, as listed their website, "drag kings, femmes, genderbenders, trans*³ performers, burlesque, gender artists and more!" (idke.org). This change demonstrates how drag kings have helped paved the way for nonconforming gender performance. The current mission statement reads:

The International Drag King Community Extravaganza, also known as IDKE, is an event that celebrates the mutability and performance of gender and is designed to draw together an international collection of persons interested in the many aspects of gender-based performance. IDKE strives to be collaborative rather than competitive, accessible rather than exclusive, and a safe space of respect and accountability. (idke.org)

³ The asterisk is commonly found next to the word "trans" to denote the trans identified umbrella, including non-cisgender gender identities such as transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, two spirit, agender, third gender, bigender or trans man or trans woman.

The conference was most recently held in Cleveland, Ohio, on October 19-21, 2013. I was lucky enough to be able to choreograph a number for the main showcase but was unable to attend. One standout performance that I heard about featured a drag zombie apocalypse including the one and only Mitt Romney.

In terms of male impersonation and drag kings in contemporary mainstream media, two notable performers are Lily Tomlin and Lady Gaga. Tomlin's male persona, Tommy Velour, is an example of how Tomlin brings characters to life in what Tony Schwartz described in a *New York Times* article in 1982 as "balancing a deft sense of parody with a genuine affection for them" (Schwartz). Gaga appeared as her drag persona, Joe Calderon, at the 2011 Video Music Awards. Gaga created quite a stir and Matthew Perpetua writes in *Rollingstone.com*, "The singer was fully committed to her drag performance as her greasy, lewd, male alter ego Jo Calderon. Gaga remained in character all night, even backstage, where she would only answer questions as Calderon" (Perpetua). It is significant to note that in the last 40 years of American television there are only these two examples of cross-dressed female figures, and they are separated by 30 years.

I return to the 1990's to begin fleshing out examples of drag king Camp. The 1990's seem to be a time when female people began to harness empowerment around presenting themselves as male, whether as a transgender man, a cross dressing performance artist, or a drag king. Some of these acts demonstrate drag king Camp and will act as cornerstone examples throughout the remainder of this thesis. It is important to note that not all drag kings are Campy, not all females performing as males consider themselves drag kings, and not all scholars agree on the definition of Camp or its applicability to drag kings and/or lesbians; but more importantly, part of the allure and success of the drag king lies in these ambiguities. I am choosing to focus

on what I observe as particularly theatrically minded performers rather than drag kings that focus on portraying a subdued masculinity or have the goal of “passing.”

Drag King Camp: Types and Case Studies

Pond Scum Camp

As a constant in drag king Camp, there is parody of hegemonic masculinity. I begin with performer Maureen Fisher, also known as the drag king Mo B. Dick. As previously mentioned, Fisher was the host at the Drag King Club, Club Casanova, in New York in the late 1990’s. In an interview with Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith “Jack” Halberstam printed in *The Drag King Book* (1999), Fisher explains the development of Mo B. Dick as a drag character:

He’s a real cheesy kind of guy, he’s opinionated, macho, always thinks he’s right, and is quite riled about any injustices: but he’s also sexy and ‘ruff and tuff’...his total schmuck attitudes come all too naturally to me, it’s scary. He’s a typical Brooklyn guy who mouths off, “I ain’t no homo” and “suck my dick” and “fuck you”. The crowd loves that, they love to hear me say that stuff, it’s so funny to me because I see this as a total parody and I get off on emulating maleness in such an extreme and crass way. (qtd. in Volcano and Halberstam 114)

Fisher is referring to a certain kind of white (usually), heterosexual masculine type. I will designate this type of drag king performance as Pond Scum Camp.⁴ This stock character is found in many drag kings’ acts, especially from these relatively early days of drag kingdom. Fisher continues, “I guess I think men like Mo are hilarious, they are so insane, and so my act is an opportunity to emulate some of the worst aspects of male society and make it funny. I also feel that by emulating this behavior I am also appreciating masculinity in my own way” (114). Mo B. Dick is a representation of a heterosexual male, placed in a mostly lesbian context. This

⁴ I borrow the term “pond scum” from Jean Bobby Noble’s essay, “Seeing Double, Thinking Twice: The Toronto Drag Kings and (Re-) Articulations of Masculinity,” in *The Drag King Anthology* (2002). This is not an official term used by drag kings. It is a classification I have created for use in this analysis to label this reoccurring stock character.

separation from the dominant order is vital to the success of the act. There is safety in knowing that Mo is overtly acting; Fisher is not attempting to pass and her portrayal is not an expression of her own true self. Fisher further explains her approach to physicality in terms of masculinity, “I have to be very conscious of my movements. Usually I move around a lot, but as a man I am much more rigid and I hold my body a certain way and it’s much stiffer in the torso and there’s no wiggle in the hips” (117). She goes on to acknowledge that this is a sleazy, negative type, however the importance lies in Fisher’s ability to parody the dominant order in a way that is well received by her predominantly female audience. This stock character was just the beginning of the drag king’s ability to bring the theatricality of masculinity to attention. Many have since approached this same idea using different types as their inspiration, including long-haired rock stars and effeminate, heterosexual men. Mo B. Dick’s style is significant in that it confronts the most dominant order, the white male heterosexual, in such a way to bring attention to women and their alternative expressions of femininity, masculinity and desire.

Celebrity Camp

Another type of drag king Camp is what I name Celebrity Camp. In its simplest form, this type is expressed through impersonations of male celebrities. A classic example in drag kingdom is the impersonation of Elvis. Many drag kings have capitalized on the accessibility of Elvis in terms of performance. For example, performer Leigh Crow made a name for herself as Elvis Herselvis, and was one of the first drag kings to come out of San Francisco in the early 1990’s (Bottoms and Torr 27). Crow has been written up in *Curve* and *Entertainment Weekly* and was asked to perform at an academic cultural studies conference, until officials realized that

a woman would be performing the role, public outrage ensued and she withdrew from the conference. And who says Camp lacks political force?!

Elvis is a quintessential choice for drag king celebrity impersonation due to his fame and highly recognizable hip movements, facial expressions and songs. Judith Halberstam makes the important observation in the *Drag King Book* that, “modern white masculinity maintains its cultural sway...by always appropriating for itself the markers and signs of other performances and reproducing them as natural to white masculinity” (Volcano and Halberstam 62). Elvis’ musical success was largely due to conventions and styles that he borrowed from black music including the blues, soul, R&B and gospel (Volcano and Halberstam 62). In this regard, Elvis himself is highly derivative, but in a way that claims his calling cards as original to him.

Drag King Celebrity Camp demonstrates the performativity of masculinity as it draws focus to the behaviors of influential male icons. Some flavors of Celebrity Camp are not literal or exact impersonations of a famous individual but rather exaggerated stereotypes of such types as smooth 1950’s crooners, 1980’s hair band rockers, or 1990’s boy bands.

Marginal Male Camp

The third type of drag king Camp to be explored here is Marginal Male Camp. In this form, drag kings will reveal themselves as homosexual, bisexual or otherwise queer. Jean Bobby Noble describes the Toronto Kings portrayal of Ricky Martin and The Village People in *The Drag King Anthology*. In terms of Ricky Martin, an element of Celebrity Camp is also seen, but here the emphasis is on his representation of what Noble observes as a racially marked masculinity as a Latino man. He is hypersexualized and exhibits behaviors of excessive heteronormative masculinity. Noble describes, “What is parodied in these numbers is the

sometimes very thin line between gay and heterosexual masculinity, where ironic reading practices articulate the contradictions that masculinity often disavows and yet is unable to contain” (256). The Toronto Kings have also performed the Village People, itself a parody of gay masculinity according to Noble, “the drag kings’ Village People parodies a parody in a performance that simultaneously signifies masculinity, hyper-masculinity, failed heteronormative masculinity and white notions of queer diversity” (256).

Thomas Pointek addresses some of the differences in the ways that drag kings have approached the issue of performing race in the essay “Kinging in the Heartland: or the Power of Marginality,” in *The Drag King Anthology* (2002). He observes that kings in San Francisco and New York seem less likely to perform music that was originally recorded by a race different from their own, but that in Columbus, Ohio, the drag groups are usually racially mixed and the performance of a variety of songs by all performers is generally welcomed (Pointek 134-135). This thesis does not allow for an extensive discussion of race, but I will acknowledge that most of my discussion of Camp comes from a predominately white perspective and looking at predominately Caucasian performers.

Drag King Camp

The three types explicated above – Pond Scum Camp, Celebrity Camp, and Marginal Male Camp – will act as a framework within which to discuss drag king Camp in the upcoming chapters. Many performances contain some combination of the types above, and undoubtedly more could be identified. Chapter 2 will elaborate on the origins of Camp and the way it overlaps with feminism, and Chapter 3 will apply critical theatre theory to drag king Camp performance, revealing it as a mechanism for staging alternative femininities.

CHAPTER 2: FEMINISM AND CAMP

Feminist Lens and Feminist Theatre

As explicated in the previous section, contemporary drag kings emerged in the 1980's, largely as a part of lesbian bar culture and other women's spaces, including those associated with BDSM (bondage, domination and sadomasochism) and kink scenes. It is not a coincidence that this was also a time when feminist theatre practices were becoming recognized in academia and interdisciplinary conversations surrounding feminist projects were becoming more prevalent. Drag kings are a part, though not exclusively, of the feminist theatre tradition and rely on its foundations in both theory and practice. The following is an overview of the development of feminist theatre that will provide a timeline and context for the analyses of drag king performances to follow.

I will draw largely from Elaine Aston's book, *Feminist Theatre Practice: a Handbook* (1999), to begin establishing a feminist lens for theorizing drag king performance. As indicated in its title, Aston's book is focused largely on applications of feminist theatre practices, along with a helpful introduction to feminist theatre history. My focus on performance techniques and the theatrical aspects of drag performance require an outlook based around the practical aspects of the art form and therefore Aston's perspective is particularly useful. Aston notes that theatre studies require three components: history, theory, and practice (Aston 3). It is practice that separates theatre from its sister art forms. I believe that it is also practice that separates drag performance from textually based gender theory and history. Contemporary drag king performance emerged in the 1980's, around the same time that significant feminist theatre performances and subsequent theories were developing.

Aston begins with the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960's and 1970's. Feminist theatre practices began happening in the public realm, outside of the academy. For example, protestors at the Miss World beauty pageant in the late 1960's made counter spectacles of themselves by drawing attention to their breasts and pubic area in order to critique the male objectification of female bodies (5). Aston notes, "This kind of early street protest is embryonic of the body-centered critique of gender representation that, subsequently was to dominate feminist theatre, theory and practice in the 1980's" (5). Protestors also dressed dummies in what they considered symbols of female oppression such as aprons, stockings and a shopping bag (5). This appropriation of gendered symbols for the sake of political visibility reminds me of Camp practices of the gay rights movement of the 1990's such as drag queen Joan Jett Blakk's presidential campaign. As explained by Blakk, "If a bad actor can be elected president, why not a good drag queen?" (qtd. in Senelick 470). Humor aside, the political goals of Blakk's campaign were serious. Far beyond a chance of winning any election, Blakk was concerned with using drag to support queer visibility, and to erase the line between male and female (470). The early street protests and Blakk's campaign are both subverting gendered symbols for the sake of critique.

A specifically lesbian Camp example relevant to drag king history is found in Eve Merriam's play *The Club* (1976), featuring women in moustaches and evening wear, singing male chauvinist songs of the past (Senelick 336). Senelick notes, "Merriam's performers, making no real effort to create the illusion that they were men, thereby managed to conjure up an understated lesbian appeal" (336). Senelick observes that this Vesta Tilly inspired type of male-impersonation was used often by second-wave feminists to satirize masculinity, especially at times when they were pushing feminist political agendas. Merriam's play was more concerned

with communicating the social construction of gender rather than striving to “pass” as men. For example, in one production, a performer let her hair down at the end of the show, an action that a male impersonator of the past would never dare (336). Devices such as this, that directly refer to the female body or feminine self within a performance of masculinity, are common in drag king acts. Feminist performance techniques remained relatively separated from academic conversations until the 1980’s. In the academy, one of the most influential feminist theories developed in relation to film.

Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), established the theory of the male gaze based around her observations of film reception theory. Within her theory, the active male observes the passive female. Although the essay has been criticized for its oversimplification since it was published, its basic premise is central to early feminist theatre practices, where women sought to challenge and break free from male structures and spectators. Over time the two disciplines began to influence each other as practitioners were invited into the academy as speakers, to lead workshops, and perform. By the late 1980’s, conversations between feminist scholars and theater practitioners began to challenge what they viewed as male structures of creating theatre and teaching the “canon.” In terms of the lesbian feminists in particular, Sue-Ellen Case’s influential essay, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” (1988), is useful in its feminist lesbian perspective and goal to articulate another lesbian form of Camp.

In her essay, Case removes the male body in order to allow lesbian dynamics to take center stage. It is important to Case that these dynamics belong to female bodies and are not dependent on men. In feminist performance from this era, such as those by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, heterosexual roles are parodied and become a vehicle for the lesbian subject position. In 1991, Shaw and Weaver collaborated with the theatre troupe BlooLips to create

Belle Reprise, a feminist version and queer reading of Tennessee William's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* that emphasizes its representation of the passive female role. Stanley, played by Peggy Shaw, says, "If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end" (qtd. in Aston 8). Feminists felt oppressed by the way that their roles had been written into theatre, both as audience members witnessing such portrayals, and as actors asked to embody such roles. Realism and dramatic structure based around conflict leading to climax was associated with the male-dominated world. Therefore, feminist theatre often rejected realist approaches, favoring a surrealist approach.

By the early 1990's, radical feminism emerged with the goal of re-appropriating female bodies. With particular reference to male cross-dressing, Aston observes, "Feminist theatre scholarship has drawn our attention to those 'stages' in theatre history when women did not have bodies at all: when the male actor mimed the 'feminine'" (8). Cultural feminism evolved out of radical feminism. The most significant development in cultural feminism to this thesis came from the French, Lacanian inspired practitioners. These theorists are interested in a psychoanalytic lens and established the theory of Woman as Other in terms of their representation and communication in the world. Under this cultural regime, Aston explains, women are forced to participate in a "system that constructs them as marginal or alien" (9). Sexuality is explained in terms of the central male phallus and notions of femininity revolved around women presenting themselves as attractive to the heterosexual male. This is sometimes referred to as "masquerade," where women are expected to adorn themselves with particular clothing, makeup and other artificial means in order to appeal to a patriarchal domain.

For some, reclaiming the body was just the beginning, and materialist feminists emerged with the goal of actually changing the way in which women were seeing themselves. This kind

of self-identification and self-reflection is found in the theories of playwright and director Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Brecht advocated for theatre that made the audience think about what they were seeing. In order to accomplish this he employed what he called the alienation effect, or a-effect. An audience is made aware that what they are seeing is a representation, and they are therefore asked to reflect on their experience, rather than passively watch the action of the play as entertainment. While Brecht focused on issues of class, materialist feminists used some of Brecht's concepts to focus on issues of gender. Feminist scholar Jill Dolan describes "the pressing issue for feminists becomes how to inscribe a representational space for woman that will point out the gender enculturation promoted through the representational frame and that will belie the oppressions of the dominant ideology it perpetuates" (12). In other words, women were challenged to represent themselves in such a way that would not be misread under the existing oppressive cultural sign system. Drag king performance could be argued as an example of alternative presentations of the female body and female behavior, communicated through the performative gestures of masculinity. This statement immediately begs the question of what constitutes a female or male gesture or behavior. The binary is exposed as exclusive, limiting and unstable as the lines between the two "extremes" become blurred. It is no wonder that the International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKE) naturally evolved to include an array of gender performance in 2004. There was no justification or benefit for exclusion. Drag kings are a part of performance history that continues to break down the stereotypical signs of gender performance. A part of their efficacy has been in the increasing social acceptance of masculinity as equally performative as femininity. This realization of two culturally constructed extremes reveals the infinite grey that is not "between" the binary, but exists around, through and beyond

such a linear conception. I return to early drag king performance in order to contextualize this phenomenon.

Drag kings gained momentum in the 1990's with performances that were at once part of academic culture as well as alternative cultures, including the sex industry. Many kings portray the man's man, womanizers and grungy characters (as seen in Pond Scum Camp). I am reminded of Annie Hindle's portrayal of chauvinist songs when I see contemporary kings capitalize on conceptions of the "player," another word for womanizer. Other kings are more interested in what is sometimes called "fag drag" and portray gay male characters, sometimes exhibiting qualities of Marginal Male Camp. Perhaps unknowingly, both of these types of kings are participating in a tradition of lesbian male impersonators of the past. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's influence on male impersonators of the late nineteenth century: the portrayal of the man about town, the dandy. Returning to feminism and Brecht, these performances illustrate theatrical devices described by Elin Diamond, and can be read as a

practice that seeks to expose or mock the structures of gender, to reveal gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices, usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect. That is by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator. (13)

This idea of overt resemblance to iconicity for the purpose of mocking or exposing a dominant structure connects feminism's affinity for Brechtian techniques to the concept of Camp. Camp is an elusive term that resists definition, as definition often leads to exclusion. My goal is to establish a Camp lens, rather than a Camp definition, with which to theorize drag king performance techniques.

Origins in Defining Camp

Camp is a difficult concept to describe and define. Susan Sontag's famous text, "Notes on Camp" (1964), is an early attempt at such a definition. Sontag describes Camp as a sensibility, the essence of which "is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (qtd. in Cleto 53). She goes on to explain Camp as "esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques" (53). Sontag is both drawn to and repulsed by Camp, and believes that its practitioners cannot analyze it and that to name it as a sensibility "requires a deep sympathy modeled by revulsion" (53). Many subsequent scholars have disputed this claim, are highly aware of their own Camp practices, and have demonstrated their ability to analyze them thoughtfully.

Sontag explains that Camp is a sensibility that "converts the serious into the frivolous" however, "these are grave matters" and it is rooted in a certain development of taste (54). She argues that matters of taste are of extreme importance in that it governs "free - as opposed to rote - human response. Nothing is more decisive" (54). Sontag's severity implies that Camp demonstrates an affinity for some kind of repulsive sensibility, revealing a potential homophobic and judgmental perspective. She proceeds with a list of fifty-eight qualities of camp, and explains that any linear explanation or argument would not be able to contain what she names this "fugitive sensibility" (54). Sontag's observations often seem to be coming from a place of annoyance rather than admiration or neutral observation – as much as such a thing can exist. Nevertheless, her text gives examples of Camp that will prove useful in an attempt to explicate the term as appropriate for some drag king performance. She dedicates her famous "Notes" to Oscar Wilde, and given his influence on male impersonators in nineteenth century America and England, I find that the potential for Camp in drag king performance is readily recognizable.

I will paraphrase some observations by Sontag that prove useful to this thesis and make note of how they relate to the types of drag king Camp outlined in Chapter 1.

- Note Number One explains Camp as a mode of aestheticism, it is not in terms of beauty but in terms of degree of artifice (54). Drag king Camp demonstrates the artifice of masculinity, often in an “unattractive” mode.
- Note Eight highlights that Camp is the love of the exaggerated, of things being what they are not (56). Pond Scum Camp is an extreme form of chauvinism.
- Note Nine states, “The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility” (56). Many drag kings play with androgyny and may expose their breasts during a performance to exhibit qualities of more than one sex.
- Notes Thirty and Thirty-one emphasize that the passage of time plays a role in what is considered Camp. An element of fantasy can be placed on items and aesthetics from the past, thus many campy items are often old-fashioned because we are “less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt” (61). In Marginal Male Camp, accouterments such as the monocle may be used as a signifier of both the modern dandy and lesbianism.
- She notes in item Forty-one that, “the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious...one can be serious about the frivolous, or frivolous about the serious” (62). Masculinity is generally perceived as a serious concept and nonperformative, thus its performance is a means by which it can be dethroned, as seen in Pond Scum and Celebrity Camp in particular.
- Note Forty-five observes a kind of detachment in Camp, which is the “prerogative of an elite; and as the dandy is nineteenth century’s surrogate for the aristocrat in matters of

culture, so Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem; how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture” (63).

- Note Fifty-five states “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation - not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism” (65). Drag kings generally seek to entertain with their iterations of Camp. Pong Scum Camp has been interpreted as negative and upholding misogyny. The issue of Intent vs. Impact will be further addressed in the conclusion.
- Finally the last note, Note Fifty-eight reads, “The ultimate Camp statement: it’s good because it’s awful...Of course, one can’t always say that. Only under certain conditions, those which I’ve tried to sketch in these notes” (65). Context is vital to the reception of Camp practices. A drag king performance will read differently in a queer bar than at the local talent show. Depending on how Camp is used, it can increase visibility through mainstream signifiers, or conversely serve a very limited audience. Sometimes it does both, which is delightful but also leads to confusion in its reception.

While many of these observations are helpful in articulating the elusive subject of Camp, Sontag perhaps takes too many liberties in defining the named “sensibility.” Note Fifty-one explains that while there is an affinity between homosexuality and Camp, Camp is not a homosexual taste. Note Two claims that Camp is “neutral in respect to content...is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (54). These points have been refuted by scholars such as Moe Meyer, and will be discussed in the next section. I have attempted to approach Sontag’s observations and mine out certain qualities that are evident in drag king Camp. This has been an attempt to contextualize drag kings as Campy in their own right, as much of Camp scholarship has origins

in gay male culture, nevertheless, the use of the term outside of gay male culture has been highly debated and will be discussed in the next section.

In terms of drag performance and Camp, a seminal text is Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972). Newton was informed by Sontag's "Notes on Camp," but she explores the term from an anthropological perspective, focusing mostly on drag queen culture, with only a few select comments on lesbians and male impersonators. Newton describes three major themes in Camp: incongruous juxtapositions, theatricality, and humor. Incongruous juxtapositions are either pointed out or created. Expensive and cheap items are put together, or moral deviation is made visible, such as the image of two men in bed (Newton 106-107). The theme of theatricality points to the fact that life itself is theatre, and in reference to Sontag, that Camp is consciously stagy and theatrical, a dramatic form meant for a performer and an audience. The third theme is humor, a way of laughing instead of crying, "a continuous creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and, in the process, defining a positive homosexual identity" (110). For Newton, a person can be a Camp, a role model in the subcultural ideology of camp. She explains that, "Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a relationship between things, people and activities or qualities, and homosexuality (105).

Newton makes an important disclaimer at the start of her section on "The Camp":

While all female impersonators are drag queens in the gay world, by no means are all of them "camps". Both the drag queen and the camp are expressive performing roles, and both specialize in transformation. But the drag queen is concerned with masculine-feminine transformation, while the camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity [...] the camp actually uses it to achieve a higher synthesis. (105)

If Mo B. Dick is positioned as a drag king Camp, then it follows that his Pond Scum shtick is positioned as a purposeful synthesis of masculine masquerade. His Camp qualities, the known

incongruity between his female body and male performance, are what signal the audience to experience his humor as social commentary.

Newton notes that while drag queens were normally associated with low status in the world of homosexuals, Camps were found at all levels of status and are often at the center of social groups (105). The implication is that Camp breaks away from mere illusion. Any person can choose to simply put on a costume and call it drag, however Camp is an element that infuses that performance with thought and agency. Mo B. Dick was at the center of one of the prominent drag king scenes in New York and his ability to act as a host sets him apart from the majority of drag kings, who do not usually utter a word in performance.

Opinions on Camp

Stepping back, can I use the term Camp to describe drag king performance? When can I use this term and for whom am I using it? Moe Meyer writes in the Introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1996), “Because the function of Camp, as I will argue, is the production of queer social visibility, then the relationship between Camp and queer identity can be posited. Thus I define Camp as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility” (5). I find this definition appropriate to the way in which I conceive of Camp performance. However, I proceed with caution, acknowledging that some scholars, and particularly some lesbian scholars, do not share this conception.

The way in which I have been using the term Camp in relation to drag kings is not necessarily the way that scholars have explored the term in relation to lesbians, or even the way it has been applied to drag king performance. In her 1988 essay, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” Sue-Ellen Case identifies what she calls lesbian Camp. According to Case, lesbian

Camp was concerned with female empowerment, and it was important to note that a butch was not dressing as a man, but as a butch (Bottoms and Torr 25). It is important to differentiate butch identity expression and drag king performance. These two expressions are for some individuals, very interrelated; they use drag performance as a vehicle to express themselves as butch. However, I reiterate our focus here is a study on theatrical representation and drag kings' ability to parody and destabilize the gender binary. With this goal in mind, I will discuss butch identity as something that is *not* related to Camp, and therefore not related to the parameters of this thesis. As argued by Case, it is true that lesbians have used Camp performance tactics to comment on butch-femme relationships and assumed roles within those relationships. Put another way, butch stereotypes can be *performed*, but this performance is separate from butch *identity* and separate from a drag king's use of Camp. Historians often discuss drag queen and butches as historically parallel, but as Annabelle Willox notes, "to be parallel is not to be identical," and the "the result of this differing history is skepticism of the use of camp when ascribed to butch sexualities, as postmodern notions of queer camp often ignore the historical lack of camp in lesbian visibility" (275). There is often an implication that drag kings represent butch sexualities, which is a limited view of the various intentions and motivations of the kings themselves. I do not wish to discredit the significance of butch identity to queer womyn's history. Rather, I want to be clear that butch is a personal identity that is not parody, is not an act, but an authentic representation of self, and therefore is not theatrical. As an example, I turn to Peggy Shaw's work, *The Menopausal Gentleman* (1997). This one-woman show reflects on her experience of aging and going through menopause, presented through the thin guise of a middle-aged, male New Yorker. Marcia Ferguson observes in a 1998 review for *Theatre Journal*, "The accent and the suit immediately place her in a particular context that is debunked

by the content, which is by turns sexual, passionate, frustrated, and humorous” (375). The piece is more about being butch and going through menopause than it is about commenting on, or performing masculinity.

Other theorists have rejected the application of the term Camp to lesbian theatre and drag kings. In chapter 5 of the *Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Kate Davy argues that while Case does succeed in declaring a need for a separation of phallogentric discourses to create a feminist subject position, the use of the term Camp is problematic because it, “does not walk out of the hom(m)osexual frame of reference as effectively as it could, for Camp as a discourse is both ironically and paradoxically the discourse of hom(m)osexuality, that is, male sexuality” (Meyer 143). Esther Newton returns to the topic of lesbians and camp in “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen: Lesbian Power and Representation in Gay Male Cherry Grove” (1996). Newton warns against “conflations of butch with drag (queen) and butch-femme with Camp” (65). She observes that butch-femme relations were not always a parody, but a type of relationship structure, which can be argued to have come out of lesbian bar culture. She concludes that lesbians may employ Camp, “not to destabilize gender categories as such, but rather to destabilize male monopolies and to symbolize and constitute the power of the lesbian minority” (66). Newton clarifies that any proposed parallel between butch-femme and female impersonation, and their relation to the drag/camp system, is a “sign and strategy of emerging lesbian empowerment rather than history or social theory” (66). This relates to Judith Halberstam’s conclusion in *Female Masculinity* (1998) that “For Newton, then, lesbian Camp is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is aimed at and performed through gay male monopolies” (Halberstam 237). Newton ends her essay with the concern that lesbians are synthesizing lesbian traditions with gay male culture including “queer identity, camp theatricality and modes of

sexual behavior and imagery,” in an effort to modestly expand lesbian power (89). She is concerned that lesbian signification will become distorted if it is not allowed its own defining terms. Camp seems to be one of these appropriated terms, and Halberstam questions its analytical use for drag kings’ performance.

Newton’s examples in this essay are mostly centered around notions of butch-femme roles or lesbians who participated in male drag queen scenes in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Some of these women wore female drag, and she explains that Camp has excluded lesbians in two ways. First, the women were rejected because drag was thought of as dressing as the “other” gender. A woman dressed in female drag was unfair competition and they were met with some hostility (73). Secondly, Camp emphasizes the power of the queen and thus disempowers the “king” counterpart, which are butch gay men and lesbians. In parenthesis, however, Newton then makes a comment that says volumes in terms of looking at Camp from the perspective of 2013: “(in this key respect, camp is deliberately and devastatingly subversive of masculine power)” (73). When a drag king employs this subversion of masculine power, Camp becomes a tool for the female body. Masculine power is dismantled twofold in that it is expressed through the female form and is revealed as artifice.

Halberstam contends that Camp is an inadequate term for the drag king. Halberstam suggests the term *kinging*, or the *kinging effect*, as a descriptor for what drag kings do. S/he acknowledges that Camp can very well be a part of *kinging*, but that there are unique characteristics and strategies of drag kings for which Camp does not apply. Kinging is made up of understatement, hyperbole and layering (259-261). Halberstam’s focus on the subdued drag king is correctly emphasized for the purposes of her own arguments around female masculinity. Indeed, Camp is not the only way in which drag kings are subversive, and it is not an all-

inclusive descriptor of their theatricality, but it is certainly a tool they can use effectively. In terms of Camp and its opposition to drag king performance, Halberstam relies the difference between what she considers “camp femininity” and “downplayed masculinity” (Halberstam 239). Stephen Bottoms argues in *Sex, Drag and Male Roles* (2009) that this is a “reassertion of the masculine-feminine opposition,” and that drag kings tend to blur the binary rather than reinforce it (Bottoms and Torr 130). It is perhaps most useful to this study to explore drag kings from a Camp *lens* rather than a declaration of Camp intent. I have observed a pattern of Camp mechanisms which allow drag king performance to further remove masculinity from the male body, while also expressing the multifarious nature of femininity in ways that it is not defined by the hegemony.

Finding a Camp Lens

Meyer’s argument makes a case for Camp as a *queer* aesthetic, not belonging to any category of gay, lesbian or otherwise. Does this make the claim that the concept of queer has evolved beyond gender somehow? This question evokes gender struggles within the third wave feminist thinking that oscillates between combating the idea that their foremothers have either surpassed a need for feminism, or that the movement made no difference. In *Feminist Futures* (2006), Elaine Aston reiterates an ideal posited by Alan Sinfield that simply pointing out the instability of the hegemony does not necessarily have a practical effect (Aston 11). Put another way, the project is not complete in simply making a claim; an observation of hegemony does not change it. In answer to the question of gender above, I argue that queer is not beyond gender, but rather highly engaged with gender. Expressions of queer identities are dependent on conceptions of “normal”, as posited by the hegemony, in order to distinguish themselves as both outside and a part of their surroundings. This dialogue between queer and normal often takes the

form of parody. Meyer argues that, “Broadly defined, Camp refers to the strategies and tactics of queer parody” (Meyer 9). He uses Linda Hutcheson’s definition of parody as an “intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions, ‘an extended repetition with critical difference’ that ‘has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications’” (qtd. in Meyer 9). In relation to visual representation and theatre, the manipulation extends to conventions of visual art, fashion and mass media. Meyer then describes parody as *process*, operating under a power dynamic between two sides of signification. One side is the hegemony, the possessor of the “original,” and the creator of value production. The other side is the marginalized and disenfranchised, and possesses the parodic alternative to that “original.” In this structure, “parody becomes the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification” (11). For Meyer, Camp becomes the only way for queer people to access representation, to express their own form of social visibility (11).

Under this logic, Camp is dependent on the hegemony in order to be recognized. It can be read at once as a critique of the hegemony and as a reinforcement of its power. This reinforcement elicits controversy in Camp’s actual efficacy as a political tool. Does it simply mock and then leave the hegemony in place, safe and secure? As mentioned above, feminism sought to relocate the idea of Woman into a new sign structure, or perhaps a new code of signification. However, as Dolan points out, one of the challenges faced by practitioners of feminist theatre has been to communicate in such a way that is received in a new way by the audience, to not be misread according to hegemonic sign systems, or rather, social constructions. The falsity of their authority cannot be established until they are revealed as such. Shelley Budgeon explains this difficulty as ongoing in *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender*

in Late Modernity (2011). She explains that in post-feminist thinking, “spectacular” femininity is sold to women in the commercial domain as an empowered choice. Budgeon names this the post-feminist masquerade, which “is undertaken as part of a regime of ‘self-perfectibility’ which defuses feminist critique and counter balances the threat that new forms of female independence may pose to hegemonic masculinity”(68). The patriarchal sign system remains highly pervasive is demonstrated as manipulative in its reliance on women’s choice as evidence that the power structure has been diffused, meanwhile the structure remains materially unchanged.

In terms of drag king performance, the actor is often directly confronting the hegemonic structure of masculinity, pointing out its own invisible masquerade, while simultaneously representing a less visible variety of femininity. Halberstam notices that masculinity, and particularly white hegemonic masculinity, is often perceived as nonperformative. It is portrayed as a neutral and natural state belonging to the male body (234). This is a part of the reason that some drag kings have been observed to exhibit a lack of performance in their acts. The cultural cues of “true” masculinity are rendered unreadable in performance. However, s/he does observe that in the few instances where masculinity is revealed as performative, “the masculine masquerade appears quite fragile” (234). These instances are an exception to the rule. Most of the time, white men derive power from their inevitable masculinity, and under the logic that it occurs naturally, it cannot be impersonated (235). Halberstam observes, “Drag king performances, however, provide some lesbian performers (although all drag kings are by no means lesbians) with the rare opportunity to expose the artificiality of all genders and all sexual orientations and therefore to answer the charge of inauthenticity that is usually made only about lesbian identity” (Halberstam 240). Halberstam explains that she endeavors to prove that, “what we call ‘masculinity’ has also been produced by masculine women, gender deviants and often

lesbians” (241). The idea that masculinity is produced through various bodies, not just the male body, leans on the idea that gender behaviors are not innate, but learned.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler famously argues that gender is performative, a set of behaviors learned from the outside world, and most fundamentally, it is constructed through “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 191). If gender is performative at its core, it can therefore be performed through mimesis of these recognizable acts. Butler describes gender as a surface signification, never fully internalized, and impossible to embody (192). In terms of drag performance, she writes, “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (186). In analyzing drag kings, Butler’s argument is important as a theoretical basis for establishing masculinity as performative. Femininity is often already established as such, as seen in the idea of the feminine masquerade. What Butler accomplished was a theoretical stance that makes visible the social construction of normative gender. The revealing of this construction makes it available for critique, at least theoretically. But how is this done in practice?

Drag kings use Camp as a form of visual representation that challenges the very existence of the white male as “original,” using at once recognizable elements of masculinity, while consciously expressing these cultural cues as performative. Therefore, the male “original” is exposed as derivative. As the male “original” crumbles, the power dynamic and justification for the gender binary is weakened. In drag king performance, feminism and Camp overlap in their mechanisms, both in pursuit of representation from the margins.

For example, Pond Scum Camp embodies white masculinity’s repetitive and recognizable gestures in such a way to render them performative. Maureen Fisher’s character, Mo B. Dick, embodies a type of “Brooklyn guy” that stems from her surroundings. She admits

that Mo's behaviors come "naturally," they are an impersonation of what she has witnessed as patterns of performed masculinity.

I now turn to *Celebrity Camp*. In *The Drag King Anthology* (2002), Jean Bobby Noble's chapter "Seeing Double, Thinking Twice: The Toronto Drag Kings and (Re-) Articulations of Masculinity" explores the Toronto Kings in terms of their parodic performance of white masculinity. She focuses on "the hyper-masculine star at his most contradictory and dialogic" (Noble 251). In congruence with Halberstam, Noble argues that white masculinity is the most dominant form of masculinity in Western culture. Because it is considered the most "normal" race and sex, it often goes unmarked and its performative cues fail to register visually. It is the "original" with which the marginalized "other" must oppose. Noble asserts that white masculinity is both the most visible form of masculinity while remaining the most invisible due to what I consider its unquestioned authority and "normalcy." Drag kings are able to make themselves visible through the hyper-visibility of the straight male celebrity. *Celebrity Camp* often plays with the less recognized similarity between lesbian desire and heterosexual male desire. Lesbians (alongside other queer identified womyn) and heterosexual males are often perceived as existing in separate cultural spheres. Part of what drag kings do is express this cultural divide in a parodic way in order to make a claim for visibility and offer common ground. Noble writes, "I suggest that what overdetermines the male impersonation at the heart of the drag kings' show is a shift from the separatist to transitive trope, complete with its shifts in alliances and cross-identifications" (256). Noble comes to this conclusion in part via Eve Sedgwick's book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick outlines how lesbians identified with other women under lesbian separatism, with gay men under gender transitive perspectives, and more recently, they have looked for identifications and alliances with straight men. For example,

Nobel gives the example of drag kings Mona and Jesse performing a song by Styx titled “Mr. Roberto” (257). Noble explains that the narrator of the song is a self-made man, and the lyrics read, “I’ve a secret I’ve been hiding under my skin...I’m not what you think/ Forget what you know/ I am the modern man who hides behind a man/ so no one else can see/ my true identity” (257). Through a Camp lens, this layering and queering of heterosexual masculinity articulates multiple forms of masculinity, both male and female. The performer is communicating and plunging into visibility through a heterosexual sign system. Taking this idea one step further, the performance then becomes equally about an alternative type of female expression, one where a female is adored by female fans and plays the dual role of spectacle and voyeur as they look out at the crowd.⁵ Hegemonic structures are performed as vulnerable in their authority, and even if it only exists for a minute, an alternative queer visibility is achieved.

Aston ends her historiography in *Feminist Theatre Practice* by advocating for a feminist theatre that seeks to create disturbance, which draws on whatever devices or knowledge necessary in order to resist categorization (18). Camp is one such device, and its use in drag king performance opens opportunities for resistance of a male defined conception of authentic femininity.

⁵ Many performers do not identify as female off stage, and so I do not want to assume female pronouns. In my experience, “they” is the most commonly preferred neutral pronoun and so that is what I have used here.

CHAPTER 3: MULTIPLICITIES

Women as Subject

Annabelle Willox writes in the essay “Whose Drag is it Anyway? Drag Kings and Monarchy in the UK” (2002), “The drag king is one of the few eccentrics left that can subvert and denaturalize our notions of gender, race and class through parodic performance, and without doubt a new hybrid theory that encompasses the cultural, historical and power-based construction of the King is needed” (Willox 282). This chapter will construct drag king Camp performance as a site for subversive appropriation of the patriarchy as a means to express multiple femininities in a context separated from the heterosexual male gaze. I will first reiterate relevant historical evolutions of the art form and feminist theatre to contextualize my claim. Alisa Solomon’s *Re-Dressing the Canon* (1997) will serve as a model from which to explore drag king performance as theatre from her unique spin on the feminist perspective. Geraldine Harris’ book, *Staging Femininities* (1999), will point up the discrepancies between theory and practice, concluding that the context of staging is what most informs an audience rather than the actor or author’s intention. I will then elaborate on the evolution of the staging of drag king shows to demonstrate the importance of its roots in expressing female sexuality, and particularly alternative sexualities including queer, lesbian or otherwise. I begin with a response to Kate Davy’s observations in the mid 1990’s.

In her essay *Fe/Male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp* (1996), Davy writes, “female impersonation, while it certainly says something about women, is primarily about men, addressed to men and for men. Male impersonation has no such familiar institutionalized history in which women impersonating men say something about women” (Meyer 133). While I agree that the institutionalized histories of drag kings and queens are different, drag kings and male

impersonators do say a great deal about females, and always have. The many female admirers and lovers of Charlotte Cushman, and Annie Hindle's marriage to a woman both indicate a tradition of cross-dressed performance as a means to express desire that was censored in reality. The incongruence between performance and mainstream reception worked to their advantage. The fact that the primary viewer was conceived as male, and that Cushman portrayed men so convincingly that she did not cater to their assumed gaze, demonstrates a technique for removing the performance from the dominant male order. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, male impersonation in the vaudeville circuit eventually became a subcultural art form that allowed masculine women to express themselves in a time when cross-dressing was being pathologized as indicative of sexual deviance. As feminism made slow and steady progress in the later part of the twentieth century, feminist theatre practice and drag kings began to create the drag king scene as it exists today. As exemplified by the WOW Café, feminist theater has long been concerned with creating space for women as practitioners and audience members. Drag king performance offers a sexualized space for womyn⁶ to express desire outside of the phallogentric hegemony, as both audience members and performers.

Women as Spectator

A great deal of feminist theatre criticism has observed that women are portrayed on stage not as women, but as Woman, an objectified sign for the dominant and superior male viewer. In *Re-dressing the Canon* (1997), Alisa Solomon comments that feminist theatre criticism has little to say about the actual mechanisms and workings of theatre, particularly noting that the

⁶ I am using the word "womyn" in an effort to encompass female born people with alternative sexualities and gender identities including queer, lesbian, bisexual, trans or otherwise. This does not exclude trans women or male born people that identify with these identities in any capacity.

spectators' critical engagement with the theatre can spark a parallel critical engagement with the world.

When it does so, theater produces a critical distance between spectator and stage: the spectator sees the play, and sees herself seeing it. This basic Brechtian point can be bent in feminist directions by training it on images of femininity in metatheatrical plays, for they allow us to see ourselves seeing the theatrical construction of a social construction. (Solomon 9)

This process is critical to her suspicion that Western drama's tendency to discriminate against women has produced "fissures" where feminists can then find room to create more powerful "fractures." Solomon continues, "by questioning its own representational strategies, theater can also undermine those power structures" (Solomon 2). I will apply Solomon's techniques in a critical engagement with drag king Camp to show how drag kings' subversion of gender and masculinity relies on the gender binary in such a way that the binary self-destructs, at least momentarily, and multiple femininities emerge. The patriarchal power structure is based on the existence of the gender binary where men with male bodies are assumed to contain an intrinsic authority. Drag kings call into question what I consider fissures in the constructs of masculinity in order to then create fractures in masculinity's façade and therefore its authority. Solomon aims to use a feminist approach to deconstruct theatrical mechanisms that already exist, rather than the more typical feminist approach, which is concerned with creating something new and essentially *of women*. Drag king Camp can be theorized as an adoption of aspects of masculine theatricality for the purpose of its subversion. Kings are an ideal tool for thinking outside of the essentialist box, given their location in an art form by mostly female born practitioners that do not all identify exclusively as "women." What could be a better example than a good old-fashioned male strip tease?

On February 13, 1999, the H.I.S. Kings of Columbus, Ohio, performed a scene from the film *The Full Monty* (1997) at their Valentine's Day extravaganza, titled "Boys on Film" (Pointek 131). Thomas Pointek describes the performance in his essay, "Kinging in the Heartland: The Power of Marginality" (2002). The film follows a group of average, unemployed men who decide to try their luck at striptease, leading to hilarious rehearsals and a final scene in which they perform to a Tom Jones' rendition of the song "You Can Leave Your Hat On." The film freezes the shot and ends before the final reveal can take place. The characters are contra-examples of idealized masculinity with their average bodies and overall awkwardness. There is something endearing in the way that the characters follow through with the performance despite their imperfections. The H.I.S. Kings' performance of this metatheatrical final scene delivers further on the original promise in that they indeed complete the strip. However, they are wearing body suits. As they approach the final moment, they remove their G-strings to reveal obscenely large phalluses. Pointek writes, "What is particularly interesting about this scene is the way in which the attribution of the female lack according to which women = man – penis is countered by the excess of the grossly exaggerated male members, which the strippers expose to the audience as they walk off stage" (132). I would classify this as Marginal Male Camp. *The Full Monty* is a rare cultural example of men being positioned as the object. They are subject to ridicule, however, there is a sense of pride and empowerment in their willingness to perform. Why do I get the sense that this premise would fail if it were a group of unemployed women? I postulate that the objectification of women's bodies is more prevalent and is associated with prostitution and sex. We don't want our daughters turning to the sex industry, but, "Hey kids, let's watch *The Full Monty* tonight, it is rated PG after all." I observe that the H.I.S. Kings' performance hints at women's potential empowerment through sexualized or revealing

performances in addition to parodying the ultimate sign of the male, the penis. For drag kings to mock masculinity through its own power structure is to challenge the authority of that structure. In drag queen Camp, queens are taking on the construction of femininity. And although it is one thing to successfully demonstrate the way that masculinity is also a construction, it is another for this fact to be communicated and understood in practice, as these constructions still function as a dominant power dynamic in the “real” world.

The subversion of male power is sometimes perceived as dangerous, as noted by Stephen Bottoms, “for women to ‘upgrade’ themselves to the status of men, and to do so plausibly, is to imply that the authority traditionally held by men is a matter of posture and theatricality (bluff) more than divine or biological right” (Bottoms and Torr 10). Recall the anxieties that male impersonators of the 19th century evoked. It is tempting to default to Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity and conclude that femininity *and* masculinity are simply performative gestures, dependent on repetition. While this conception is a cornerstone to gender theory, it is often misused and misunderstood in such a way that equates the *performative* with actual *performance*. Solomon warns against this and observes,

[W]hat theater can most powerfully present is not the equivalence between performativity and performance, but their revelatory divergence. Indeed, that’s what theatrical irony is: the startling contradiction of the stated by the shown. My purpose, then, in part, is to ballast the proliferating performance metaphors with theatre itself, to take up a challenge posed by Jill Dolan when she asks, “How can the liveness of theatre performance reveal performativity?” (Solomon 3).

Solomon evaluates the cross dressing of the male character Mnesilochus in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*. Mnesilochus thinks he can pass as a women as long as he has the appropriate costume and props. Solomon therefore concludes that femininity is conceived by Aristopahes as a set of effects, not as something that belongs to the female body (Solomon 6).

Judith Halberstam indirectly builds on this concept in *Female Masculinity* (1998), where they assert that masculinity is a quality that does not belong to the male body and its effects.

Therefore, where Solomon is locating fissures in Classical plays and theatrical mechanisms, the drag king is locating fissures in terms of patriarchal dominance as a given fact, and also allows for an alternative objectification of the female body.

In the essay “Seeing Double” (2002), Jean Bobby Noble finds empowerment in Michel Foucault’s call to not find out what we are, but to understand the “relations between what we are and what we deny we are” and that “the power of the drag king lies in their exposure of the impurity of categorization itself” (Noble 259). This is not a claim that categorization is not useful, but in recognizing it as a construction, it can become the subject of critique. Furthermore, categorization is proven to be in constant flux, an ongoing process of meaning. Camp is a theatrical tool concerned with the process of meaning, giving space for the queer performer to make themselves visible within a society that often erases them from the frame. In response to Dolan’s question then, the live drag king performance is a moment in time when performativity is revealed and visibility is achieved. Although it may only last momentarily, it nonetheless serves as a repetition of the “abnormal,” thereby participating in an infinite process of recoding.

Finding a Frame

At the end of her introduction, Alisa Solomon makes notes of drag performance in the context of Butler’s theoretical investigations:

The all-important question, which Judith Butler raises in *Bodies That Matter*, is “whether the denaturalization of gender norms is the same as their subversion.” As she points out, some parodies of gender (such as misogynistic drag shows) may denaturalize the category’s norms, but never call them into question. *The issue, then, is whether the parody—or any other sort of metatheatrical gender*

display—effects, through its performance style, the double vision of critical consciousness, that is, the means by which subversion can at least be imagined. It's one thing to recognize that there are theater-like aspects of masculinity. It's another to feel authorized to assume the strength and self-sovereignty masculinity claims. (Solomon 18, my italics)

Solomon warns that theatre is not the mechanism that will take down the patriarchy and that observing that gender is theatre-like does not necessarily allow a person to live outside of gender's sociological norms and rules, but it can teach us to see critically (18). Up to this point, Solomon's technique has been focused on theatre criticism that is founded in the technologies of theatre. She claims that theatre has been, as quoted above, a source of training on "images of femininity in metatheatrical plays, for they allow us to see ourselves seeing the theatrical construction of a social construction" (9). I sense an important dilemma in her methodology that is at the foundation of my original argument. Her reference to drag shows questions whether subversion is obtained through denaturalization. I answer that drag kings in particular are not *just* denaturalizing gender. More profoundly, drag kings create space for multiplicities of gender expression and identity, drag king Camp being one of the more effective mechanisms by which to do so. As a performance form dominated by female born performers, drag kings are a part of the continuation of the work of feminist theatre, a theatre that is perhaps striving to find the "strength and self sovereignty" *females* claim.

Drag king Camp is an effective performance mechanism by which to affect the "double vision of critical consciousness" called for by Solomon. Drag kings allow womyn to see themselves in the theatrical construction of gender norms and when Camp is employed, the resulting action is subversive of the gender binary, as it calls for critical interpretation through humor. Whether this affects critical consciousness with the world at large is perhaps not as

important as the safe space that is created for the performer and the audience to indulge in their desires, explore identity, and express the multiplicities of the female experience.⁷

This claim is heavily based in theory, and it is difficult to anticipate what kind of experience or thought process the spectator will have. In the book *Staging Femininities* (1999), author Geraldine Harris endeavors to explore the divide between theory and practice, particularly in reference to feminism, where the theories are often disconnected from the real lives of women both inside and outside of academia (Harris 1). A part of this focus is reconciling a spectator's interpretation with a performer's intent. In her discussion of gender performance, Harris comments that the spectator is often left confused and cannot necessarily read the performer's intention, which, "points up the problem that if any version of gender mimicry or masquerade is to be effective as a resistant or subversive strategy, at some point or on some level it must be clearly legible as differing from the norm" (62). Harris argues that this logic depends on essentialist notions of gender and identity, and that the norm is often established within power dynamics of class, race and sexuality, rendering it a concept that is not fixed for each viewer. Harris refers to interpretations of "excessive femininity" and argues that these displays, by either by lesbian femmes or drag queens, can only be read as excessive if there is an identifiable norm of femininity in the first place (63). After careful scrutiny of theorists including Carole-Anne Tyler and Judith Butler, as well as recent iterations of Brechtian theories, Harris finally comes to the conclusion that any movement in the theatrical frame is already a sort of "double," in quotation marks, to mark it as not reality, but reflective of a perceived reality. Therefore, she states, "In short, the intelligibility of any given performance depends on the manner in which it is

⁷ When I refer to "safe space," I refer to both theoretical and physical space, as the staging of the show within a queer bar or event allows for a filtering out of audience members that are more likely to degrade the performance based on unintelligibility.

specifically staged or located within, through, and against the history of theatre as a discursive institution, in a fashion that is beyond ‘author’s intentions’” (77). Drag king performance is situated within a discursive institution of queer culture and most prominently, that of womyn’s culture. It is true that a performance may be misinterpreted, or may work better in one context than in another. A performer should be aware of this risk and make choices to best communicate their intention. Mechanisms of drag king Camp are purposefully derivative and play on notions of hegemonic fame and systems of desire, but stages them in a context that allows for some control over intelligibility. In this environment, drag king Camp is a playground for expressing what I tentatively name as multiple femininities.

Drag king performance is often an expression of female desire and of female as subject. Jean Bobby Noble begins her essay with a story from her childhood in which she saw a Beatles-esque band at a local bar. She found herself not wanting to be one of the frenzied female fans, but rather to be a band member, to be desired by a group of adoring female fans, with all the lights and technology that make for a rock concert (252). In this case, drag king Celebrity Camp is one avenue for womyn to gain this kind of attention in a safe space. Butler’s concern for the successful effect of the “double vision of critical consciousness” is achieved in that Camp performance gives that familiar wink to the spectator. They can enjoy in the fantasy as a fan, or revel in the fact that they too could wield the position as subject. Alana Kumbier describes her experience as a drag king fan and performer in the essay, “One Body: Some Genders: Drag Performances and Technologies” (2002). She refers to cultural critic Jennifer Maher, who describes the “starfucker blues” as an experience of doubled desire by some female fans while watching their male rock star idols:

Our desires for and desires to be like the male rock star are all tangled up because we want so many things at once. We want the same entry into unrestrained sex as

he has, we want to have sex with him. We want to sleep with the performer and we want to be one ourselves, to be both sex objects and performing subjects. We want carnal agency without sexual violence. (qtd. in Kumbier 197)

She then expresses how this experience is comparable, but uniquely different for the queer female drag king spectator in that, “the experience of the queer female fan watching and desiring a drag king act is different from that of the female fan watching the male rock star, because for the drag king fan, the possibility of desiring and owning that phallus, that masculine energy (carnal or otherwise) is much more real” (Kumbier 197). While this may seem to remain in the phallogocentric universe, it could be alternatively argued as one where the phallus is resignified as an accouterment, a symbol of carnal agency, yes, but one that is peripheral to the sexed body.

Harris discusses the process of resignification and observes that Butler deconstructs the psychoanalytic approach to such signification to favor an operation known in critical theory as “*différance* within the process of signification, whereby all intelligibility depends on repetition but at the same time repetition constantly produces new meanings in a chain of signification through which the production of final meaning is infinitely deferred” (Harris 70-71, emphasis in original). If phallic power is produced through the operation of performativity, which must be repeated, this opens up the possibility of its resignification “in ways and places that exceed its proper place” (71). Drag kings achieve a level of resignification in that they locate themselves in dominant subject positions, in terms including and beyond heteronormativity and masculinity. It can be argued, as Harris later warns, that these relocations are simply momentary reversals (72). Ultimately the power structure remains in place and no real collapse of ideology is achieved. Perhaps this fact illustrates the accessibility and success of Camp. As a means for queer social visibility and representation both within and outside of the dominant paradigm, it is logically dependent on that paradigm to exist. This does not, however, make it less subversive. As the

paradigm shifts, so must Camp. The momentary reversals of power are insertion into the fissures of the hegemony, and with time, repeated subversion will give rise to larger fractures.

Female Desire, Sex and Fetish

Some of these fissures exist even within queer cultures. For example, I return to Jean Bobby Noble's discussion of the Toronto Kings' impersonation of The Village People. This type of Marginal Male Camp performance not only acts as parody of masculinity, but also "shifts away from what we might identify as butch-femme sexual identities toward a continuum of female masculinity" (Noble 256). One interpretation of staging drag kings as gay men is the assertion that a butch can be sexual with another butch, a taboo in some womyn's social scenes. Therefore, Marginal Male Camp can express female sexuality as something that is also not bound to notions of butch or femme, and is also not dependent on the phallogentric in the way that it is a sexualized expression liberated from the dominant heterosexual male viewer. Drag king performance is a part of female centered fetish, that is, fetish that is not centered around men. Bottoms quotes Clare Taylor in her study of modernist women's literature, *Women, Writing, and Fetishism, 1890-1950: Female Cross-Gendering*, "for some women writers cross-gendering is a performance of fetishism which enhances the (female) body/self as a sexual body/self for the subject, and a desirable body/self for the object of her desire" (Bottoms and Torr 120-121). One early example of female centered sexuality on drag king performance is seen in Shelly Mars' performances at the Baybrick Inn in San Francisco in the 1980's, years before the boom of the drag king scene of the 1990's. Mars was a theatre student that worked in the sex industry as a stripper at a bisexual bathhouse (118). She approached her strip scenes as

little character skits and was noticed by the founders of the lesbian erotic magazine *On Our Backs*, Nan Kinney and Debi Sundahl. Bottoms narrates,

Sundahl was a professional stripper who, like Diane [Torr], had wondered how erotic dance formulas developed for straight men might translate into an all-female context. One of the differences, she claimed in her 1987 essay “Stripper,” was that the dancers found “they had more freedom of expression. They were not limited to ultrafeminine acts only; they could be butch and dress in masculine attire.” (qtd. in Bottoms and Torr 118)

Mars adds that this comment implies that lots of people were cross-dressing, but in fact she was the only one. Her performances were not always received well, with particular mixed reactions to her predatory male character named Martin. Mars explains that Martin is a manifestation of her fears of sexual abuse from her father, and that she dressed as a tomboy in part as a defense mechanism. This kind of agency achieved through male clothing is not a new strategy for women that did not have hegemonic desire for men. Bottoms notes in a footnote that “Long before female to male cross dressing began to be associated in the public mind with ‘inversion’ or lesbians, it was recognized as a sign of resistance to the norms of patriarchal economy” (118). Some breeches actresses and male impersonators mentioned in Chapter 1 also often dressed in male attire in their everyday lives, managed their own finances, and generally competed with men in their careers. Drag kings have evolved in part out a tradition of subversion of male dominance through the appropriation of practices typically signified as male. Shelly Mars’ Martin is an early example of Pond Scum Camp, and as an adult she observed that “mimicking predatory males could function cathartically as a means of appropriating and queering the ostensible ‘sexiness’ with which aggressive masculinity is often invested by the mainstream” (119). When read through a Camp lens, Martin becomes an example of queer womyn’s social visibility as potentially sexually aggressive beings, without the actual threat of sexual violence. Bottoms recounts one of Mars’ acts that is recorded in the film *Virgin Machines* (1988),

Dressed in a suit and tie, hat, and Groucho-style moustache, she languidly struts about the stage, grooving to bass-heavy music and interacting lewdly with female audience members. Martin demands a kiss with tongues from one, fellatio on a half-peeled banana from another, then drags a third onstage and mimes finger-fucking her from behind. He then strips off his jacket and trousers (comically shaking them off his hips) to reveal big, baggy white shorts in which he proceeds to masturbate a beer bottle held casually at his crotch until a moment of climax when beer foams out. (119)

This could be examined as the type of misogyny described by Butler above. Is this act actually addressing the problem of misogyny in a productive way? Is it subverting the power structure of the sexual, predatory male? The intent of Mars may have been to express her sexual energy as a female, but it is possible that the impact felt like sexual perpetration to the audience members. The act described above was staged for a film and is not an exact replica of what may have been performed at a live event, but its mechanisms are helpful examples of Pond Scum Camp. Camp elements include the banana and beer bottle as substitutions for the phallus, which may have given a comic tone to the performance, allowing the audience to further separate the performance from an experience of sexual threat. Careful attention to context must be taken into account when speculating on the impact of the act. Mars' acts at this time were part of a strip show for womyn. Del Lagrace Volcano describes his reaction to one of Mars' performances as Martin in 1985 in *The Drag King Book* (1999). At first, Volcano was very confused and wondered why a man was on stage, but he narrates,

“Martin” was not a man, he was something else altogether, the performer, Shelly Mars...Even though I knew in my head he was female, the way she performed Martin's masculinity was lewdly compelling and to me, incredibly seductive. Something clicked and from that moment a fetish was born. (Volcano and Halberstam 10)

This Pond Scum Camp character was likely perceived as seductively incongruous by more than just Volcano, given the fact that Mars was a regular performer at The Baybrick Inn. What I want to emphasize is the potential for fantasy for both spectator and performer. Camp is a tool that

can effectively remove the scene from the realistic realm and allow space for double consciousness and elements of fetish. It is ultimately in the eye of the beholder whether a drag king performance effectively deconstructs masculinity in a useful way, leading to alternative expressions of female desire. Mars is an example of an alternative femininity in a context that was mostly made up of long haired, slender strippers. Her comic Camp elements are what distance her performance from reality in a way that allows for her sexual energy to be expressed through modes of masculinity.

Since these modes have been debunked as not belonging to any type of body, at least theoretically, all people are given access to multiple expressions of self and sexuality. However, the hegemony does not lose hold so quickly, and the fleeting escape into drag king performance does not relieve the performer or the audience for very long. In *Third Wave Feminism*, Budgeon uses the book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), by Angela McRobbie, to identify forms of hegemonic patriarchy that operate under the guise of female empowerment. McRobbie and Budgeon are critiquing contemporary female stereotypes that are posited by the hegemony as beyond feminism. One of these types is named the Phallic Girl. According to their analysis, women are allowed to exhibit qualities previously associated with masculinity including heavy drinking, promiscuous sex, watching pornography etc., as long as they remain desirable to men (70). What is at work in these cultural processes is an assumption that females have become capable subjects of capacity, meaning that they are able to thrive in the hegemonic structure, but the structure remains unchanged. Budgeon explains that according to McRobbie, this results in “‘double entanglement’: feminism is granted recognition and allowed to exist but only as something that has *already happened*” (66, italics in original). This is precisely the kind of snare Solomon and Harris warn of in terms of mistaking the application of a theory as a change in the

hegemonic structure that the theory addresses. Drag king performance, while at times performed through patriarchal modes, has the opportunity to break from the patriarchal gaze and continues to challenge the hegemonic norm. As manipulative responses to feminism evolve, such as those critiqued by Budgeon and McRobbie, drag king performance and its sister arts will continue to respond with new subversions, much in the vein of the third wave feminist movement. Budgeon explains third wave feminism as existing in a time when the relationship between the masculinity and femininity is being renegotiated, and interrogates the way that gender roles influence the way that women understand their own experiences.

Solomon seeks to redress the theatrical canon by giving women a vantage point to observe their own roles and allow for self-reflection. Drag king performance extends beyond the artifice of gender and holds great possibilities for feminist and queer readings of historical moments and current events. I am interested in an application of drag king Camp to Solomon's view that theatre "can self-reflexively consider its own embeddedness in cultural institutions and historical moments. When it does so, theater – in Stuart Hall's terms – 'negotiates' dominant culture, at once reproducing and resisting it: self-conscious theater self-deconstructs" (Solomon 2). Given its particular subversive tone, drag king Camp lends possibilities of queerly impersonating important historical and religious figures such as U.S. Presidents, Benjamin Franklin, or Jesus Christ. This is a kind of impersonation is unique to drag kings as they have a voluminous patriarchal historical playground from which to derive performance. Patriarchal portrayals of history itself can be revealed as theatrical and can be usurped by the feminist and queer agenda in a way that calls into question existing power structures. The ongoing project of feminism continues, and drag kings are exemplary to its mission, as described by Budgeon:

Third wave feminism emphasizes contradictions and encourages them to be part of female identity, therefore the goal is not to define female identity but to

complicate it strategically to undermine processes that dictate what meanings can and cannot attach to femininity...third wave feminism enthusiastically advocates the opening up for new subjective spaces through performances of femininity that are at once dissonant, irreverent, and ambivalent. (76)

In their critique and subversion of the cultural hegemony, drag kings make less recognizable forms of femininity visible, allowing for self-reflection and a critical perspective. Camp is a recognizable mechanism that pairs nicely with the cultural critique embedded in much of drag king performance. As I conclude, I will reflect on how drag king performance, situated in a feminist cultural performance frame, can utilize Camp techniques to renegotiate cultural hegemonies through a process of slippage in the dominant sign system.

CONCLUSION

Camp is a process of resignification of hegemonic sign structures via queer parody. When employed by the drag king performer, its function often foregrounds the artifice of masculine dominance and simultaneously reveals alternative forms of femininity. Often these forms of femininity remove the assumption of the male gaze and are created for womyn's audiences. I return to Moe Meyer's reference to Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as an "intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions, 'an extended repetition with critical difference' that 'has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications' (qtd. in Meyer 9). Meyer continues a defense of Camp and observes, "its derivative nature, and its dependence upon an already existing text in order to fulfill itself are the reason for its traditional denigration, a denigration articulated within a dominant discourse that finds value only in an 'original'" (10). As previously discussed in Chapter 2, Camp's parodic function is dependent on existing hegemonic sign structures; however, this dependence is not upholding the structures but is instead engaged as a relentless challenge, constantly shifting in stride with the hegemony. In terms of drag king performance, Camp is particularly geared towards the critique of the artifice of male dominance, a culturally constructed idea of the "original." Drag king performance can thus be situated as a form of cultural performance.

Cultural performance is discussed in Chapter 8 of Marvin Carlson's book, *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (2004). Carlson quotes scholar Phillip Zarilli in his observation that performance as a "mode of cultural action is not a simple reflection of some essentialized, fixed attributes of a static, monolithic culture, but an arena for the constant process of renegotiating experiences and meanings that constitute culture" (Carlson 179). In much of drag king performance, it is hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality that are at the forefront of this

renegotiation, revealing gender's infinite multiplicities. It is a difficult task to attempt to redefine femininity and I posit the use of Camp as an effective entry point into cultural critique rather than as an end.

Taking inspiration from Alisa Solomon's *Redressing the Canon*, I see potential in drag king performance to explore history and the theatrical canon through a feminist or queer lens that gives visibility to marginalized populations, with particular concern for womyn's visibility. This is not an entirely new concept. In *Wearing the Breeches*, Mullenix describes that in the 1893-1894 season the Professional Women's League in New York mounted an all-women production of *As You Like It* in an effort to get unemployed actresses back on stage (Mullenix 281). The production was a success and the breeches performers highly praised for their convincing performances (282-285). This is curious in a time when breeches performances had started to lose popularity. Mullenix speculates that a part of the mainstream success may be that the press emphasized the organization's overall embrace of essential womanhood by its members (286). The production upheld the natural gender binarism rather than blurring notions of gender, which was the subversive effect of drag (286). The purpose of relaying this story is to emphasize that simply cross-dressing a part of the canon is not necessarily a critique of that canon. It may well give presence to women on stage, but cultural critique must take on a more overt intention in order to have the self-conscious double effect advocated by Solomon. Drag kings' use of Camp is one way to display overt commentary, drawing upon recognizable codes of humor and parody that mark a performance as self-conscious and therefore able to self-deconstruct.

As discussed in Chapter 3, attempts to perform empowered femininities are often interpreted as simply reinscribing the patriarchal hegemony that they claim to overcome. It has been my intention to demonstrate drag king performance as an effective means to critique the

cultural institution of gender, with particular aim at expressing lesser acknowledged conceptions of what is named *feminine*. In its favoritism toward the female gaze, the female subject, and female sexuality, drag king performance is recognizably subversive to the patriarchal hegemony. Drag king Camp's overt repetition of what is considered masculine results in what Butler calls slippage in signification. Carlson explains the cultural tendency to

deny or limit slippage, to maintain a total congruity between concept and experience, pure identity and repetition, but it can never be totally successful. The possibility of innovative agency is always present, not based upon a preexisting subject constrained by regulatory laws but, as in [Judith] Butler, in the inevitable slippage arising from the enforced repetition and citation of social performance. (Carlson 189)

As explained in Chapter 2, Camp is recognized through incongruities; it is a discourse that has become expert in challenging the notion of the stated versus the shown. In exploring drag kings through a Camp lens, I find slippage in the patriarchy, a continuation of the larger feminist mission to claim agency in the cultural production of meaning.

Queer culture is not immune to the patriarchy and I do not wish to conflate drag kings with drag queens. However, I do find it significant that drag queens have become such powerful symbols of gay male pride and alternative masculinities, while drag kings remain relatively invisible in mainstream culture. This is in part due to hegemonic censorship that dates back to the 19th century, drag kings' self isolation for safety reasons, and the subsequent unintelligibility of drag king performance in the mainstream. I began my research with the goal of examining the way that a minoritizing view of queer womyn has imposed invisibility and the ways in which drag kings can subvert this trend. I was prompted by what Eve Sedgwick calls a universalizing view of the world in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), where “the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities’ as being fundamentally intertwined and interdependent” as opposed to what she calls a minoritizing view, where an activity that has little or no significance to the

majority culture (Sedgwick 1). I do feel that drag king performance has become a part of a larger queer culture, rather than a specifically lesbian culture, but I am undecided whether mass visibility would either benefit or pigeonhole drag kings. The potential pitfalls of increasing visibility are a topic open for discussion in the future.

As a performer, I strive to perform drag in a way that is entertaining as well as subversive. I am concerned with demonstrating my male character as a self-aware performance of masculinity that is convincing, but also not striving for complete illusion. For example, I turn to my drag persona, Frederick McGee. Frederick speaks softly, but he carries a big (ahem) stick. He leads with his shoulders and has a tendency to want to smash things, as demonstrated in his signature dance move, banging his fist down in front of him. This Campy portrayal of male aggression is purposefully exaggerated and humorous. It contains a level of slapstick that is not dangerously aggressive. He remains confidently sexual, enjoys a good pelvic thrust, and shoots a lustful gaze out to the audience. Frederick is the founder and owner of Pound Town Demolition Company, that operates under the motto, “You’ve got the Town, We’ve got the Pound.” Watch out for his wrecking ball. The innuendos are endless. The development of Frederick’s character informs my performance. I have had the pleasure of teaching a couple of workshops about drag king performance and I always encourage people to come up with characters. This practice facilitates thought and intention in the performer’s choice of name, songs, dance moves, and overall stage presence, all of which lead to a stronger performance.

When I teach methods of performing masculinity, I always begin with walking. I ask that participants first walk what they consider a feminine walk. This proves simple for most, as they swish their hips back and forth and sway their arms across their bodies (although, notably, most women on the street do not walk this way). I then ask them to embody what they consider a

masculine walk. The room goes silent. Some participants become very stiff and walk as if they cannot bend their legs. Others do not move and stand thinking. I am reminded of Halberstam's theory that masculinity is difficult to perform due to its inherent lack of performativity as the "original." I then ask the participants to walk like a father figure. They become more animated when prompted by such direct imitation and there is usually lots of stomping and marching. I suspect that the male body and its effects are simply not posited as performative nearly as much as the female body and its effects. While masculinity is theorized as equally performative to femininity, it has yet to be as recognizable in its performance. This is one of the ongoing tasks of the drag king.

I would like to devote some closing remarks to a concept generally referred to by many drag performers as "Intent vs. Impact". It is important to consider the impact that a performance is going to have on its audience, despite the intentions of the performers. For example, sometimes performers approach audience members as a part of their act. They may suggest sexual acts or touch the audience member. The performer's intent may be to comment on masculine sexual aggression. However, the impact on the audience member may be that they are being forced into engaging in a physical act that makes them uncomfortable. In workshops, this disconnect between intent and impact is sometimes addressed. It is commonly suggested that audience participation is planned with the audience member before the show, or that they are clearly asked to volunteer as a part of the act. Issues surrounding the performance of racial or cultural identities are also debated among many performers. The complexities of cultural appropriation and race theory are beyond the scope of this thesis, but they are important concepts to consider when one conceives of an act. I mention this here because this is another time when the intention and the impact of the performance may become incongruent. This would not

necessarily be a negative outcome, as performance art is often thought provoking and daring, but it is something to be conscious of in terms of achieving one's artistic goals and avoiding inadvertently or unconsciously producing what may be interpreted as offensive.

I advocate for the use of Camp in drag king performance as a means to renegotiate the cultural construction of masculinity in such a way that redefines femininity. I realize that many drag kings may not aspire to this end, and that fact is demonstrative of the infinite intentions and possibilities in drag king performance. Drag king performance resists classification and has not yet been analyzed at length in academia. However, the antecedents to what is now usually classified as drag king performance are deep within the history of theatre. Females have been cross-dressing as a means of attaining cultural agency since at least the 19th century, and drag king performance will continue to reveal innovative means of redressing and renegotiating cultural codes of meaning.

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