'OH, IT'S LIKE CABARET': DRAG KINGING, GENDER IDENTITIES, & SELVES

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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Literature exists on drag kinging, although it lacks a focus on drag king performers themselves. Previous research has pointed out the transgressive potential of drag kinging, although the individual performers’ experiences, self perceptions, and effects of performing as a drag king on performers’ gender identities have largely been missing from research. Utilizing observations and interview methods, this work explores two primary research questions: How does performing impact individual performers’ gender identities? How does troupe member versus independent performer affiliation/status affect any gender identity impacts that drag kinging may have on drag kings? While drag kinging influences performers’ gender identity shifts and transformations in this study, the shifts that occur are subtle and challenge cultural assumptions about drag kings. This research explores the effects of drag kinging on performers’ gendered identities and how they negotiate their self/selves as a result of performing in drag.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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Introduction

“I don’t think there is a true definition. I feel that gender is what you feel, you can look like a man on the outside and be soft and fem on the inside and of course the other way around or all of the above…I think gender is who you are, it’s not defined by biology…it’s identity…one that makes you smile when you look [in] the mirror.” (Romeo, independent performer)

The notion of gender as performative sparked my interest in social situations where there is a deliberate gender performance. Although individuals perform gender in the everyday sense, the performance usually goes unexamined in contexts outside of academia. Butler’s (1990) contributions to gender theory with regard to gender performativity and subversive bodily acts provided an argument for drag as holding subversive potential within the context of drag queens. Halberstam (1998) introduced the concept of female masculinity and identified various types or forms—drag kinging remained one form of female masculinity. This brought some academic visibility to drag kinging. Prior to studying Butler and Halberstam, I had only attended a small drag queen show, but possessed no recollection of ever hearing about drag kings beyond Halberstam’s work. Masculinity as spectacle appealed to me. Consequently, I searched for nearby drag kings and through a friend of a friend I learned of a drag king troupe show in an urban location in Ohio. The first drag king show I attended further peaked my intellectual curiosity.

Throughout the inception of this research I went from the academic study of drag kings to visiting the social scene and back to the academic interpretations and research on drag kinging. After exposing myself to drag king shows and revisiting the academic side
to drag kinging, Shapiro’s (2007) unique approach into the exploration of performers’ identity transformations inspired this study. Shapiro flipped the research lens away from the subversive potential of drag to the immediate consequences of performing as a drag king on individual performers. Her study opened the door for further exploration and ultimately led to my primary research questions. First, how does performing as a drag king impact individual performers’ gender identities? Shapiro’s sample consisted of troupe members, which resulted in my second research question. Is there a difference between troupe members and independent performers in terms of gender identity transformations? Through interviews and participant audience member field observations, I found that performing as a drag king often led to gender identity shifts as opposed to more clearly defined transformations in identity and this distinction existed for both troupe members and independent performers. Also, participants experienced a multiple self/split self dynamic in the negotiation of their offstage selves compared to their masculine onstage drag personas, which formed as a result of performing in drag.
Literature

Gender

Masculinity and femininity remain polar opposite ideals full of socially prescribed behaviors, attitudes, appearances, demeanors, and roles. These binary gender roles are constructed and continuously negotiated through social interaction in complimentary ways—i.e. masculinity depends on femininity and vice versa. What it means to be a man--masculine implies not being the opposite, a woman--feminine. Consequently, this social construction includes the belief that gender roles are naturally tied to biology. West and Zimmerman (1987) assert that individuals produce their situated gender roles through social interactions. The underlying differences in socially constructed gender roles both inform how we do gender and create the misconception that biology inherently produces these gender roles. West and Zimmerman explain, “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987:137). Doing gender and constructing dual, oppositional gender roles involves doing and creating differences in gendered enactments within social situations. Gender is neither inherent nor natural among individuals. It is “both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and a means of justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (West & Fenstermaker 1995:9).

West & Zimmerman’s use of “doing” terminology implies actions and highlights the social constructionist aspect of gender; however, Deutsch (2007) considers the
transgressive possibilities that surround subversive interactions, which allow for the “undoing” of gender norms and ultimately resistance. Deutsch explains this from a social constructionist perspective, “By examining the effects of subversive action on its audience, we may be able to identify the conditions under which those actions change normative conceptions of gender, and how and when these new conceptions can take advantage of or even drive institutional change” (Deutsch 2007:120). Just as social interactions produce, maintain, and normalize gender systems, they can also be sites in which social actors resist gender norms. Deutsch calls attention to human agency and resistance on an interactional level, which holds the possibility for change on an institutional level.

Butler (1990,1993) builds on the notion of gender as a social construction and points to the subversive possibilities of drag (with regard to drag queens or female impersonators) in Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter. Butler argues that the parody involved in drag reveals that there is no “original or primary gender identity” (Butler 1990: 174). The parody of drag actually sheds light on gender being an imitation with no “original” to begin with. Butler’s view on how gender is performed in general includes:

“…acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 1990: 173).

This is not to assume that individuals present their gendered selves through a deliberate performance, as is the case with drag. Gender performance in the everyday, mundane
sense differs from drag because drag performers make the purposive effort to perform gender onstage. In either case gender performance disrupts the pretense that gender is biologically determined, natural, fixed, and allows for a closer examination of the social production of gender.

Patriarchy reigns in Western cultures (among others). It is a system of privilege and oppression, domination and subordination that positions men and masculinity above women and femininity in a hierarchal fashion and infiltrates personal, political, and structural arrangements. Society, made up of social actors, have created, perpetuated, and sustained a gendered hierarchy through patriarchal ideology, which governs social norms. As various aspects of society have changed over time and across situational contexts, the gendered divisions within society play out differently; yet, patriarchy, the ideological foundation, remains. Connell examines the social organization of masculinity and identifies three processes that produce gender division—power relations, production relations, and cathexis (Connell 1995:73). The power relations refer to Western (American and European) social structures that employ patriarchy (Connell 1995:74). Production relations unfold in the gendered division of labor and subsequent economic inequality that results from the rationale used to justify gendered labor divisions (Connell 1995:74). Finally, cathexis reveals how sexual desire is gendered, though this is often overlooked (Connell 1995:74). Connell takes these processes into consideration in an analysis of masculinity to uncover how it is produced in relation to femininity and the complications embedded within masculinity.
Because gender underlies social structure, other social categories (e.g., race, social class, sexuality, etc.) do not exist independently of the gendered social order. The hierarchal gendered relationships combine with other hierarchies to produce different masculinities. Although femininity falls in subordination to masculinity in general, there is a hierarchy among the various masculinities as well. According to Connell, homosexuality exists at the bottom of the masculine hierarchal order. Hegemonic masculinity equates homosexual men and their masculinity with femininity and the effects occur on a daily basis, which “include political and cultural exclusion, cultural abuse (in the United States gay men have become the main target of the religious right), legal violence (such as imprisonment under sodomy statutes), street violence (ranging from intimidation to murder), economic discrimination and personal boycotts” (Connell 1995:78). There is no singular gay male masculinity that all homosexual men embody and display, but the ideological underpinnings from a hegemonic masculinity viewpoint sweep it under a generalized, lesser, subordinate category. The same-sex sexual desire negates gay male masculinity. In other words, what it means symbolically to be a man rests on what it means to be one of the limited number of men who actually fit into a hegemonic masculine ideal. Other forms are marginalized. Men and their masculinities that have been socially produced through the intersections of race/ethnicity, social class, and sexuality (among other categories), though oppressed relative to hegemonic masculinity, still comply and benefit from the subordination of women and femininity as a whole (Connell 1995:79).
Female Masculinity

Halberstam (1998) conceptualizes female masculinity as part of the construction of masculinity. Female masculinities and subordinate masculinities help legitimate and create the dominant position of white, middle class, heterosexual masculinity (Halberstam 1998:2). In other words, what we think of as legitimate, real masculinity—that of white, middle class, heterosexual men—has been and continues to be shaped by other minority forms of masculinity ranging from tomboys, racial/ethnic masculinities, to gender art/expressions such as drag kinging. Female masculinity becomes interpreted by others’ “framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (Halberstam 1998:2). Halberstam argues for a rethinking of masculinity to the inclusion of the various forms of female masculinity in the active construction of male masculinity and masculinity in general.

Halberstam’s (1998) conceptualization of female masculinity and exclusive focus on drag kings (Volcano & Halberstam 1999) has informed and led scholars from a variety of disciplines to explore the dynamics of drag kinging. As a result researchers have extended gender theories that stem from Butler and Halberstam within the context of drag kinging. Willox (2002) argues that drag queens and drag kings are fundamentally different because each has arisen out of different cultural contexts. The term “drag” has been used to include kings and queens; however, Halberstam distinguishes between kings and queens. Drag queens emerged originally as a parody and response to the social stigma attached to feminine men (Willox 2002:275). The stigma attached to male femininity/effeminacy, which has been associated with homosexuality, shows what
happens to individuals when their gender displays contradict their sex categories and sexuality. Within the already marginalized gay male subculture, male femininity has been socially stigmatized and drag queens, “campy” queens in particular, developed as a response to this stigmatization. However, this response of camp does not necessarily extend to kings.

**Drag Kinging vs. Camp**

Camp represents a particular style that some drag queens exhibit through performance. Sontag (1964) defines camp as a taste, a way of viewing objects, and behavior (Sontag 1964:277). Camp does not only exist within gay male subculture. Sontag references plays, objects, iconic figures (Sontag mentions noted actress Greta Garbo as one example), and various art forms. Camp involves extravagance, style, and taste, which are mutable qualities given the social context. Consequently, camp, among any social context or social category, depends upon social norms.

Newton (1972) offers an understanding of camp rooted in male homosexuality and drag queens. For Newton camp stems from the social stigma attached to homosexual men, which also pertains to drag queens because certain queens mobilize camp ideology through performance. (Not all homosexuals are campy or automatically drag queens and not all drag queens, regardless of sexual orientation, can be considered campy.) In an abstract sense, camp “signifies a *relationship* between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality” (Newton 1972:105). Newton establishes three consistent themes for something to be considered camp: incongruity, theatricality, and humor (Newton 1972:106). Camp emerges from that which opposes and/or runs parallel to
social norms. Newton points out that homosexuality exemplifies this oppositional juxtaposition to heterosexual cultural norms, which satisfies the incongruity; however, this can be extended to other social categories such as historically stigmatized racial/ethnic minorities (Newton 1972: 107). Theatricality involves style and how one plays a role. Drag queens exhibit camp through exaggerated, theatrical performances in front of an audience (Newton 1972:107). The audience component is integral in terms of camp. A transformative element remains in both Sontag and Newton’s descriptions of camp. Sontag notes how camp transforms one thing into another, for example, “lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants” (Sontag 1964:279). Newton points out the obvious drag queen transformation from masculine to feminine (Newton 1972:106). Thus, a conversion process exists with all things campy.

The third aspect, humor, simultaneously allows the audience to laugh at the camp performance and provides an opportunity for campy drag queens to turn their stigmatized social positions into a source of humor (Newton 1972:109). Newton captures how some drag queens exude camp qualities:

“The camp queen makes no bones about it; to him the gay world is the ‘sisterhood’. By accepting his homosexuality and flaunting it, the camp undercuts all homosexuals who won’t accept the stigmatized identity…A lot of camp is extremely hostile; it is almost always sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well. Campy queens are very often said to be ‘bitches’ just as camp humor is said to be ‘bitchy’. The campy queen who can ‘read’ (put down) all challengers and cut everyone down to size is admired. Humor is the campy queen’s weapon” (Newton 1972:111).

Newton presents camp and the drag queen as separate roles that can and often overlap (Newton 1972:109). Camp within a drag queen context indicates a stylistic approach to dealing with social stigma attached to male homosexuality and its implications for gender
role expectations. In other words, the social construction of gender and sexuality positions the two in a symbiotic relationship. Consequently, within this ideology male homosexuality implies an effeminacy, which contributes to stigmatized gay male masculinity and provides a site for incongruity (masculine/feminine), theatricality, and humor to thrive among drag queens. Camp among drag queens results directly from the stigma attached to male homosexuality and the subsequent cultural assumptions about homosexual men.

Halberstam points out that the performance of masculinity and the humor involved is not the same as camp because masculinity exists in a non-performative sense (Halberstam 1998:238). Halberstam admits that some drag kings can exhibit camp characteristics in their performances, but drag kinging makes masculinity visible through performance (Halberstam 1998:238). The drag king’s ability to make masculinity visible and incorporate humor into a deliberate gender performance speaks to subversion in ways that camp does not, given the power relations between masculinity and femininity. Halberstam coins the term “drag kinging” to refer to the humor involved with masculinity (Halberstam 1998:238). Camp includes humor, but remains socio-historically attached to drag queens and male homosexual subculture. “Drag kinging” is necessary to separate and acknowledge fundamental differences between drag kings and drag queens—i.e. the term “drag” fails to capture the important differences between drag kings and drag queens.

Wilcox and Halberstam (1998) argue that under the historical, drag queen trajectory, butch lesbians would be the equivalent socially stigmatized group from which
drag kings would have emerged—this is not the case. Butch lesbians are not the same as drag kings and I would argue that effeminate gay men are not drag queens. Halberstam explains the differences among lesbians, male impersonators, and drag kings:

“A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume. Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. Both the male impersonator and the drag king are different from the drag butch, a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression. Furthermore, whereas the male impersonator and the drag king are not necessarily lesbian roles, the drag butch most definitely is” (Halberstam 1998: 232).

These distinctions are necessary to comprehend what a drag king is in relation to other forms of female masculinity; however, variances among drag kings may complicate the conceptual lines that Halberstam draws within the realm of female masculinity.

According to Willox, the main difference between kings and queens surrounds the social construction of gender and the power relations that exist with this gender system. Queens’ performances “parody the masquerade of femininity”, but femininity in general has been constructed as a parody and subordinate to masculinity within Willox’s conceptualization. On the other hand, kings parody masculinity, which exists as the original, authentic, dominant gender (Willox 2002:280). For Willox, drag kings retain the unique ability to shed light on social categories (ex. gender, race, and social class) and power relations through the performance of multiple masculinities. Drag kings perform a variety of masculinities onstage and have developed more recently (Willox 2002:275).
Drag kings reveal the social construction aspect of masculinity because they expose masculine plurality, which contradicts the idea that there is one, authentic masculinity. Although few men satisfy normative hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinities (and the men who embody subordinate masculinities) ultimately benefit from the patriarchal ideology that subordinates femininity in relation to masculinity (Connell 1995: 79). Willox expands on how drag kings subversively illustrate masculinity as a social construction: “If the center is proved to be a construction in itself, then all eccentric entities are proved to be just as (ec)centric as the ‘original’ and the drag king’s parodic display of masculinities can expose the constructed nature of masculinity, the original origin” (Willox 2002:279-80).

Koenig (2002) expands on the unique, transgressive space that drag kings occupy with a focus on embodiment and the gendered gaze. Men under hegemonic masculinity maintain the power to gaze at femininity and women’s bodies, which contributes to drag queens’ increased visibility over time. Essentially, the feminine is still the “spectacle” with drag queens. However, drag kings/kinging “attack the spectator…redirect the gaze toward the conventions of maleness, thus making a spectacle of the position which has been constructed as ‘transparent’” (Koenig 2002:250). The gaze/spectacle relationship indicates another component within the frequently discussed topic of drag kinging as subversive and a site of resistance within the gender system.
Drag Kinging & Gender

These mainstream notions of how we do gender underlie how drag kings construct themselves and their gendered bodies. Drag king performers play with, explore, manipulate, and perform various gender identities. Although drag kings have traditionally been defined as biological women performing masculinity onstage, women are not the only ones performing masculinity onstage under the label “drag king”. While drag queens have received much attention in popular culture, drag kings have only recently become more visible. Volcano and Halberstam (1999) articulate the relative cultural invisibility of drag kings:

“The contemporary Drag King is something of a contradiction in terms and an unexpected late-comer to the scene of drag and gender bending. We know all about the drag queen, with her camp impressions of famous and infamous women; we understand the comedy of the cross-dressed man and the slinky power of a discernibly male body in a dress. Indeed, the last two decades of popular film have offered up numerous images of male femininity and the lure of the campy queen. Until recently, there has been a remarkable absence of the cross-dressed woman and her particular brands of masculinity” (Volcano & Halberstam 1999: 32).

There is an emerging body of literature about drag kinging by both academics and performers themselves (c.f. The Drag King Anthology (2002) and the Journal of Homosexuality (2002)). While it takes a variety of approaches, much of it relies heavily upon Butler and Halberstam in terms of how drag kinging contributes to gender theory. The occurrence of drag kings disrupts hegemonic masculinity and the gender system; therefore, academics have emphasized the distinct subversion associated with drag kinging.
Schacht (2002) explores the ways in which lesbian drag kings’ embodiment of masculinity both sustains and resists sexism and gender disparities. Within the organization that Schacht studies there are gay drag kings, lesbian drag kings, gay drag queens, drag queens, and hyper-feminine lesbians. Often times the hyper-feminine women compete with drag queens for who assumes the most feminine appearance by mainstream cultural ideological standards. Schacht finds drag queens to consistently outperform the hyper-feminine women in this regard.

Because gender roles exist within an oppositional binary, the power relations between lesbian drag kings and gay drag queens and lesbian drag kings and lesbian drag queens mimic traditional gender power structures in mainstream society. Schacht points out, “Unlike the gay drag kings, however, who are after all gay men, lesbian drag kings (and lesbians in general) often are treated in quite sexist, sometimes even outright misogynist ways” (Schacht 2002:83). However, lesbians within this organization have resisted their subordinate position to gay men through the oppression of other lesbians that do not embody masculinity. The hierarchal gender structure posits men before women who embody masculinity and feminine women occupy the lowest status. In order for lesbian drag kings to secure power and authority within the organization, they must utilize “masculine power tactics” to subordinate others (Schacht 2002:88). Thus, power remains relational in this gendered context among a group that mainstream society marginalizes and ultimately oppresses. Because masculinity relies on being dominant and in opposition to a subordinate femininity, lesbian drag kings depend on other lesbians to gain power and solidify their masculine image. The following ensues, “For a lesbian
drag king’s image to ultimately be complete, however similar to the successful
businessman’s wife, a contrasting image of feminine beauty must be present to fully
attest to ‘his’ standing and import: the ‘prettier’ this feminine image is, the ‘realer’ the
masculine becomes” (Schacht 2002:88). Whenever individuals exist as inferior to others,
they find ways to resist and challenge those in a superior position. A pattern emerges in
Schacht’s study—lesbian drag kings challenge gay men, lesbian women resist lesbian
drag king’s subordination of them, while the group as a whole resists and challenges their
marginalization within mainstream society. Schacht’s study reveals how lesbian drag
kings both subvert and maintain power relations within gender hierarchies. Although the
group he studies creates a safe space for homosexuals and drag performers, traditional
gender ideology, which places masculinity and men superior to women, frames the social
interaction among them.

Noble (2002) focuses on the Toronto Drag Kings troupe and finds that drag
kinging draws attention to white masculinity in particular. Noble agrees with
Halberstam’s argument that drag kinging has been culturally invisible relative to drag
queens and camp ideology because “their parody forces masculinities’ silence to speak,
exposing contradictions which need to remain hidden for masculinity to accomplish its
cultural work” (Noble 2002:254). For Noble, the “cultural work” surrounding drag kings
involves unmasking the invisible workings of white masculinity through exposing the
inherent ironies that reveal its flawed foundation (Noble 2002:258). Drag kings tap into
subversion as “performers are both inherently dialogic, in conversation with both
conservative and oppositional politics of gender, with lesbian feminism, queer theory,
homophobia, feminism, with race and racism, with transgender politics, etc., but also with the contradictions that fracture each” (Noble 2002:258). Kings perform a variety of multiple masculinities that cut across racial/ethnic lines, gendered identities, sexual desire boundaries, social class positions, and age groups (to name a few).

Pauliny (2002) asserts that drag kings perform the fluidity of gender and call attention to the idea of multiple genders through a close analysis of one performer’s layered gender performances onstage. Pauliny affirms Butler’s social constructionist conceptualization of the gender system and considers the gendered implications of drag king performances. The transgressive possibilities emerge for Pauliny because “when women pair their culturally prescribed gender with gender performances deemed acceptable only for men, they awaken an awareness of possible truths, rearrange and revalue the performance of sexuality, race, and gender, and engage in an activity that exploits the fissures inherent in such contradictions” (Pauliny 2002:244). Pauliny’s observations of a biological woman, drag king performer, who performs multiple genders onstage is indicative of the wide array of what marks contemporary drag king performances.

Halberstam (1998) established a commendable, but by no means exhaustive, drag king typology based on performers in New York, San Francisco, and London. Since Halberstam’s work in the mid 1990s, some researchers have criticized the location restraints that informed her characterization and understanding of drag king culture. Surkan (2002) describes a “new wave” of drag kings through a focus on Midwestern drag kings and notices critical shifts that have taken place over the past ten years with drag
kinging. Drag kinging and performance surpasses male impersonation because of drag king workshops and IDKE (an annual drag king event), which serve to bring audience members (and I would argue academia as well) closer to drag king performances through layered performances that complicate gender and sexual identities (Surkan 2002:172). For example, some drag king performances toy with homosexual and heterosexual desire, which is complicated by the bodies and gender identities that produce it. This “new wave” of drag kings shatters traditional stereotypes about drag kings to the point where multiple gender identities are performed in a variety of ways through a variety of gendered bodies. Surkan complicates Halberstam’s drag king typology because it hinges upon “butch” and “femme” identities (Surkan 2002:165). The problem with Halberstam’s typology, for Surkan, is the underlying assumption that one body, one individual identifies with a fixed gender identity such as the dichotomous butch/femme to begin with (Surkan 2002:165). This critique shifts the drag king gender theory discussion back to identity and exposes the interplay between society and the individual. It allows for a more comprehensive analysis of drag kinging, which opens the door for questions regarding gendered selves.

Piontek (2002) takes location into consideration and focuses on the H.I.S. Kings troupe in Columbus, Ohio. Piontek challenges Halberstam’s position that drag kings are not campy and points to the comedic aspects involved in H.I.S Kings’ performances (Piontek 2002:132). According to Piontek, the now defunct H.I.S. Kings incorporated a theatrical element along with the comedy to shed light on the makings and existence of gender. H.I.S. Kings served as a “counter-example” to Halberstam’s portrayal of the
drag king as a “theatrical male impersonator” (Piontek 2002:140). However, Halberstam does not limit her presentation and understanding of drag king culture to strictly theatrical male impersonation. With this particular troupe, Piontek expands on the potential of female masculinity to include that “a drag king may expose the artificiality of conventional gender roles not only through his performance of masculinity but just as effectively, if not more effectively, through a performance of femininity” (Piontek 2002:136). Piontek acknowledges that drag kings perform a variety of masculinities and femininities onstage. This research shows how context is crucial and paves the way for a more inclusive drag king typology. More importantly, Piontek’s study reveals that drag kings display, perform, poke fun at, and engage multiple genders—i.e. multiple femininities and multiple masculinities—among other social categories.

Kumbier (2002) offers a first person account of how one body can be the site for multiple gender performances (Kumbier 2002:191). Kumbier performed as both a drag queen and drag king, which allowed her to rethink gender identity, embodiment, and the drag king experience:

“I had never felt any of the things I’d mistakenly assumed drag kings felt (I had confused transgender identity offstage and king identity onstage, thinking that most kings were performing FTM identities in both spaces). I enjoy myself in my own skin, don’t feel as if I’m in the ‘wrong body’ or living a falsely gendered life, and have never wanted to become a boy or man. But there I was, all of a sudden loving the way the pair of socks between my legs and some fake facial hair made me feel. I felt ready to strut my stuff, to be the sort of sleazy, sexually aggressive man I would hate in real life. I felt like a supreme, badass genderfucker, and I loved it” (Kumbier 2002:198).

This description from a performer’s standpoint touches on cultural assumptions and misconceptions about drag kings and speaks to the transgressive potential within drag
Kinging. Kumbier’s personal narrative offers a glimpse into the performer’s perspective, which is largely missing from drag king research.

Ayoup and Podmore (2002) focus on a drag king troupe in Montreal and find that performers tend to construct their masculine performances through a deliberate emphasis on their “pre-existing” masculine characteristics (Ayoup & Podmore 2002:65). Kings create their masculine personas through a combination of erasing feminine characteristics and constructing masculine ones. In other words, drag kings in this study display an effort to remove “one gender identity in order to replace it with another” or they “highlight” their already heightened masculinity (Ayoup & Podmore 2002:65). Ayoup and Podmore attempt to address performers and gender identity within their study and point out the perception of masculinity as non-performative, authentic, and the “neutral” (Ayoup & Podmore 2002:64) gender category, which extends Halberstam’s position that drag kings have not been as socially accepted as drag queens simply because they perform that which has been constructed as non-performative—masculinity. The academic exposure of contemporary drag king performers/performances across time and location creates a more thorough, though imperfect, depiction of drag kinging’s subversive potential within a gender system that remains integral to the social structure and everyday social practices.

**Kinging & Gender Identities**

The literature on drag kings addresses the implications drag kinging has on gender issues. However, very few studies have addressed the drag kings themselves or how drag kinging impacts performers. Shapiro (2007) conducted a case study as a participant
within the Disposable Boy Toys drag king troupe in Santa Barbara with a focus on drag and gender identity. Shapiro found that performing within a troupe provided opportunities and a site for performers’ transformation of gender identities through the combination of four mechanisms: “imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support” (Shapiro 2007: 250). Shapiro has asserted that oppositional cultures serve as a site for identity transformation and ultimately finds that the collective group/troupe dynamics provided the necessary atmosphere for participants’ identity transformations to occur. The Disposable Boy Toys’ ideological foundation was crucial in participants’ identity shifts. Shapiro explains that “doing drag in a group with an oppositional collective identity, feminist political commitment, and collective organizational practices can harness drag’s disruptive power” (Shapiro 2007: 266). Butler brought the notion of drag holding subversive/transgressive potential within gender theories to the forefront and since then research concerning drag performances has exposed the political aspect of drag in general.

Rupp and Taylor (2003) focused on drag queens who performed regularly at a particular venue and found that drag shows, among other cultural performances/expressions, are both political and subversive (Rupp & Taylor 2003: 210). The drag queens within their study purposively make efforts to subvert normative cultural expectations surrounding gender and sexuality, “build and affirm a gay/lesbian collective identity and also broaden the meaning of community by linking diverse audience members to the performers and to each other” (Rupp & Taylor: 2003: 211). Although Butler points to drag’s subversive potential, Taylor and Rupp argue that beyond
subversion drag is a form of collective action couched within an overarching gay/lesbian movement (Taylor & Rupp 2003: 212). In contrast, Shapiro inverts the emphasis of drag research through focusing on drag kings themselves and how drag can be a space for performer gender identity transformations.

Shapiro’s research provides substantial insight into drag kinging’s subversive potential and gender identity implications within her particular sample. However, in this research I ask, “What do drag kings in a different situational context (time frame, location, etc.) experience with regard to their gender identities?” The unique aspect of Shapiro’s study is her focus on the relationship between gender fluidity, drag king performers, and gender identity transformation. The idea that drag kings occupy a transgressive space stems from gender theory fundamentally informed by a social constructionist perspective. Gender as performative and practiced also extends a social constructionist framework. Given this theoretical foundation, if drag kinging is distinctively transgressive (compared to drag in a drag queen context) and holds the potential to disrupt the status quo, then how does this deliberate gender performance impact drag kings? Therefore, the focus of this research project seeks to advance Shapiro’s work through asking: How does performing as a drag king impact the performers? Further, do Shapiro’s findings apply to troupe and to free lance members? My original research questions are meant to both test (although not to replicate) and expand upon Shapiro’s study. Shapiro only focuses on performers within a drag king troupe, which leads to more questions: Do members of another drag king troupe
experience gender identity transformation? Does drag kinging in general serve as a site for gender identity transformation or is this unique to a troupe setting?
Methods

To investigate the primary research questions I decided to conduct both face-to-face and email interviews with drag king performers and to observe different drag king shows/events. Over the course of approximately one year, I attended eight shows and remained in the field (including pre and post show) for about four to five hours at each event. I recorded analytic memos immediately after each show on four categorical aspects: physical descriptions (ex. setting, performers, and performances), interactions (ex. audience members, audience/performers, and onstage dynamics), my initial reactions, and general information about performers to gain insight into this social scene. Initial field observations allowed me to navigate this setting, learn how to contact performers, and informed subsequent interviews. I developed interview questions that were designed to explore the meaning and/or definition of drag kinging for individual performers, their history, biography, and experiences related to drag, and how performing impacts their gender identities. I adopted and tailored questions from Taylor and Rupp’s (2003) study to gain personal history information from performers with regard to how they view their performances, what emotions are involved with kinging, how they view themselves in relation to other kings, how and when they started performing in drag, how they learned to perform, how they chose their drag names and personas, and what they are trying to impress upon the audiences with their performances. Questions emerged throughout interviews and fieldwork surrounding who can be a drag king, the difference between performers onstage and offstage, critical turning points for performers throughout their drag history, whether they experience a coming out process as a drag
king, and the role of support from others outside of the drag community. I asked email participants the same questions as face-to-face performers as they emerged. As I utilized a reflexive research process, conversations with participants, events/issues that arose throughout my fieldwork, and general participant suggestions informed my decisions to add questions to interviews throughout data collection. I kept extensive analytic memos with each show event, throughout interviews, and during data analysis in order to maintain a reflexive process throughout data collection and subsequent analysis. Consequently, my original interview questions grew with each interview and performers often shared personal information that pertained to their lived experiences, which led to a more substantial depiction of the identity work that occurs in their daily lives.

Before I interviewed participants I did not realize how limiting the categories “independent/free lance” and “troupe member” were in a drag king community atmosphere that transcends these boundaries, especially with the performer owned/operated production companies also involved. However, I utilized two types of questionnaires to differentiate between free lance performers and troupe members and interviewed participants who were not a part of the troupe with the free lance questions (that includes production company owners/performers as well). Copies of the interview questions are appended (Appendix A).

I originally sought email participants through MySpace and also contacted nearby performers for face-to-face interviews. I encountered difficulty recruiting email participants, which I contribute to the limited opportunities to establish rapport among potential participants through strictly electronic means. In the beginning of the
recruitment process, I experienced difficulty gaining participants. However, once I increased my visibility at shows among performers, I was able to gain more face-to-face participants. The limitations of electronic emails and correspondence (including the lack of face-to-face interactional dynamics) ultimately led to a sample comprised of twice as many face-to-face interviews compared to email interviews. The challenges I faced in securing participation at the onset of data collection diminished with my increased visibility as a researcher, which resulted in immediate establishment of contacts and participants. Informal conversations with performers at shows and events and introductions through performers both allowed participants to become familiar with me as an individual and researcher and revealed the tight knit social network among drag kings performers.

The Sample

I learned about a nearby troupe in an urban Ohio area through conversations with individuals close to the drag scene, attended two troupe shows, and found out that performers communicate and distribute show information largely through MySpace. I constructed a MySpace profile to gather information about shows and performers and eventually contacted performers with my recruitment tool for either face-to-face or email interviews, while attending shows throughout the recruitment process. I contacted performers, both independent and troupe members in Ohio, performers in other states, and one outside of the United States for interviews. Although I initially sought independent and troupe performers, I quickly learned that the lines blur with regard to how performers categorize themselves. Some performers belong to a troupe, but perform
for events outside of the troupe, for other troupe (in different locations) shows, and/or for production company shows. Some performers own production companies, which is not the same as a troupe. One participant, who has extensive experience being a part of a troupe and now owns a production company, explained her thoughts on the differences between a troupe and a production company: “A troupe is a group of people that continually perform together and there usually is a specific structure (for example, president, vice president, treasurer, etc.) and a production company, mine specifically, is one or a few people that put on a production by inviting performers (with the exception of the owner)—there are no members”.

I conducted a total of eighteen semi-structured interviews (6 email interviews and 12 face-to-face interviews) with volunteer participants and collected fieldnotes from three drag king shows in Ohio. The majority of interviews took place at various coffee shops; however, I left it up to participants to choose where they felt most comfortable. Although I tended to suggest a neutral location for interviews, such as a public place of their choosing, (fully aware that some participants had not met me before the interview), quite a few participants invited me into their homes for interviews. The twelve face-to-face, digitally recorded, and transcribed interviews lasted in duration from 45 minutes (shortest) to 41/2 hours long (longest). The amount of time participants had been performing as drag kings during the time I interviewed them ranged from under 1 year to 14 years. Among the six email interviews only one belonged to a troupe; however, this participant’s troupe was not the troupe in Ohio where participants who comprised the troupe sample participated. The other five email participants were independent

1 IRB Approval #07X147
performers. Out of the six email interview participants, only one participant performs outside the United States. Six of the twelve face-to-face respondents belonged to the troupe in Ohio and the other six were independent performers (two of the six independent face-to-face participants owned production companies). Certain participant characteristics, which include length of time performing, troupe versus independent status/affiliation, and type of interview, played a role in the overall findings (see Table 1 for Critical Characteristics of Sample). All participants who participated in face-to-face interviews were in Ohio at the time of data collection.

After fieldnote collection and interview transcriptions, I analyzed both interview and fieldnote data through analytic induction and followed a qualitative data coding process outlined by Neuman (2006). During the first data coding stage, open coding, I sought critical themes and concepts within the data to establish codes/analytic categories (Neuman 2006: 461). Once I developed codes and themes with the first pass through the data, I identified themes and the interconnections among them relevant to my research questions and the empirical evidence present within the data through axial coding. Finally, I began selective coding to compare and contrast solidified themes established throughout previous coding stages.

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2 I did not ask participants about their racial/ethnic identifications, among various other social categories. Some participants discussed their racial/ethnic identifications through conversations. However, race arose mostly in interviews with regard to performance context issues/concerns and diversity among performers.
## Table 1

Critical Characteristics of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Troupe vs. Independent Status</th>
<th>Years Performing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Email Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>&quot;Group&quot;; Not a troupe</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romeo</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brice</td>
<td>Troupe; Not &quot;troupe&quot; sample</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassius</td>
<td>Independent; Part of &quot;drag family&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Face-to-Face Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalton</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristan</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>Troupe Member</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>Independent; Production Co. Owner</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante</td>
<td>Independent; Production Co. Owner</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

How do you define gender? What does it mean?

The core research questions address the impact that performing as a drag king has on performers’ gendered identities. In order to gain insight into how drag kining affects performer identities, it is imperative to decipher the meanings that performers attach to gender, including their gender definitions. Data analysis revealed that the primary theme among performers’ meanings of gender is individual choice in gender identification and expression. Performers emphasized individual freedom to define one’s gender. Self imposition and choice often combined with various other themes. Many performers indicated a correlation between one’s internal, self feelings (or identity) and the outer manifestations of that identity with regard to gender. Some acknowledged social, cultural gender expectations as part of their gender conceptualizations, which influenced and, at times, grounded their gender identities. A few performers explained gender in social constructionist terms, while others approached gender from an essentialist position. The notion of gender fluidity also emerged both conceptually and in lived, personal experiences. Although these themes are less prominent than individual choice, they evidence gender’s complexity. As social beings, performers define, experience, and understand gender in relation to social expectations. Consequently, their gender definitions expose awareness of mainstream gender ideology, despite whether or not their personal choices conflict with their understanding of that ideology. The following illustrates the main theme of choice in participants’ meanings and definitions of gender.
The ways participants define gender and meanings are important, informing their thoughts, expressions, and lived experiences. The primary way that respondents spoke about choice was in regard to the freedom to define one’s own gender identification, regardless of social expectations. Participants defined gender as a choice, a self definition, an individual freedom and their beliefs demonstrate the active individual agency that combines with and, at times, opposes mainstream gender norms. Performers maintained a heightened sense of mainstream gender norms and the prescriptions and proscriptions involved. One particular sub theme that accompanied the theme of choice and self definition was the perception of a cultural change in the conceptualization of gender. Some respondents interpret a change in current society that allows for more self definition and freedom of choice with gendered expressions. Although the idea of current society exists as an evasive concept because context continues to shape situational norms, performers speak from their lived experiences, which include exposure to gender bending in an accepting environment. For 3Trevor, an independent performer who is part of a performance duo, gender is an “obnoxious social construct” and “whatever gender constructs you want to put upon yourself is (sic) different than someone assigning them to you”. Trevor rationalizes the purpose of gender constructs as a social need to maintain order; however, these gender constructs, Trevor candidly adds, “get in my way and I’ve chosen to ignore them.” Personal choice outweighs gendered social impositions. Although few performers speak of gender in social constructionist terms, they have internalized society’s role in gendered expectations. Brice, a troupe member, believes

3 All participants’ names, both offstage and onstage, have been changed to protect identities and maintain participant anonymity.
that “society may claim your gender to better fit their needs, but you are the final decision
in the matter”. Troupe member Marshall thinks of gender as “how you express yourself
[for example] if you express yourself in a feminine way the majority of time, you can
identify as female, even if you’re biologically a male. Gender is whatever you wanna
be”. For Marshall, gender identification stems from personal choice. Freedom to define
one’s gender remains integral in performers’ understanding of gender. The self imposed
conceptualization of gender that dominates respondents’ meanings attached to gender ties
into other themes.

Dalton, a troupe member, suggests that current society allows for more freedom
of expression with gender as opposed to other social contexts and time frames.
Individual choice and self comfort lie at the crux of what gender means to her and she
provides a more extensive response, while weaving her personal gender identity
experience into her definition:

“I think that we’re in a good place in the world to be able to express ourselves in
like a lot of different ways, to me, gender means—first of all, I’m comfortable
with my gender, I’m—in the body I was with, like I’m comfortable with my
gender. So, to me…you know, I think at age thirty-one for a while, I kind of
wasn’t and then I was kind of like all like, you know, like I would be, I would just
kind of like play down certain like certain parts of myself like at work, profess—
onally, around certain family [members], but not—I’m just more like it’s just me,
like who I am. I kind of—if I had to like use terminology like, I’m not like some
hard, super like diesel dyke/butch, but I think I’m like butch. I like to be that way
and maybe some people think I—some people were like ‘I don’t think you’re—
maybe more soft butch’. I don’t think—whatever, like that’s how I like to be and
I think that gender, as far as me, I just feel like happy like being a female, I’m
glad I get to like express these more like masculine parts of myself. But I’m glad
I get to define like who I am. I love that I can define that through how I act and I
can define that through the ways that I dress and my own personal style. I’m glad
I can define myself through those things and…now, the older I get, I’m like ‘yeah
I wanna be’—I like being butch and I like sorta that—like for me, some people
don’t like roles or they have these types, for me, I’m very comfortable in a butch/
Dalton clearly places emphasis on personal choice in gender identification and mentions an awareness of how others perceive her gender identification. This response includes a self imposed notion of gender, the relationship between internal feelings and outward expressions, and a relationship between social dynamics and self-evaluation. For Dalton, her respect for individual choice accompanies an openness to the possibility of change with her own gender identification; therefore, the meaning of gender and one’s gender identification are not fixed concepts both in personal lived experience and in abstract conceptualization. Similarly, Hugh, an independent performer, interprets a social change in the way people view gender, “gender is becoming so fluid these days, getting further away from black and white. I love it. It is moving away from what genitalia you have and more towards being a matter of intention and choice”. The choices involved in one’s self defined gender identity derive from a constant interplay between the individual and society.

In contrast and at times complimenting the theme of individual choice with gender identification and expression, other performers indicate that one’s gender stems from internal feelings and outward expressions. They also grounded their personal conceptualizations of gender in activities, roles, personal interests, and appearances, which demonstrates the internal feelings and outward expressions aspect of gender. In other words, for the respondents, the gendered self combines internalized elements and
the outer manifestation of internalized elements, which include appearances and activities. Romeo, an independent performer, explains her definition of gender:

“I don’t think there is a true definition. I feel that gender is what you feel, you can look like a man on the outside and be soft and fem on the inside and of course the other way around or all of the above...I think gender is who you are, it’s not defined by biology...it’s identity...one that makes you smile when you look [in] the mirror.”

Romeo’s gender definition points to the possibility that one’s inner self feeling and self perceptions can contradict one’s outer expressions at times. Thus, personal identity and self presentation do not always match.

Drag king performers experience gender socialization through various socialization agents, as social beings, where in mainstream society sex and gender are thought of, discussed, and understood as synonymous. Gender, sex, and sexuality conceptually intertwine and implicate one another. Kurt, an independent performer, negotiates an academic definition of gender with her personal thoughts and comments on how gender is multifaceted:

“There’s that textbook definition of it’s all your social, cultural um expressions of whether you’re masculine or feminine identified or whatever. I mean when I think of gender, for me, I think of the clothes I wear, um certain things I like to do with my time, you know, playing sports, what sports those are, um what kind of music I like to listen to, what kind of tv shows I watch, what kind of um...I don’t know, I think of it as kind of...like an umbrella for or like really broad set of...I don’t know, just kind of how I move through the world. I feel like it’s fluid. I feel like it’s something that can change and morph, and all those things...”

Kurt views gender as a term that includes personal and social implications. Similarly, Ivan, a troupe member, believes that gender is a social construction and everything is gendered, “behaviors are gendered, things are gendered, appearances are gendered, anything you can think of.” Ivan also approaches gender as a social construction and
acknowledges a difference between sex and gender, but admits that she uses the terms interchangeably because that is how people talk about gender. In sharp contrast to Kurt and Ivan’s social constructionist views about gender, one participant and troupe member, Thomas, equates sex with gender and identifies lesbian women and homosexual men as “in-between” genders or other options in between male and female. Thomas is an exception. Troupe member Andre, for example, associates gender with prescriptive and proscriptive social norms:

“We all have some sort of expectation tied into us however we define gender, um whatever we’re raised to think of gender and what gender means. That meaning is part of expectations, like you should do this, you should look like this, you should act like this um that it’s tied into a series of demands, so I think that’s one part of it. Um I think that [with] drag, another [thing] we [are doing] is trying to get past that.”

Andre continues to describe the negative connotations she has with gendered social demands and how that impacts individuals, while offering an ideal of a less limiting gender approach with an emphasis on self definition:

“You know, it’s really trying to see it [gender] as like, yeah just like a series of choices. Like uh just on a continuum, a series of choices, just like there are different personalities, different traits and seeing them less as like tied to masculinity and femininity, but just like if we take the list of what is masculine, what is feminine and put it on the list and pick like who we are out of that and release it from those expectations of masculine and feminine, you know, like having it all come together as a package. Like, you know, a package deal, so I think that, yeah unfortunately when I think of gender, that’s what I think of is the negative aspect of how it’s all wrapped up in the expectations, the demands, and how like really limiting that can be, I mean, and not just limiting, but like destructive to a lot of people and really um like really harmful.”

Andre argues for a gender conceptualization that shifts away from a rigid, dichotomous gender spectrum, which limits individuals to polarized gender roles with varying degrees of masculinity and femininity on either side of the spectrum. Andre personally views her
gender relationally without the use of gender labels. She grounds her gender in terms of comparisons to others’ gendered activities, appearances, personalities, and interests.

Some performers spoke of the fluidity of gender, both in terms of lived experiences and in gender conceptualization. Hunter, a troupe member, recalled feeling angry about rigid dichotomous mainstream gender role expectations that have been tied to biology and she advocates for a more fluid approach to gender:

“There [was] a point in my life where I would get upset when people—because society always wants to place gender with biological sex, you know, absolutely. You know, you walk into a toy store and there’s the girl side and the boy side and there’s no in-between. Umm and so I think for a long time I let that bother me and I’ve sort of gotten over that because it’s the way things are um, but in an ideal world for me gender would be completely fluid and there would be more than two choices. Which, you know, some people try that third neutral choice and, of course, it’s extremely difficult, but if it were something that could be done in everyday life, I would absolutely take that. So, the neutral and not claim one or the other.”

Hunter struggled with mainstream gender roles and expectations, but acknowledges the difficulties of living an androgynous lifestyle.

Dante, an independent performer and production company owner, experiences gender as fluid and explains that gender performance allows individuals to express a variety of genders, which has spilled over into her daily life outside of drag:

“I can either choose to be really masculine or I can choose kinda to be the girl—like be girly-man...for me it’s [gender] is very fluid and for other people it’s very set—you’re either a boy or a girl--and I don’t necessarily feel that way, like sometimes I wake up and I want to, you know, wear my blazer to school and sometimes I wake up and I want to just wear a t-shirt and jeans or—I don’t own any dresses and I’m not opposed to wearing them, I just look like a drag queen in a dress”.
For Dante gender identity is fluid, subject to daily changes, and a personal choice; however, she acknowledges that people experience gender differently. He, an independent performer and production company owner, views gender as a classification system in general, but individually gender is “who you are internally and maybe who you present externally.” He extends her opinion on gender:

“It’s a fluid thing and I think that people, for a lot of different reasons, put stoppers on it, but I just really think that’s it’s kind of the essence of who you are, your gender is um, but that it gets um roped in, you know, and controlled. I think it’s really what gives you your power, but that—and that’s why society tries to control it so much, you know, because that’s where your power comes from. That is who you are. You can’t change your gender. You can pretend a whole lot of things, but it is what it is. You can change your sex, you know? You can do things about your sexuality, but your gender is what it is and it can’t—you can lie all day long that you’re not a masculine female, but [laughs] it will come out, it will come out, you know? It will.”

He’s opinion is that socially constructed categories constitute gendered social expectations, but she appears to personally define gender from an essentialist stance.

This example indicates that gender is complex and inherent contradictions exist between personal gender meanings and awareness of gender on an abstract social level. He also points out power dynamics that surround gender and society’s influence on the individual. Like Andre, He acknowledges gendered social pressures and expectations that affect individuals’ lives.

Performers who viewed gender as fluid, regardless of gender identity, frequently expressed respect for individuals who experience gender as fixed, which aligns with an overarching belief in a self imposed definition of gender. Although participants differ with regard to their lived experiences and how they identify, the underlying foundation

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4 The research participant chose “He” as a pseudonym for one onstage drag person, “She” for the other onstage drag persona, and “S/he” as a pseudonym for the offstage self.
with participants’ attitudes and opinions about gender revolves around the belief that
gender is a self definition and a personal choice that should be less about mainstream
 prescriptive and proscriptive norms and more about individual freedom.

Gender and sex remain distinctly different, though related, concepts in academic
discussions; however, the social construction of gender implies sex and vice versa.
While most participants define gender in terms of internal feelings and outer expressions,
choices, and freedom of expression, some offered their biological sex identification in
response to my question about their personal gender identity after advocating for an
ideological shift away from a strict gender/sex conflation. Cultural assumptions about
drag kings contribute to some participants’ contradictory answers with regard to their
gender meanings and definitions compared to their responses to inquiries into their
gender identifications.

Cultural Assumptions

Drag king performers bend gender norms and social constraints wherein
biological sex implies a proper gender role and gender presentation. The majority of drag
kings identify as biological women, who perform masculinity onstage. However, drag
kinging is not exclusively for women. Drag kinging’s transgressive potential lies within
the performance of masculinities onstage. The majority of drag kings (not all) have been
socialized as females in a patriarchal society and they perform gendered expressions of a
culturally dominant group—men and masculinity. The occurrence of women performing
masculinity, female masculinity, frequently leads to social stigma. Female masculinity
threatens and disrupts the normative component of gender under an essentialist position
that biology naturally produces gender. As addressed by Halberstam (1998), female masculinity takes numerous forms. Drag kings display female masculinity through a performance context. Kinging is a form of female masculinity because individuals socialized as girls and women interpret, embody, and purposively perform masculinity onstage. The subordinate group (women) performs, parodies, and exposes that which culture defines as dominant (masculinity). When individuals bend gender role expectations, they often receive negative social sanctions and ultimately experience social stigma as a result.

The cultural assumption about drag kings is that they are women who want to be men. This assumption derives from the idea that biology dictates gender; therefore, transgressive behavior becomes interpreted as something perverse, abnormal, and shameful. Performers in my sample are aware of the social stigma attached to being a drag king. I attribute the cultural assumption about drag kings and the impersonal nature of email interviews to four of the six email interview participants’ defensive tone in answering my questions about their gender identifications. I asked participants this question, “how did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?” Hugh, an email participant, explained, “I have always seen myself as a woman, and that did not change with starting drag. Of course I have a significant masculine side to my nature, but I have only ever identified as a woman”. As previously noted, Hugh defined gender as fluid and took enjoyment in her perception that gender has become more about intention and choice and less about biology. Romeo also defined
gender in one way and responded to the question about her personal gender identity with a biological identification.

Me: What does gender mean to you? How do you define it?

Romeo: I don’t think there is a true definition. I feel that gender is what you feel, you can look like a man on the outside and be sort and fem on the inside and of course the other way around or all of the above…I think gender is who you are, it’s not defined by biology…it’s identity…one that makes you smile when you look [in] the mirror.

Me: How did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?

Romeo: 100% woman…I love being a girl.

The inconsistency between Romeo’s definition of gender that downplays biology and the biological emphasis in her answer to the gender identification question (which precludes the question about whether drag has changed her gender identification) demonstrates an awareness of the cultural assumption that surrounds drag kings. Another email participant, Wyatt, answers with a somewhat defensive tone to my inquiry about a gender identification change since performing in drag.

Me: What does gender mean to you? How do you define gender?

Wyatt: Gender in my opinion means female and male. Or how you see yourself…butch, femme, etc.

Me: How did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?

Wyatt: I identified myself as butch/boi before I started performing.

Me: Has your gender identification changed since performing in drag? Why or why not? How?

Wyatt: No it has not. Just because you are an entertainer does not mean your gender ID is going to change…it’s the art of illusion.
Face-to-face interview participants, who did not experience any gender identification shifts as a result of drag kinging, did not respond defensively to these questions and often times acknowledged that fellow performers have experienced gender identity shifts as a result of drag, even though they did not personally. I attended shows and spoke to most face-to-face participants before the interviews, which contributed to a familiarity that email interviews lacked. However, email participants never met me as an individual/researcher and the face-to-face interactional dynamic is non-existent with an email interview and their responses were typified by a more defensive reaction to inquiries about their gender identities.

Because of the cultural assumption about drag kings, some drag kings experience a coming out process, which is similar to a coming out associated with non-heterosexuality. During a show observation, one participant mentioned to me that some of her co-workers would be attending the event and she previously “came out” to them in the context of being a drag king performer. This comment coupled with the defensive email interview responses led me to add an additional interview question about a possible coming out process for drag kings. Do drag kings experience a coming out process wherein they must disclose this part of their lives to friends, family, co-workers, and other significant people? What role does family members, friends, significant others play for drag king performers? Troupe member Ivan, who has been a drag king performer for thirteen years, recounted her personal history when I asked if she has experienced a coming out process as a drag king:

“Sort of. It’s funny, I used to say—when I say I perform, people’s obvious next
question is ‘oh, what do you perform?’…then you have to answer them, right? And so it’s not like, it’s not like having—it’s not the most acceptable thing to say ‘oh, I’m a drag king’, you know? So, what I used to say—well, I used to not say that I perform—then, I would say ‘oh, it’s like cabaret [laughter]. Something general. Um but now I actually say ‘I’m a drag king’ and I explain what it is. That was an evolution for me in that. Same coming out process, now that I’m thinking about it, as coming out as a lesbian, I mean, boy, back in the beginning I never said a word. I’m like ‘oh, come out to people?’ Obviously, when I got more comfortable with it, I’m like telling close people, whatever, and now it’s like driving with my gay sticker on my car and I take my partner to Christmas parties and I don’t care.”

Time was the key factor in Ivan’s coming out process as both a lesbian and a drag king. Over time she grew more comfortable disclosing the fact that she was a drag king and even now makes it a point to explain what a drag king is to others. Ivan further explains a phone conversation with her mother after the family had learned that her aunt planned to transition from female to male:

“My uncle, when my aunt told the family that she was transitioning into a man, the first thing my mother did was call me up on the phone (impersonates her mother’s voice) ‘you don’t wanna be a man, too, do you?’ It’s just—because he said that it was the drag king performance—not that [it], you know, made him decide he was gonna do this—but was an inspiration to take the next step, was seeing one of my performances. Of course, my mother was deathly afraid that I wanted to be a man…”

It was harder for her family to accept her being a drag king than it was for them to accept that she was a lesbian. In this particular example, Ivan’s family had received news that a close relative was preparing to transition from female to male and exposure to Ivan’s drag performance helped the family member decide to transition (exposure to drag served as a catalyst to a preexistent desire to transition). Nonetheless, the example illustrates a fundamental cultural fear of transsexuality and an association between drag kings and transsexuals. The cultural assumption about drag kings wanting to be men causes many
performers to fear disclosing that part of their lives, which brings stigma and necessitates
a coming out process. Troupe performer Marshall has been a drag king for two years and
keeps his personal life, which includes drag kinging, private in a work environment.
Marshall usually gives co-workers a vague description of the drag troupe he performs
with when questioned:

“If I had to leave work early and like go to practice or something, they ask me like
‘well, what do you need to go for?’ and I have to like explain it to them, but I
don’t tell them what it is. I just say I’m in a dance troupe or whatever. I don’t
wanna come out and tell ‘em cuz they might think it’s weird and look at me
different, you know.”

Although Marshall avoids coming out as a drag king to co-workers, his family is aware
that he is a drag king performer. Marshall offers a rationale for why drag king
performers often experience a coming out process:

“I think a lot of times, like gender—if you mess with gender, like it makes people
feel uncomfortable cuz they’re like set in their own ways, you know what I mean?
Like they’re strictly male or strictly female and when you mess with somebody’s
gender or talk about gender, it makes them feel uncomfortable if they’re not in
tune with other gender identities.”

Drag king performers know they break gender norms through performance
whether they purposively attempt to bend gender boundaries or not. The cultural
assumption that drag kings want to be men affects how these performers live their lives.
My primary research questions ask whether and how performing as a drag king affects
performers’ gender identities. Since performers face stigma associated with a cultural
assumption, it is not surprising that over half of the email participants became defensive
toward inquiries into their gender identities by a researcher with whom they have only
email interactions.
Gender Identity

Participants overwhelmingly noted significant changes in their gender identities and their overall self-perceptions as a result of drag kinging. However, the shifts are subtle and, for the most part, do not pertain to an extreme gender identity, which sheds light on how the cultural assumption about drag kings remains an oversimplification, a sweeping generalization, and a gross misunderstanding of drag kings. The assumption ignores the gray area in between a dichotomous gender social construction that individuals must negotiate in their gendered identities.

The dominant theme that emerged with respondents’ gender identity shifts involves feeling comfortable with their gender identities as a result of drag kinging. Individual self comfort extends beyond the stage into daily life. Participants frequently expressed that their gender identity shifts were about becoming more comfortable with their gender identities, which included masculinity, as a result of performing in drag. All participants indicated in some way that they have been labeled biological women and socialized as females in society. Given gendered social expectations attached to biology, the occurrence of women acknowledging that they possess masculine characteristics and embracing their masculinity, whether tied to a gender identification label or not, simultaneously disrupts mainstream gender norms and illustrates gender’s complexity.

Many performers felt more comfortable with their gendered identities through performing in drag. Troupe member, Hunter, has been a drag king for three years and came into a butch identity in her mid twenties before she started performing as a drag king. Stereotypes surrounding butch women held her back from completely embracing
and feeling comfortable with a butch identity. Hunter contributed her initial butch identity acceptance to partner support and encouragement:

“I was probably around twenty-five or so and uh… I was finally in a place, I think it was, a lot of it had to do with the person I was dating at the time where I wasn’t—I wasn’t intimidated by the butch thing. I wasn’t scared of exhibiting masculine qualities like I had been before. And so I suppose that it probably, I mean it obviously explodes those qualities onstage and I’m able to do that, but uh if I had to label myself, I would say definitely I’m butch. On the same note, I was really, really afraid and intimidated by butch women. Like uh even after I was out [sexuality], I was always like ‘I don’t ever wanna be perceived as that’ and so, yeah. And so, but I think that’s a lot of internalized—you know people have internalized homophobia, they have internalized everything, and so that was part of it.”

Female masculinity in any form meets resistance. Hunter not only displayed an acute awareness of the stigma attached to a butch lesbian identity, she also recognized that she internalized cultural stereotypes and their negative implications, which caused fear of a butch identity. Although she embraced a butch identity before drag, she felt that drag increased her comfort with her gender identity.

“I think part of that [feeling more comfortable] is because I can—some of those butch qualities that I don’t carry around in my everyday life, like the confidence and the like, you know, maybe the rough around the edges thing, but that really isn’t me the person. I can still do it onstage um, but I’m still able to claim that sort of softer, in a softer sense because I—most of my friends will probably tell you that I’m super girly in my own respect—cry at the drop of a hat. I can’t fix a car to save my life. I can’t do anything that would be considered masculine at all.”

Hunter’s negotiation of a butch identity shows the complexity of any gender identity.

While she claims a butch identity, she admits that she maintains a softer, more feminine side. She exudes butch confidence through her drag persona onstage, but notices that onstage drag confidence in her masculinity does not equally translate into her daily life.

In other words, her masculine stage character emanates more confidence than she does.
outside of drag. Despite Hunter’s escalating self confidence in her self and butch identity through support over time and as a result of drag, she experiences a distinct difference between drag masculine confidence and non-drag masculine confidence. Drag kinging’s influences on Hunter’s gender identity are subtle, nonetheless, these effects hold implications for identity work.

Hunter’s fellow troupe member, Dalton, has been a drag performer for approximately two and a half years and has recently claimed a butch identity with which she is most comfortable. Like Hunter, Dalton’s comfort and confidence with a butch identity has increased through drag kinging.

“You know, before I did it [drag], I was still kind of just…I mean I was who I was, I wasn’t trying to be someone that I wasn’t, but as emcee, being onstage in front of a lot of people at like [club] shows and such, I started getting a different kind of level of comfort and confidence and then I started—and then as a result of…performing in drag, I think I—that’s when I became a lot more comfortable in like my butch self cuz that’s like pretty much how I identify. So, like I became more comfortable in that as a result of performing for a couple of years, absolutely. And the thing is—the people I’ve met through it and the things I’ve gotten to be involved in as a result, that makes me feel like really comfortable.”

Prior to drag, Dalton downplayed masculine characteristics in certain social contexts, for example, at work and around certain family members. She came into a feeling of self comfort with her butch identity over time through drag kinging.

Thomas, a fellow troupe member, similarly acknowledged preexistent masculine characteristics throughout her life; however, Thomas differs from Dalton (and most participants) in age and personal definition of gender. She also expressed always wanting to be boy as a child. Drag has caused Thomas to feel more comfortable displaying her masculinity in daily life, which includes constantly wearing male attire. Thomas defined
gender in biological terms—i.e. male and female—and this conceptualization of gender aligns with a mainstream dichotomous gender notion wherein biology and gender are conflated. This same social construction perpetuates the cultural fear of gender norm disruption. Consequently, under this rigid definition of gender, masculinity belongs to men and femininity belongs to women. If a biologically labeled woman, who has internalized a dichotomous mainstream gender ideology, feels masculine in various ways and displays that masculinity through gendered behaviors, appearance, activities, and interests, the logic necessitates an internal response that the biology is incorrect and must be changed. However, an individual’s desire to alter his/her body to match internal feelings and ultimately the self meets social disapproval in either the decision to change one’s sex or to live with an inconsistency between gender identity and biology.

Troupe members Thomas and Tristan, who are significantly older than most participants, both defined gender in terms of sex, have struggled with their female masculinity, and have considered and/or have entertained the possibility of changing their sex throughout their lives. Tristan offers a more detailed explanation about her experiences with her gender identity and how that has changed over time before drag:

“Uh from as long as I can remember I always wanted to be a boy and dressed like a boy when I was growing up. I was considered the third boy in the family, you know. Um they uh—and I considered running off and uh way back when, it’s a long time ago, actually [laughs] um society was different and I considered running off and um having an operation, sex change operation, and um…I found out about lesbianism before I did that and I’m actually glad I did because I chose not to go through with the surgery because I found out I could still live my life feeling the way I did inside and still stay the same gender, but I relate a lot to people who do go through the change [sex], the transgenders, because I know what it’s like not feeling comfortable in your body all the time and not knowing why and not understanding why you think some of the things you think.”
Tristan recounted an inner struggle with her gender, sex, and sexuality. The ideological underpinning of what it means to be a man includes masculinity and a sexual attraction to women, the opposite sex. A same-sex sexual desire, with no knowledge of the possibility of being a homosexual, coupled with her female masculinity led Tristan to initially feel that she must change her body to suit her inner gendered feelings and her sexual desires. Tristan continues to explain how drag has influenced her gender identity:

“My gender identity hasn’t changed cuz I’m still a female, but it gives me an outlet... Um so when I am dressed as a drag king, I am in essence a man and therefore the mannerisms as a man comes (sic) out, not saying that they’re not there as a butch lesbian, to put a label on me, um but they’re moreso there uh as a drag king cuz you are, it’s like in the movies people dress up as a performer or a particular uh example when Will Smith was doing Ali about Muhammed Ali, I mean, he lived the part. He did the trainings, you know, you throw yourself into that part and it’s the same thing with drag kinging, so when you’re onstage, when you’re dressed, when you’re in costume, so to speak, you are who you’re dressed as, so...”

Although Tristan defines gender in terms of sex, she labels herself as a butch lesbian female. Drag allows her the space to embrace her masculinity and provides an outlet to express her masculinity, which she felt unable to do as a young adult.

Cassius, an independent performer, views gender as an internal feeling and an outward expression and recounted always feeling more masculine throughout her life. She recalled gendered childhood activities that displayed her masculinity in her response to my inquiry about her gender identification before and after drag:

Me: How did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?

Cassius: God knows, I am one who has always been on the tomboy end of the spectrum, in terms of internalized feeling and in terms of dress, activities, etc. I have always fallen on the masculine side of the curve. I was the girl who went fishing with her dad, to sporting events with her mom, chose to wear pants and
abhorred dresses. That was just me, from a little girl onward. My mom basically stopped suggesting that I wear skirts or dresses when I was in 1st or 2nd grade. It just wasn’t my style, even then. I see myself as a strong individual, for the most part, and female, most definitely. My outward appearance and personality, I believe, reflect that sense of self.

Cassius remembers always feeling more masculine than feminine, feeling comfortable in masculine attire, and participating in more masculine activities throughout her childhood. This exemplifies the relationship between gendered internal feelings and subsequent gendered outer expressions in the form of appearance and activities. Drag has provided opportunities for Cassius to grow comfortable with her gendered self. She explains the role that drag has played in her comfort level:

“I think, if anything, I have gotten more comfortable with my gender identification. I have been an out lesbian since my early 20s and have become more and more comfortable with that reality over time. Doing drag, I feel, has given me more room to play and work through my conception of masculinity, both within myself and as I conceive it to be in the world around me. I get to mess around with gender roles and stereotypes, which help[s] me feel more free as a creative person, a female and as a lesbian.”

For Cassius, drag grants her freedom to explore gender. Cassius has worked through her gender identity and her overall conceptualization of masculinity; therefore, drag kinging has caused a shift within her self and with regard to her perceptions of the gendered world around her. The effects of drag kinging on Cassius’ gender identification pertains to self and social perceptions of gender without a change in an identity label.

Jacob, an independent performer, has been performing in drag for seven years and noticed that drag has allowed her to be more in touch with her masculinity and she has gained empathy for men in general as a result. When I asked how drag has influenced her gender identification, Jacob gave this response:
“Well, I think I’m just more in touch with my own masculinity and I think I’m more understanding of men in general. You know, it’s one of those funny things um I try so hard to empathize with them so I can really deliver an effective performance that um, you know, it helps me to understand their perspective. And uh that definitely yields understanding.”

Jacob defined gender in terms of biology and identified as a woman, but drag has impacted her identity through a better understanding of her gendered self, which involves female masculinity, and her perceptions of men. For Jacob, the shift that occurred as a result of drag kinging applies to her gendered self and how she views men and masculinity.

Brice, a troupe performer, who has been performing in drag for four years, identified as female prior to drag. Drag has impacted her choice to identify as androgynous. Brice locates her androgynous gender identity within male and female terms:

“I don’t necessarily see myself as a MAN; however, I do feel I have a male counterpart. I don’t consider myself a woman in drag either. It has taken me a while to figure out who I am as myself and as [Brice]. I consider myself an androgyne. When I or people talk about me as [Brice], I am always referred to as ‘he’ or ‘him’. The opposite occurs when I am myself. However, I have wondered what my life would be like if I felt my gender should be male, not so much physically but mentally and physically. If that makes any sense.”

Split gendered self dynamics occur for Brice’s stage character and her offstage self. Drag has made her think about her gender identity differently and she has embraced a “male counterpart” to herself. This negotiation between onstage persona and offstage self exists for numerous performers. Dante contributes her comfort with a fluid gender identity in her offstage self to the fluidity in her onstage persona. Dante recalled
childhood memories of thinking she was supposed to be a boy, but she contributed this to gender and sex conflation.

“Um and by no means—I don’t think I was meant to be a boy. I don’t wanna live my life as a boy. I don’t feel like I’m, you know, have gender dysphoria or, you know, or I wanna be transgendered or anything—don’t get me wrong, when I was little, I thought I was supposed to be a boy, but that’s cuz I wanted to run around with my top off and now I still can [laughs].”

Dante’s experience exemplifies internalized social expectations at a young age, similar to Thomas and Tristan. However, Dante recognizes that her biology does not limit her gendered expressions and she can embrace a variety of gendered expressions.

Before drag, Dante recalled being offended when people would mistake her for a male, but over time she has become more comfortable with being mistaken for a male. She recently began going by her male drag name, Dante, in everyday life over her birth name, Diane. Dante explains this transition in acceptance of others’ perceptions of her and roots it in a comparison to her girlfriend, who others do not mistake for a male regardless of her gendered attire:

“My girlfriend is really feminine and she—it’s funny because she prefers to wear dresses and skirts and things. And then with—but she is also completely fine in, you know, jeans and a t-shirt. But no one perceives her as anything other than a girl. But when I wear, you know, jeans and a t-shirt, people still think I’m a boy. And when I wear a dress, people still think I’m a boy. So it’s completely like…and for me over the years I used to get really offended when people would call me ‘sir’ or use a masculine pronoun. I’m not as—I just say ‘thank you’ and move on um cuz most of—you know, half the time I’m trying to be a boy anyway or trying to portray myself as, you know, this type of gender performer, but it’s not so set in stone and it really is whatever I feel like when I wake up in the morning and I think that’s why I like it [drag].”
Dante enjoys the freedom of choice in drag with a variety of gender expressions. Her gender identity is fluid and she has grown more comfortable with that fluidity in daily life, regardless of how others perceive her.

Out of eighteen participants two performers in my sample identify as trans and only one of the two, Marshall, is a transsexual (physically transitioning from female to male). Marshall felt comfortable exploring his gender identity through drag and contributes his transition realization to performing as a drag king. His shift in gender identity emerged over time and he explains that when I asked about his gender identification:

“I guess I’ve just [identified] as a female like before just because society like told me to, you know? And I’m like ‘well, no, wait, like I don’t have to be like that. I can identify however I want’. So, then I like identified as androgynous for like a really long time and like that was my gender. And like now after drag kinging and like the start of that, I was like ‘no’ like it’s okay to transition and this is what I want.”

Social pressure initially contributed to Marshall accepting a female identity, which was also the case with He, who now identifies as trans with no gender identification attached to it.

He remains unique in that she identifies as simply trans, which places her in an even more marginalized gender category than transgender. The assumption with transgender individuals, both within transgender communities and culture in general, is that transgender implies a transition from one gender/sex affiliation to another. In other words, under the cultural dichotomous conceptualization of masculinity and femininity, most transgender individuals make the decision to cross from one gender/sex extreme to the other. He refuses to label herself with a gender identification that limits her to
masculine or feminine and that, in her own words, carves a marginalized space for her as an “oddity” in the queer community. He has been performing in drag for approximately fourteen years, but remembers seizing opportunities to dress in drag and entertain throughout her life. He was biologically labeled female, but she always felt more masculine. She also experienced a shift in gender identification over time and recounts the gender identification changes in her life:

He: I just always sort of, if I had to say begrudgingly I would say ‘I’m a girl, I’m a girl, I’m a woman’, you know, ‘I’m feminine’, but that never quite—like even when I said it, I just felt like I was lying, you know? I think I’m masculine with a twist is what I think I am, but prior to that I was like ‘okay, my gender is feminine’. And I tried really hard [laughs], you know, to do that.

Me: [laughing] To make that work.

He: Right, you know, if gender could be tomboy, okay, then that’s what it is, you know, but um now I think I’m just like trans [chuckles], you know?

Me: How has performing led you to that change?

He: Um…it just gave me the opportunity to try some stuff out, you know?

He’s development of both a feminine character, She, and a male character, He, allowed her the space and opportunity to explore gender. Performing in drag, developing complex gendered stage characters, and being a part of a large drag king community, and an annual drag king event that transcends national boundaries combined to give He the courage to be able to come to terms with and identify as trans.

He: Performing and—and really more than anything um the International Drag King Extravaganza more than anything is what helped me um be able to verbalize who I was, you know, these people came with all these different names for things and, you know, you could really sit in there and really talk about having these feelings and even as I did, I still sort of felt like I didn’t quite fit because I am the queer’s queer, you know, I mean I—even in trans circles I am an oddity because I don’t claim a feminine or masculine identity and so um—but it got me
closer, you know? And I think that what [He and She] did and what performing did was give me the courage to be like ‘I don’t really care if…all I know is I’m not that and I’m not this, this is what I am and so I purposefully left the gender off the transgender and just call myself trans.

A trans identification offers He space with her gender identity without feeling confined to rigid gender prescriptions. He and Marshall are the most extreme cases of gender identity shifts within this sample.

Over time some performers noticed blurred lines between their onstage drag personas and their offstage selves. The gender identity transition that performers experience, with a few exceptions, did not imply embracing a trans identity or wanting to change one’s sex. Drag has been a catalyst for performers’ decisions to transition physically, but the subtle effects of drag have been overlooked in previous research. While Shapiro focused on the mechanisms within a troupe setting that allow for gender identity transformations, this research extends Shapiro’s work through an examination of performers’ identity transformations, shifts in self-perceptions and social perceptions, and the overall impact of performing on individual performers. These subtle self transformations do not fit neatly into a transgender classification system. Onstage and offstage identity work exists as a central theme in participants’ narration of their selves.

**Self Transformations**

Performers frequently described a sharp, oppositional contrast between their offstage selves and their onstage drag personas. This contrast primarily arose through field observations and participants’ responses to questions about their drag names and personas—i.e. how did you decide on your drag name and persona? Not all performers discussed the differences between their offstage drag personas and onstage selves in
response to my inquiry about their drag names and personas; however, they consistently talked about the differences throughout the interviews in response to a variety of interview questions. During field observations I observed performers’ personality transformations in drag compared to their offstage selves outside of drag, which supported performers’ explanations. As part of a reflexive research process, I modified interview questions to explore the patterns that emerged indirectly through the original research questions and field observations. Given field observations and the recurring pattern early in data collection wherein respondents explained differences between their onstage drag personas and their offstage selves, I added a question to elicit a specific, direct response to address any perceived differences performers have with regard to their onstage drag personas and offstage selves—i.e. is there a difference between [onstage drag persona] and [offstage self]?

Data analysis revealed that the vast majority of participants perceived differences between their offstage drag personas compared to their onstage selves outside of drag. A self transformation occurs for these performers through drag kinging. Participants spoke of inner self transformations, which included both personality contrasts and self feeling shifts. Performers substantially noted that their onstage drag personas exuded more confidence and that in drag, as their drag personas, they were able to act in ways they could not as their offstage selves. In contrast to a confident, outspoken self feeling and demeanor involved with performers’ drag personas, participants described their offstage selves as shy and more introverted. Drag has allowed many performers to be what they are not in their everyday lives.
Among participants who experienced a self transformation through drag kinging, the majority of them utilized “alter ego” terminology to explicate their onstage drag personas in relation to their offstage selves. Only two performers, who acknowledged an oppositional offstage self compared to an onstage drag persona, did not describe their onstage personas as alter egos. However, one of them, Wyatt, understands her onstage drag persona as part of her dual personalities:

“As for the persona, I am a Gemini and they say that you have dual personalities. My drag persona is cocky and loud and VERY social…and very, VERY flirtatious! Whereas out of drag I am very laid back and kind of shy. I don’t take on any one character. I have one persona and that is me…I don’t do characters (Fred Durst, etc.).”

This dual personality negotiation of the relationship between onstage drag persona and offstage self remains similar to respondents’ overwhelming “alter ego” explanation for the stark contrast between their onstage drag personas and offstage selves.

Troupe member Hunter also indicates an oppositional self transition that occurs through drag kinging. Hunter admitted that she is shy outside of drag and continued to explain:

Hunter: Umm but, but not onstage. Umm for some reason onstage, you know—and I think that’s the great thing—one of the great things about being a drag king is that when you get onstage, it’s a totally different character and I—if you ask me to define who that character is, I couldn’t tell you. I just know that it’s somebody who’s braver than I am in real life.

Me: And yet it’s part of your self, but—

Hunter: Absolutely. Sure, sure. And I think it’s that, for some reason there’s confidence there that I don’t have in my everyday life. Umm I’m sure many performers, drag or not, would probably say the same thing.
Hunter suggests that this performance self transformation may be a consequence of performance in general. Although a variety of performers may experience an onstage self transformation, this study focuses exclusively on drag king performers.

As aforementioned, performers often described their contrasting self perceptions of their onstage drag personas and offstage selves in response to a variety of questions. Romeo, for example, described her drag alter ego in response to my inquiry into how she views herself in relation to other drag kings. Romeo labeled her drag persona’s style as “old school” compared to other kings:

“I am more about crooning and seducing an audience or making them laugh out loud…and I honestly don’t care about being a[nn] ‘ego’ star…don’t care about fame. I am actually pretty shy so [it’s] not about the girls…Even though my alter ego [Romeo] will make you think differently and I am not playing with my gender role…I am not exploring being transgendered…I just want to have fun.”

Romeo explained her onstage persona as an alter ego, but among other email participants, separated herself from performers motivated to perform in drag for gender exploration purposes. Romeo expressed an oppositional contrast between offstage self outside of drag and her drag persona in terms of behavior, demeanor, and personality.

Similarly, Hugh noticed a distinct contrast between her offstage self and her onstage drag persona when asked about her drag name and persona. Hugh wanted a “gender neutral” drag name to allow her to perform as both female and male characters onstage and she discussed her drag alter ego:

“When I was a teenager, there was one side of me that went to church and Girl Scouts and was in the Honor Society, and another side of me that dressed in goth on the weekends and wrote dark poetry from the depths of my being. Medical school is a pretty strict, sterile life, so “[Hugh]” continues to represent that alter ego of shadows, passion, flame, sex, and spirit.”
One of Hugh’s performance motivations involves engaging her alter ego. For Hugh, drag has provided an outlet for an alter ego (or oppositional self) that existed prior to drag kinging. Perceived social expectations contribute to Hugh’s attraction to drag, which became clear in part of her response to what message she tries to convey through her drag performances:

“I guess on a more abstract scale, what I am trying to represent onstage is freedom…freedom of throwing yourself out on a stage in front of hundreds of people without fear…freedom to break out of who you think you should be to find who you really are…and once you find it, the freedom to put it out in the world without fear of being judged.”

Intentional and unintentional self exploration remains a consequence of drag for many performers. Although numerous performers specified a drag alter ego as part of an oppositional relationship between their onstage drag personas and offstage selves, some associated their drag alter egos with gender. These performers identified a male alter ego and both male and female alter egos in one case, not simply an alter ego.

In response to my inquiry about meanings involved with being a drag king, troupe member Dalton offered a description of the male identity/alter ego she assumes in drag. Dalton initially thought drag kinging was “weird” upon seeing performances, but she felt drawn to drag because she could tap into preexistent aspects of herself. Dalton recounted her thoughts on drag and what it means to be a drag king:

“At first when I saw drag kings, I was like all…uh…there’s no way in hell. Like, what the hell? It’s like so weird. It’s like people like lip syncing, but then I don’t know, there’s some sort of larger appeal cuz I think when I was like young, I think I really kind of like assumed a lot of those rules anyway. A lot of it—I would kind of like dress or even have these sort of thoughts and like fantasies and they were like all these like male identities, so I think it’s just like taking a drag king…I think is typically when you think of gender…I think taking your own interpretation of this male identity…like an alter ego. And then like performing,
which you can perform once, but if you start performing, you typically start taking on like a certain character. I could name almost everyone on our troupe and I could probably guess, even things they haven’t performed, I could probably guess what they might perform because they have their own style. Everyone has their own style. They have their own style of dress and they have their own style…it’s like personality. It’s like my personality is—I’m kinda who I am… kinda spazzy and I’m out there. I’m outgoing. That’s like how my personality is too and I’m like…it’s like you have this alter ego that has its own personality and in that personality there are some consistencies, which is also kind of fun.”

Dalton continued to describe her onstage drag persona as an “extension” and exaggeration of her offstage self. Dalton, the onstage drag persona, has evolved over time and has been filtered through her interpretations of “male identities”. The plurality of the male identity simultaneously subverts the construction of masculinity and allows performers to explore their own gender identifications and their conceptualizations of gender. The mere act of thinking about gender, masculinity in particular, and constructing a gendered persona or stage character, that fundamentally appropriates gender, opens the door for displays that disrupt hegemonic masculinity. Butler originally pointed out the transgressive potential of drag, though in the context of drag queens, which has presented itself in previous drag king research. Focus on drag kings themselves further uncovers the immediate effects of drag kinging on the performers, who purposively perform gender.

Performers construct their drag personas, which involves various forms of masculinity. These onstage personas often provide an outlet for performers. Independent performer Cassius both describes her masculine drag persona and identifies it as an alter ego:

“[Cassius] has a big, fun personality and is definitely one of those ‘wink, wink, nudge, nudge’ type of fellas…he likes the ladies a bunch and he likes a sly bit of
sexuality. He has an audacious sense of humor but he can also be just this side of a thug or big mouth. Basically, [Cassius’] personality is a mimic of my own but amped up about a thousand notches—he is definitely my alter ego, the one who would open his mouth when I would tend to be quiet. It makes him a great outlet for some of my own internal bullshit [laughs].

The onstage drag persona, Cassius, maintains a distinctive personality that directly opposes perceptions of her offstage self. While Cassius’ onstage drag persona is a male alter ego, he retains characteristics of the offstage female self. The onstage drag persona is a masculine gendered exaggeration of the offstage self, similar to Dalton’s experiences. The dual gendered self, explained through Freudian “alter ego” terms among participants, captures the effects of the social construction aspect of gender and how individuals negotiate their gendered selves.

Independent performer Brice, who identified as androgynous, believed that all individuals have polar opposite sides, masculine and feminine, but most people fail to “embrace” one half of their split gendered selves. Brice explained that her onstage drag persona is an “expression” of her male alter ego. Although Brice is a gender bender through gender identification and drag kinging, her conceptualization of gendered selves reflects mainstream notions about a gender dichotomy. Performers, like all individuals in a particular culture, must utilize preexistent social constructions in attempts to disrupt the status quo. Transgression exists in relation to the status quo, which contributes to individual reliance on dichotomous gender social constructions in defining the gendered self.

Independent performer Jacob noticed her onstage drag persona develop over time and it has reflected where she has been situationally located throughout her life. For
example, when she started performing in drag, almost seven years ago, her masculine
drag persona represented a young, aggressive masculinity. Her drag name and persona
and subsequent performances have changed over time in which she solidified a masculine
drag persona and created a more feminine onstage drag persona as well. Jacob has
displayed more gender fluidity in her drag performances with the development of a
feminine persona:

“I have this other persona that I call [Jacquelyn] if I do any kind of like bio-
femme number where like I’m not really going all the way to the male illusion,
which I’ve done before. I did like Scissor Sisters and I’ve done—like ripped
off—or ripped something off—or I ripped something open and I have this like
boustier with this like pink bra showing and it was very, you know, like flexible
gender, you know, stuff going on in my head. Umm (laughs), so but as far as like
Jacob] really is like the alter ego. If I was a guy, in my fantasy world, I might—
Jacob] is who I would be. He’s like kind of hard, but he’s thoughtful and
conscientious, you know and…I think he’s like, if I was straight, I think he’s the
guy that I would wanna date, you know.”

Although Jacob points out consistent characteristics with her onstage drag persona, she
clearly explains that her onstage drag persona and her offstage self both change. Identity
is mutable, prone to changes and shifts. As an individual and performer, Jacob relies on
her life situations to provoke, inform, and inspire her performances, which influence her
offstage self and onstage drag persona.

Not all drag kings perform masculinity exclusively. Drag king performers often
present a wide range of gendered displays in their performances. Some kings switch
gender presentations throughout one number/performance—i.e. masculine to feminine
and vice versa—and display gender corresponding mannerisms, demeanor, and posturing.
The occurrence of one body performing multiple genders over the course of minutes, let
alone onstage drag persona versus offstage self oppositional gender contrasts, remains a
spectacle that further complicates the ideological underpinnings of gender. Jacob has developed both a feminine persona and a masculine persona for performances, yet maintains an offstage self as well.

Veteran performer He frequently performs layered masculinity and femininity with two distinct drag personas. He offered an extensive, thoughtful account of the ways in which her drag personas have influenced her offstage self and identity. He explained how her masculine persona, He, and her feminine persona, She, are alter egos.

Me: Is there a difference between [S/he—offstage self] and [He and She—onstage drag personas]?

He: Yes and no. Um I think that [He] and [She] are [S/he] without as much visible fear and without holding back. You know, that they’re these alter egos. They’re definitely me and since I’ve been doing them, the aspects of them, they’ve given me a lot more courage to be who I am. They’ve given me the room, you know, as a trans-identified person um who really sees herself as-as uh embodying all this female and male energy. The two of them gave me the right to make myself whole. So there are these aspects, but the interesting thing about it is when [He], or [She], come on, [S/he] goes somewhere, you know? I don’t even um really I feel odd if people refer to me as [S/he] um…when I am doing them, you know? I have gotten used to it and I have gotten—and now it’s sort of endearing um when I see some of my old friends. They’re like ‘Oh my god. What are you doing, [S/he]?’ And it’s—and I’ve also been able to recognize that they see me—that they see me and they see this person as me. They don’t see it as anything different and I think that I used to just really not wanna be[S/he], you know, because I just felt like [S/he] wouldn’t do any of this stuff, you know? [S/he] is in her head. [S/he’s], I guess, is more serious and these two [He and She], they can have fun and they’re not so self-conscious about their body and they’re okay—[He’s] okay if you see a little girl in there, some girl in there, you know? His masculinity does not feel threatened by you thinking there’s somethin’ a little funny about [He].

He understands her onstage drag personas in gendered alter ego terms. The stage personas have stories, character traits, a history of evolution, and distinct personalities that combine with the offstage self to form multiple selves—one body, multiple gendered
selves. The persona She is actually a drag queen. In other words, She represents a woman performing as a man performing femininity onstage. The female offstage self embodies masculinity in the form of He. The gendered layers reveal a woman performing femininity filtered through another layer of female masculinity. When She takes the stage and performs femininity, the gendered complexity of the persona reflects the performer’s self discovery and gender exploration through drag kinging.

**Bodies and Self**

Field observations supported participants’ experiences of a self transformation through drag kinging. A strong correlation exists between performers’ physical appearances (or outer layers) and their overall demeanors and personalities in the context of drag as compared to outside of drag. Many performers also noticed this reciprocal relationship between the outer, visible components of their selves and the inner aspects, such as self feeling, and how that affects their gender comportment. This shift in self, both perceived by a researcher and explained by performers through mostly dual self concepts, supports the postmodern notion of multiple selves. I observed these transformations through a gender conscious lens, while only two performers addressed how their physical appearances affect their inner self feelings. Analysis of interview data and field observations revealed that performers utilized a variation of four ways to construct visual indicators of authentic masculinity—i.e. the appearance of male genitalia (“packing”), facial hair, lack of breast visibility (“binding”), and clothing.

Many drag kings fashion some type of artificial male genitalia to produce the appearance of a “bulge”. This has also been referred to as “packing” among the drag
kings in my sample and/or at shows. It is important to note that drag kings do not necessarily conform to informal norms that involve all the visual indicators of masculinity at once. Performers would often discuss “packing” among themselves and close friends surrounding a drag king event. For example, during a conversation with some troupe performers from another urban area in Ohio, one of the drag kings who performs both a masculine drag persona and a feminine drag persona onstage, Kyle, interrupted the ongoing conversation by exclaiming “Bobby’s packing tonight!” Bobby strictly performs masculinity onstage and his “packing” effort held a common, matter-of-fact meaning for troupe members. Shortly after Kyle’s burst of excitement, a short, thin person with long, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail under a black winter hat, opened his long dark coat to show us the bulge under his black spandex suit. The other troupe performers inspected it and teased him. Kyle commented, “There’s little Pierce.” Pierce stood with his arms stretched out holding his coat open, laughed, and said, “Hey! It’s mini-me.” The creation of a bulge or “packing” is normalized within the context of drag kinging.

Another visual indicator of authentic masculinity for drag king performers revolves around minimizing their breasts to give the appearance of a male body. I observed performers frequently consulting with friends, partners, and other performers about their breast visibility before and after performing onstage in drag. Audience members at a drag king competition booed and smirked at a contestant because she did not bind her breasts and they were visible throughout her performances. Later that night Hunter, troupe member and research participant, pointed to David’s (a performing
contestant and fellow troupe member) chest and informed me that they had to do some “extra binding” before the contest because she bounces around the stage so much that they tend to “pop out”. Minimizing the female body and constructing a male one remained a concern for performers during offstage interactions with close friends, partners, and other performers through conversations.

Facial hair is also a visual indicator of masculinity. Though not all drag king performers choose to apply facial hair and some biological women naturally grow noticeable facial hair, it remains quite common for drag kings to either draw it on with eye liner or attach real hair to their faces with Spirit Gum (the adhesive used by most drag kings when applying facial hair). Tristan, a contestant in the drag king competition and research participant, wore a cleanly trimmed brown beard that matched the length of her short, brown hair. Before the competition started, she became rather fidgety and mentioned to her girlfriend that she thought she looked “more believable without a moustache”—just the beard—because of the shape of her face. The reference to “believability” (a term often used by participants) or authenticity was an ongoing concern for many performers regardless of whether or not they were competing. The above mentioned example illustrates performers’ ongoing concern about their appearances in pursuit of presenting themselves as masculine characters. However, some performers wore little or no facial hair when performing masculinity onstage.

During her production company’s show at a large gay/lesbian-oriented club, Dante wore mascara to outline her eyes, but had no facial hair. A few weeks prior when Dante was attending the drag king competition and another week when she was
performing at a local bar, she had facial hair. Although drag kings display various markers of masculinity, they do not necessarily use the same ones in the same fashion at each event and/or for each performance. Male clothing is another visual indicator of masculinity in which performers can play with and manipulate their gendered appearances. Both onstage and offstage, drag kings tended to wear male baggy clothes, button-up dress shirts, ties, and baseball caps. In contrast to drag kings, drag queens, bio-queens, and burlesque performers (those performing femininity on stage) wore tight fitting clothes, revealed a female body, showed more skin than drag kings, enhanced the appearance of breasts, and wore noticeable makeup. Drag kings, among gender performers, must utilize the visual gender indicators that remain part of social expectations and gender norms in the reproduction of gender through performance.

Clothing choices and other gendered visual indicators helped construct gendered bodies; however, some of these drag kings presented their masculine selves beyond visual indicators. The issue of embodiment arises when comparing how drag king performers present themselves in drag compared to outside of drag. Most (certainly not all) drag kings live their lives outside of drag as queer identified women. I observed them performing in gay/lesbian clubs (queer spaces), but I also interviewed many of them outside of this space in which they are known performers or are in character because they are performing in a given night—i.e. offstage but in drag. There were subtle differences in how these individuals presented their gendered selves outside of clubs, offstage before and during shows, and onstage throughout performances.
The closer performers came to a performance, both temporally and spatially, the more intense their embodiment of a masculine identity became. The level of masculine embodiment gradually increased in intensity through comparison of how they appeared and presented themselves outside of clubs, mingling offstage before and after performances, and onstage during their performances. Their use of space differed in seemingly gendered ways according to context. Jacob, an independent performer and research participant, appeared and moved her body in more feminine ways during our interview, but in the clubs (before she performed) she took up more space and did not exhibit the same attention to her surroundings as she did in the coffee shop (interview location). She commanded space walking through the clubs on performance nights and embodied a masculinity that sharply contrasted her offstage self presentation. For example, when I first met Jacob outside of drag for the interview, she sported short platinum hair and wore hip-hugging jeans, a beige corduroy coat with a scarf and a fitted green t-shirt with a long sleeve ivory shirt underneath. She moved around the table gracefully with an awareness of the close quarters and randomly disheveled chairs from previous patrons. As we sat and spoke, she averted her eyes frequently and kept her arms close to her body. Less than one month later at a drag king event (an event where she was performing) Jacob walked into the bar with shaven hair, wore khakis with a short sleeve t-shirt underneath a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut out revealing her arms and carried a red tool box with her drag accoutrements. Jacob took more space in her movements, seemingly uninterrupted by the tables, chairs, and barstools. The cultural cues of masculinity and confidence displayed before a performance increased in intensity
when Jacob performed onstage that night. Jacob entered the stage to Justin Timberlake’s “What Goes Around” wearing a white button-up dress shirt, white tie, and a grey hat. She seemed like a taller, more masculine version of the artist. Her buzzed hair cut also created a physical resemblance to the artist. She danced in the Michael Jackson fashion that Timberlake does, sliding across the stage while smoothly flipping her hat from her head to her hand and back up to her head. Later into the number, Jacob turned her back to the audience and did a worm-like wiggle with her whole body and turned her head around (with her back still facing the audience), smiled, stuck her tongue out, while winking, and kept dancing. This gradual, yet noticeable, physical transformation in gendered self presentations repeatedly arose among performers’ perceptions of themselves and through my field observations both as an audience participant and interviewer.

Troupe member Andre described a specific masculine character that characterizes her onstage drag persona. Andre, the drag persona, embodies an “awkward”, “nerdy” masculinity. The onstage drag persona emerged over time. Andre explains:

“I didn’t necessarily choose an identity that goes with that name [Andre]. Like I think ‘this is the person I want [Andre] to be’. Um but I think just like over time there’s definitely like a persona that’s developed like a—I have a preference for doing sort of a nerdier character. Like a, sort of like, yeah, a little bit more awkward, like I can’t do like the sexy posturing or anything like that. It’s definitely not my masculine persona at all. Um, yeah, the character I prefer is like, you know, traditional nerdy or in general kind of like awkward. Um I picture like Wang Newton and in general like awkwardness. Um but any time I’ve tried to do like uh, even just like traditional masculine kind of performance, it just doesn’t, it doesn’t come off right.”

Although Andre feels most comfortable performing a more marginalized type of masculinity, she realized over time that her physical appearance impacts how she feels.
When I asked about the emotions associated with drag, Andre responded with an explanation of her self transformation that occurs as a result of drag:

“Um well I think that, I think that definitely like the minute you get into your costume, there’s a change, like you feel different, um like for me it’s sort of like that with any costume, but there’s definitely masculine, sort of latent masculine attributes that sort of come out like as soon as I put the package in (mocking, deep serious tone) [laughter]. There’s like, there’s definitely like—not a swagger cuz I’m usually like a nerd, but sort of like a, even like a, I don’t know, like a posturing that seems to like emerge as soon as that layer is on.”

Andre initially viewed drag as another type of performance, but over time she noticed this self transformation tied to this type of gender performance. Drag kinging within a troupe setting allowed Andre the space to explore gender through performance. Andre’s experiences in drag have caused her to think about her gender identity. Through drag Andre discovered certain masculine qualities about herself, which she utilizes in everyday life, as her offstage self, when necessary. The onstage drag persona, Andre, impacts her offstage self, Andrea. For Andre, “what’s on your body matters” reflects her self realization:

“It [drag] has made me think about that more in my daily life, like um what part of my personality comes out when I put on work clothes versus like when I put a t-shirt on in the morning. It’s just like, yeah, like how much it matters and how much it’s strange that it matters—and it’s strange that it matters, just like what’s on your body and how that affects like, yeah, what you’re thinking about how you’re thinking.”

The relationship between drag persona and offstage self is reciprocal. While the offstage self constructs the onstage drag persona for performance, the constructed drag persona also shapes the continually changing offstage self. Similar to Andre, Dante perceived a shift in self feeling that directly stems from her outer appearance. Dante pointed out that she is treated differently by others when she is her masculine drag
persona compared to her offstage self. She explained how her onstage drag persona and offstage selves have merged over time:

Dante: There is a difference between me on and offstage; however, the more I’m doing this, the more they’re becoming closer.

Me: Really?

Dante: Yeah. Um and there’s several reasons for that, but when I’m [Dante], like the flirting is intensified and I can get away with saying shit that I could never say as just me. Like I could say the most random shit...and girls will not smack me. When I’m [Dante], I—shit just flies outta my mouth, that I’m like ‘I can’t believe I just said that’. It’s like especially when it comes to flirting, cuz it’s like...I’m trying to like schmooze people and like—and, you know, get people interested in me like as a performer [and] like the show or especially like when I go out promoting for the show. Like I have no problem like walking up to someone in drag and like handing them flyers, but when I’m not in drag, it’s—for some reason, it’s really difficult for me. I’m like (shrinks unto herself). I get kinda shy. I start getting real nervous and I’m like ‘I can’t do this’ like, but when I’m [Dante] it’s just different, like I can just walk up to anybody and just like ‘here dadadada’.

The onstage drag persona, Dante, allows her to be someone else, but still be the same person. Dante thought that one of the reasons why it is easier to approach others while in drag relates to her understanding of Dante being part of her, but not her. Despite the initial oppositional, alter ego relationship between Diane (the offstage self) and Dante (the onstage drag persona), over time the two selves have become more “blurry”. Dante still experiences less masculine confidence outside of drag, but there are recognizable overlaps between both selves. Dante attributes some of this blurring between selves to the fact that she started going by her stage name in everyday life:

“And, you know, I’ve been introducing myself as [Dante] and I notice that the lines are starting to blur more, starting to get closer to the—not the same on [Dante] like when I’m like performing, but like in everyday life like I feel more confident and more comfortable being called [Dante], but using the female pro-
nouns, so that gets confusing in and of itself...so the gap between [Dante onstage and offstage] is becoming one.”

While Dante has experienced a merge between her offstage self and her onstage drag persona, He identifies a true self among her onstage personas. This participant explains that her masculine drag persona, He, is the true self:

“It was hard for me to do [He] because I really think that [He] is the [S/he]. [He] is [S/he]. If she could be—if I could be [He] all the time, I’d be happy about that. You know, I would be perfectly fine being [He] all the time, you know, and I can’t say that there won’t be some day that that’s who I’ll be all the time, as [He], because I am the most confident as [He]. I am the most assured of myself as [He] and [He] doesn’t talk half as much as [S/he], you know, and—or any of these other things, but [He] can approach anybody and be okay and [He] understands himself as a sexy being and it doesn’t feel uncomfortable with that, and can own it and can be okay with it in ways that [S/he] immediately gets nervous and is immediately like ‘Oh my god, I gotta get outta here’.”

He further described the transition she makes from her offstage self, S/he, and her masculine onstage drag persona, He, while discussing how she has constructed her offstage self:

“It’s almost like I have to take off the [S/he] suit and hang her up, you know? But there’s this nervousness the minute that I walk onstage and the minute that I don these clothes, which really, when I get the face on, I’m okay. Like I can just have my face on and not be packing, not be binding, and I still feel like [He]. There is something when I look in the mirror and I have that face on, there’s something about that, that I think [He] really is the true person. I think [S/he] is this uh is the person or the character that society, my family, that was easiest for all of them to deal with and so that’s [S/he]...because it’s too hard to try and explain who [He] is. It’s too hard having to jump through all of the hoops to get him...seen, I don’t know, to get him...just too much explaining.”

Similar to Andre, He notices a self transformation when she alters her physical body with masculine visual indicators. He remains the only participant who expressed finding a true self through drag; however, many participants indicated that identity work takes place in their ongoing negotiation between their offstage selves and their onstage drag.
 personas. These performers must deliberately construct gendered bodies and self presentations for drag purposes. This has led many performers both to contemplate their gendered self constructions outside of drag and come to terms with their identities, which include multiple selves. The idea of one, true self permeates mainstream ideology and may play a role in some participants reconciling their identities through split self/alter ego terms. Activities, appearances, demeanor, posturing, speech, mannerisms, gestures, etc. constitute social interpretations of masculinity and femininity. Performers are aware of various forms of gender presentations/identities and they actively construct a gendered self through embodiment. While not all drag kings perform for gender exploration purposes, gender exploration remains a consequence of performing. Drag provides a space for creativity, performance, gender play, and social acceptance for otherwise unacceptable gender expressions within a society that retains a rigid, dualistic, essentialist ideological foundation.

**Drag Appeal**

For numerous participants, the appeal of drag frequently leads to intentional and unintentional shifts in identities, sense of selves, and new understandings of gender. Drag involves a space for acceptance and social validation, where performers feel appreciated and celebrated for gender play and cultural disruption. The performer and the audience participate in an interactional exchange wherein performers receive audience support through verbal and nonverbal means as they appropriate gender, express themselves, and entertain onstage. Participants overwhelmingly referred to drag as an outlet in emotional/therapeutic, gendered, and artistic/creative ways. Strong social
support networks and audience acceptance allow performers to experience drag as a personal outlet. For example, troupe member Hunter described her social world within a local drag king community as a “bubble” because she knows the accepting atmosphere is unique. Brice responded to questions about performance motivation and emotions associated with drag in this way:

Me:  What are some of the emotions associated with doing drag? How do they affect you?

Brice:  My performances always reflect how I feel, whether I be sad, angry, goofy, or even horny. I don’t always perform the ‘normal’, known songs that everybody wants to hear. I base it mainly off what I feel like performing. When my mother passed away a few years ago, I had performed Hoobastank’s ‘The Reason’ a couple months later, for the last drag king contest I participated in before moving back to Colorado. [A] couple years later, I performed ‘Battle-scars’ by Punchline on her birthday, with [two] big framed pictures of her and I. Both received great responses, even though they were slower songs. But the audience understood why I did it and could feel my sadness and remembrance of her.

This exemplifies how a performer can express him/herself through performance and feel the audience embrace that self expression. Brice experiences drag as a personal/emotional and gender outlet. Performers often find drag to be a space for self expression coupled with positive reinforcement.

Me:  What motivates you to perform?

Brice:  I perform to let out my male energy/spirituality/sexuality onstage. I don’t bring myself out fully as [Brice] 90% of the time. However, many people know me as [Brice], and call me by name [male drag name] over my female counterpart. I also perform for my audience. I don’t discriminate about who my audience is because they are one of the reasons why I perform, and for my popularity. Plus, I enjoy watching them accepting and embracing me as [Brice]. Although they tend to get me and my female self confused outside the stage.
The audience supports the male counterpart or alter ego, whom they see and interact with in a drag performance setting.

Because drag provides a space where performers can express themselves in ways that are otherwise socially unacceptable, drag becomes a form of escapism for both performers and audience members. Drag events usually take place in a queer club environment, part of urban nightlife. He utilizes drag as an educational tool for gender activism and social awareness in general. She embodies a type of “old school” black male masculinity and strives to provoke others—i.e. audience members, other performers, and anyone exposed to her drag performances—to question their cultural assumptions and stereotypes through both subtle and direct performance choices. He mentioned the purpose behind her drag performances in response to my inquiry into how she views her performances:

“I think that I embody—I mean, whether people know I identify as trans, whether people know I’m a women’s studies scholar, whether people know that I’m a mom or whatever those things are, they are being exposed to it, you know? And so even if they do say ‘I don’t know any trans person that’s a parent’, it won’t be true and there’ll be—something will—I truly do believe in like a lot of metaphysical stuff—it’ll be something that won’t resonate. There’ll be something that will feel weird or a little odd and whether they ever share that with anybody else, they might have to think about that a second time and they may say it again, but they’re always gonna be kinda thinking about ‘do I?’, you know, or that type of thing. So, I just perform so I can put a little piece out there somewhere and I perform because I want my nieces and nephews and my daughter to know that it is okay to be who you are, you know, and it’s okay to let everybody know it.”

He continued to explain the pivotal role that audiences play in her experiences and the escapism involved with drag shows and performances.

Me: What is the best part of performing?

He: The people. The reaction of the people. You know, I—their laughter,
their smiles, their just complete enjoyment, that to me is, I don’t know, you know, I can live on that. I can live on—like it’s a place where you can just kind of forget about war, you know, in a way. You know, yeah, there’s political numbers and there’s all those types of things, but you can go there and you can just enjoy yourself, you know. And you can get some learning without it feeling like it’s shoved at ya’ or smackin’ ya’ in the head or whatever it is, even if it is a number that challenges you, but the best part is the people. You know, just feeling that—I don’t know—applause for what you did, feeling that ‘Oh my god! It’s [He]!’, you know? And knowing that they’re there because they like what you do for them.

The audience provides social validation and a form of acceptance that performers find rewarding to the point of performance motivation. For troupe member Dalton, notoriety gained through her drag performances produces a feeling of acceptance. Social acceptance and self validation compliment each other; therefore, participants often recounted social acceptance and self validation as simultaneous occurrences.

Independent performer Jacob has enjoyed the outlet aspect of drag, the creative freedom involved, and the range in self expression. Jacob shared the appeal of drag for her:

“You can express things you wouldn’t normally feel to express. You know, the stage can exaggerate things and sensationalize them and really draw a caricature and, you know, truth is stranger than fiction, so art is frequently more planned and polished than any real life experience, you know. It’s fun. That’s a good thing, you know, you can—you know, you can create your happy place onstage. You choose, you can do some really—when you can create your own anything, it’s fun to be in charge of—you know, in business, don’t you wanna be in charge? You wanna make choices. Well, in art you’re the boss of your own—you design your own space and that’s invigorating.”

Her participation in drag also elicits emotions tied to liberation in expressing masculinity within a drag king context, “There’s a lot of empowerment and liberation up there, you know, it’s kind of like what would you do if you had a penis for a day?” For Jacob, drag can vindicate performers’ feelings and life experiences:

“It’s almost like a place to vindicate your feelings, you know, especially when
you find that song that especially speaks to what you’re passionate about, you feel like you’re really getting a chance to express yourself…express your ideas. It’s a microphone in some ways.”

Many performers experience a therapeutic outlet with drag kinging, which entails self expression, creative freedom, gender play, a forum to explore gender identities, and the space to be something other than what they are offstage. This creates an opportunity for performers to contemplate their identities in the same way Shapiro (2007) described the “opportunity for enactment” mechanism for identity transformation, including a negotiation of multiple selves. Although numerous performers have constructed complex gendered selves for performance purposes, the process of building onstage personas forces them to reflect on the preexisting processes involved in constructing their offstage selves as well.

Dante expresses her fluid gender identity through drag and refers to the stage as a “powerful medium” for self expression. Her motivation to perform includes gender expression, education and gender activism, social acceptance, and a therapeutic release/outlet:

“I think what motivates me is the fact that I can have an influence on people regardless of whether they’re aware of it or not. Some of them are and it does depend on the venue and the audience again, but I like having the ability to influence people in an awesome way or, you know, what I’m trying to do or hope that it’s in a positive way. And be able to express what I’m feeling at that moment in time and, you know, cuz I like when—I’ve learned that the more I express how I’m feeling or like what I’m thinking or feeling, the less that I—it consumes my mind and like the more I’m able to move on from that particular cycle…because it’s a way for me to get emotions out that…like…I feel that [song from previous performance] was kind of an aggressive song, like a performance for me, but I wasn’t directing my aggression towards anybody. I was just putting it out there…and um I was able to get—it’s kind of like a contact sport. You know, you can take your aggression out and not be directing it at anybody, but just playing.”
Dante displays a concern for the messages that her performances send, while she also experiences her drag performances as an emotional outlet, a means for self expression.

Self expression also points to the considerations that performers contribute to their identities and the active construction of onstage personas and offstage selves. Participants have examined (to varying degrees) their personal social categories and others’ social categories through exposure to other gender performers and their own performances. This fosters an environment for self transformation and a gendered outlet in particular. Social categories, such as race, social class, sexuality, age, etc. interconnect with gender identity in the construction and understanding of one’s self. Consequently, gender cannot be neatly separated from other social categories and situational contexts that shape identities. For many performers, the freedom of self expression through drag grants them the space to explore different roles and identities, if only for the sake of performance. Cassius explained “the best part of performing, for me, is getting to play out this persona who might change roles with each song. It is akin to personal exploration/experimentation and I have really relished that benefit of performing.” Similarly, troupe member Andre perceived drag as a space to explore and break away from social expectations. She also spoke about personal liberation from normative gender expectations:

“I think it [drag] has some powerful potential to it, to really just like broaden people’s horizons a little bit, um relax a little bit um about things that kind of hold us back on a daily basis, you know, restrictions we feel on who we are and who we become and what this means or that—you know, um one thing I’ve found interesting, and I don’t know if it’ll come up later, but as a woman I think we’re, a lot of times, like we’re supposed to look attractive. You’re really supposed to like try and look attractive. Um and you’re supposed to spend a lot of time and energy
on thinking about how you look. And do you look good? And for me like in
doing drag that disappears and so I really enjoy that, like it’s very liberating to not
think at all about how I look or like do I appear attractive to someone else. And
for me that’s a lot of times looking very unattractive [laughter] and I really enjoy
that. I really enjoy like this space and freedom to do that. Um to just like, yeah,
fit some sort of character and not at all worry about like, yeah, how’s somebody—

is somebody gonna find me attractive or do I look good? No, I look terrible,
that’s the point [laughter]. Just that in and of itself is pretty liberating.”

Troupe member Tristan experiences drag as a gender outlet and a form of

escapism for both the performer and audience members. As previously mentioned,

kinging allows her to embrace her masculinity. Tristan and independent performer Kurt

pointed out the “camaraderie” among drag kings as a key factor in their motivation and/or

best part of being a drag king. Kurt explained:

“The best part of performing…for me it’s camaraderie. It’s just being, just like,
you know, working with people to make a number come together like, you know,
creating costumes together, thinking about song choice, lighting, practicing all
that, and then having it all happen. It just—it’s fun. I mean, I think that’s fun
and—I think the camaraderie.”

Social support remains a key component in participants’ lives. Social acceptance,

social validation, and appreciation foster self expression. Performers received support

from other performers, significant others, and audience members. One of my original

research questions involved an inquiry into the potential differences between troupe

members and independent performers. Throughout data collection, I quickly discovered

that drag kings exist within a community that extends beyond national borders, sex,

sexuality, gender identification, and other social categories. The group processes that

facilitated identity transformations in Shapiro’s (2007) study also existed among

participants in this sample. However, independent performers receive similar social

support, opportunities for enactment, exposure to information and resources, and
“imaginative possibility” (Shapiro 2007). This suggests that a strong social network and proximity to other drag kings and gender performers provide the necessary mechanisms for identity transformations among performers. Many participants view the stage as a forum, a place to educate, a space to challenge cultural assumptions, an opportunity to cast a lasting effect on anyone exposed to drag kinging, and a means to intentionally or unintentionally explore their selves and personal identities. The majority of identity shifts that take place involve subtle aspects of identity work and the inclusion of how performing often leads to a split self dynamic among participants.

Discussion

I originally designed this study to explore two main research questions. First, how does performing as a drag king impact the performers’ gender identities? Shapiro (2007) focused on drag kings within a troupe and found that performers tend to experience gender identity transformations and the troupe environment provided the necessary mechanisms for identity transformations to occur among troupe members. Not all drag kings perform within a troupe. Consequently, the second research question involved a comparison of troupe members and independent performers—i.e. how does drag kinging influence troupe members and independent performers with regard to gender identity? Throughout recruitment and data collection it became clear that the categories of troupe member and independent performer among participants in this sample were limiting. Many independent performers have performed with troupes and/or have been members of a troupe. Troupe members often perform at events outside of troupe shows/events, for example, charity events or production company shows.
Individual production companies exist wherein one or two people put shows together and recruit various gender performers, but a production company does not retain the group structure inherent in a troupe.

The majority of participants experienced gender identity shifts regardless of whether they belonged to a troupe, performed independently, or owned and operated production companies. The troupe versus independent performer comparison did not result in a substantial difference in the occurrence of gender identity shift. Shapiro (2007) identified four mechanisms within a troupe setting that allowed performers the space to explore and ultimately experience gender identity transformations: information/resources through access to support and information about a variety of gender identities, “opportunities for enactment” or a space to explore different gender identities and roles, social support that does not exist in larger society for gender performers, and “imaginative possibility” that taps into creative construction of gender through performance (262-5). Although this research did not replicate Shapiro’s study through design and methodology, it sought to test (in some ways) and expand on the insights gained through her work. The findings in this study suggest that the mechanisms found among Shapiro’s troupe sample exist among drag kings in this sample and possibly among drag kings in general. Proximity to other drag kings and gender performers, information gained through strong social networks, and an annual drag king and community (i.e. inclusive toward a variety of gender performers) conference/event that fosters a sense of community, information and resources, networking, academic panels,
and access to other performers also provide the mechanisms that Shapiro identified in her study.

The deliberate performance of gender within a drag kinging context contributed to overwhelming shifts in participants’ gender identities and sense of self. While Shapiro (2007) defined “gender identity shifts” as “both coming to a new gender identity and defining or understanding a preexisting gender identity in new ways” (257) among her sample, she focused little attention on the scope of these gender identity shifts. This study has extended Shapiro’s groundwork through the exploration of the subtle gender identity shifts, subjective understandings of the self influenced by drag kinging, and the role of embodiment in self expression and overall gender comportment.

Among eighteen participants only two identified as trans, while others experienced more nuanced shifts in gendered self perceptions (regardless of whether participants chose to claim a gender identity label) as a result of drag kinging. For the most part, participants expressed feeling more comfortable with their gendered selves and contributed that to their experiences performing in drag. The comfort gained through onstage performances often spilled into performers’ daily lives. Performers’ gendered self perceptions involved female masculinity in various forms. Drag kinging has allowed them to express gender in ways that transgress normative social expectations. Drag provides a space for: self expression, creativity, gender exploration, role play, social activism, exposure to a wide array of gender expressions/displays and ways of being, social support, acceptance, and social validation.
Drag kings embody and perform masculinity (whether one identifies as gender-fluid, label-free, butch, femme, androgynous, etc.). The notion of an authentic female body or authentic gender self becomes quite unrealistic, especially with regard to drag kings. Halberstam explains the anxiety and/or fear that surrounds drag king performers, “Much of mainstream discomfort or disinterest in Drag Kings has to do with the fear that the costume may never come off, that the performance will become a reality, and that some kind of authentic femininity will be damaged or contaminated by the very impersonation of masculinity” (Volcano & Halberstam 1999:120).

Drag kings remain aware of the social stigma attached to gender bending. The cultural assumption surrounding drag kings is that they are women who desire to be men. Mainstream ideology rests upon an essentialist position that views biology as a determinant of gender. Given the ideological framework, transgressive gender displays, such as drag kinging, contain the potential to disrupt the status quo. The strikingly defensive responses in email participants’ answers to my inquiries into their gender identifications and any shifts that may have occurred through drag kinging compared to face-to-face participant responses further revealed performers’ awareness of the cultural assumption associated with drag kings. Slightly over half of the email participants in this study expressed their gender identifications in defensive, curt responses that often reaffirmed their contentment with their biological sex. The nature of exclusive online interviews hinders data collection when a researcher, essentially an outsider, has no face-to-face interaction with participants in this circumstance. Face-to-face participants often met me at drag shows and spoke informally with me before interview participation. The
face-to-face interview dynamic with a highly visible researcher significantly affected the type of data collected—i.e. face-to-face participants provided more extensive responses to interview questions than email participants. While drag kinging has impacted the majority of participants’ identities, a couple of participants noted that their responses to the interview questions would vary in different times and places in their lives, which highlights the complex and mutable qualities of the self/selves. This aligns with Holstein and Gubrium’s claim that individuals actively construct the self through a narrative process (or storytelling) and this active storytelling draws upon culturally recognizable tools in order for the audience to interpret and understand the self narrative (2000:103). Holstein and Gubrium also assert that an individual chooses how to structure and convey the self throughout the practice of self narration through a variety of everyday technologies. Material mediations and embodiment remain one of the various technologies that an individual can use to construct the self, which maintains implications for one’s notion of self. Goffman refers to the material components of performative contingencies, which are “material features of a social setting, such as stigmatized bodies, posture, demeanor, closed doors and similar barriers to perception, furniture arrangements, lighting, and other corporeal or environmental props that might be used to communicate a particular narrative” (Holstein & Gubrium 2000:187). Because the symbolic meaning behind visual cues work to form narratives of the self for the individual and audience, one’s physical appearance—body, clothes, accessories—can communicate part of one’s self construction and identity.
Participants often described their contemplative efforts involved in constructing their drag onstage personas, which led to many to contemplate their gendered self constructions offstage as well. They learned various techniques for constructing a masculine physical appearance through continually observing and consulting with other performers and experimenting with visual masculine indicators. Not all drag kings perform masculinity exclusively; therefore, the construction of femininity also existed among participants within a drag king context. When I asked participants how they learned to perform in drag, numerous kings referred to learning how to construct their masculine selves for onstage performances. The analysis of field observations showed that performers accessed four distinct social indicators of authentic masculinity to construct their gendered outer appearances. These social cues aided performers in creating the illusion of a male body and allowed them to tailor their physical displays according to each performance/number.

Performers explained that they strive to convey different meanings through their performances, ranging from personal expression, political/social commentary to humor and entertainment. The intentional meanings behind performances contributed to how they chose to construct their physical bodies. Dante, for example, varied her use of facial hair and outward appearances from show to show. She did not always display the same visual indicators of masculinity in the same ways for each performance. Participants discussed the techniques they utilized to construct their gendered bodies and in so doing revealed the creative aspect of drag. Performers frequently enjoyed the freedom to create their own performances, which included song choice, meanings conveyed through
performances, and their overall gendered appearances. There is interplay between the body’s use of material mediations or performative contingencies and these material items on the body. With regard to drag kinging, “the female drag king body is constructed as and through the ‘artifacts’ of various masculine signs and vestimentary codes, be that clothing, the application of facial hair, the use of a ‘pack’ to simulate a penis bulge, postures or stance, and the binding of breasts to create a flat masculine chest” (Hanson 2007:92). Material items serve to convey meaning about one’s identity through the body.

Crossley (2005) utilizes the reflexive aspect of the self to claim that individuals both are their bodies and have their bodies, which engages the body as both subject and object. In other words, there is not a significant difference between mind, self, and body (Crossley 2005:2). Crossley’s focus on the reflexivity involved in embodiment implies that individuals can construct, maintain, and transform their selves and identities. This assertion remains critical in the analysis of participants’ self narratives in this study. For example, Andre captured the reflexivity involved with the immediate gendered self transformations among many participants when she explained that what she wears matters. Drag kinging has led to her to consider the implications of bodily decorations and how that influences what aspects of her self/selves shine through as a result. The act of embodiment both results from the subjective and shapes the subjective.

Throughout the literature on gender, identity, embodiment and drag kinging the theme of one’s reflexivity emerges implicitly. Individuals, through culturally derived gender frames, recognize and attach meanings to embodied symbols—i.e. facial hair, use of space, dress, accessories, speech, posture, gestures, etc. Kumbier (2002) explores the
technologies (or material items) that women use to challenge the perpetuation and
collection of heterosexual norms that accompany the traditional system. Kumbier
differentiates between social and material technologies in drag kinging. Drag is a social
technology, whereas the drag performance (props, dress, body, etc.) encompasses
material technologies. Essentially, this distinction separates the tangible from the
intangible, but both mutually affect each other (Kumbier 2002:193). Kumbier views
femininity (and I would add masculinity) as a social technology. Although Kumbier
performed as both a drag king and drag queen to comprehend the body as a site for
multiple genders, her overall conclusions with regard to gender is in congruence with a
gender fluidity approach.

Budgeon (2003) suggests that a complex relationship between embodiment and
identity exists and that the conceptualization of the body needs to be viewed as an event
rather than an object. This remains a critique of a social constructionist perspective
because it denies the “body as a lived entity by capturing ‘the body only insofar as they
show how its functions, its movements, its “inner” and “outer” workings, have been
shaped by social structures and discourse’ and leave the body as marginalized flesh”
(Budgeon 2003:51). Budgeon criticizes social constructionism and feminism for
overlooking the role of women’s agency in terms of embodiment and the choices that
accompany multiple social contexts. This analysis argues for theory and research into
embodiment, identity, and gender to refrain from interpreting the female body within the
limiting notions of an “authentic” female body. A focus away from one, authentic female
body reflects and reinforces the postmodern assertion that an individual does not have a
fixed, stable, authentic self. What women’s bodies are capable of shatters typical accounts of gender performance, body image, and gender-bending in a variety of social contexts. Budgeon also points out that:

“Being cannot be reduced to an effect of the consumption of images but instead is the result of various forms of self-inventions which occur within embodied practices which also are not effects of representation but sites of production. The self/body configuration is one which is lived via its immersion in a multiplicity of sites, knowledges and processes, therefore, understanding the choices women make in ‘doing’ embodied identity requires a move beyond reductionist accounts, away from questions about what women’s bodies mean to questions about what women’s bodies can do.” (2005:52).

Budgeon’s emphasis on the active agency surrounding women’s agency pertains to participants in this sample because many performers felt a freedom of choice in the type of gendered body they wanted to construct/create, perform, and embody. This agency emerged in the production of their onstage gendered personas and in the construction of their offstage gendered selves.

However transgressive and/or complex a self definition may be, the individual constructing the narrative must situate the self in some relation to that which is already in existence. This consideration pertains to participant self construction throughout interviews, especially with regard to identity and perceptions of multiple selves. Participants, like most members of society, construct and come to terms with their identities through cultural concepts. In fact, the most unanticipated finding in this study surrounds how performers experienced and negotiated their onstage drag personas and their offstage selves with the use of split self concepts. Many of the performers, who experienced a self-described alter ego effect through performing as a drag king over time, spoke about their offstage selves and their onstage personas in ways that extended
beyond a dualistic approach to the self. Yet, the pervasive understanding of the self as
singular and the prevalence of psychoanalytic language in mainstream culture produces
the constraints in self construction through narrative practice.

Participants overwhelmingly discussed their perceived shifts in self feeling in
accordance with a gendered appearance. The act of constructing the outer layer or
physical gendered body influenced the inner gendered self feeling and vice versa. This
also contributed to the split self perception among participants. Schrock, Reid, and Boyd
(2005) argue that the material body and subjectivity coexist in the production of gendered
individuals, which ultimately supports the idea that gender is embodied. The reciprocal
relationship between the body and the subjective arose among performers as they
explained the self transformations they experienced through constructing the tangible
cultural gender cues, such as the creation of primary and secondary sex characteristics
and gendered clothing. Schrock, Reid, and Boyd assert that “clothing is more than a
gendered text; it helps transform the physical body into a gendered vessel” (2005:324).
The continuous negotiation among subjectivity, embodiment, identity, and self arises in
Finkelstein’s (1991) interpretation of Goffman:

“It is in the enactment of the roles, scripts and regulated performances which we
deer appropriate to the situation, that Goffman has shown where and how a sense
of personal identity is produced. With physical appearances, for instance, he has
described how the individual’s sense of equilibrium and self-hood can be drama-
tically altered when his or her appearance is changed” (Finkelstein 1991:185).

Given these considerations and participants’ overwhelming descriptions of shifts in self
that stem from gender embodiment both onstage and offstage, the concept of a true, fixed
self appears overly simplistic and ultimately fallible.
Hanson (2007) describes how the identity label “drag king” remains a source of empowerment for women, who embody masculinity. Drag king embodiment draws meaning from the social context—a gay bar or any other safe environment (Hanson 2007:64). The act of being and embodying masculinity holds implications for drag kings’ use of space, posture, demeanor, gestures, facial expressions, and race/ethnicity (Hanson 2007; Shapiro 2007). Throughout the analysis of field observations and interviews, the role of social support emerged as a significant factor in how drag kinging facilitates shifts in performers’ gender identifications in various ways. A drag space is contextually unique in that gender performers receive immediate audience acceptance, support, and social validation for otherwise stigmatized self expressions or gender displays. A drag king space allows female masculinity to flourish and to be celebrated. Female masculinity depends upon the existence of mainstream gender ideology because “drag kings deliberately and consciously evoke the restrictions of feminine bodily comportment and femaleness, whilst employing tactics of traditionally ‘masculine’ bodily performance—unrestricted, uninhibited, free and active—in order to embrace and gain pleasure from their femaleness or female body and as a rebellious refusal to be confined by that femaleness” (Hanson 2007:65). Within women’s gendered lived experiences of being subordinate, restricted, and in opposition to men and masculinity, female masculinity depends on the socio-historical, cultural frameworks that place the female body and femaleness as the other. Among participants in this study, the current definition of who can be a drag king retains inclusivity in ways that did not exist in the past. Although drag kings are traditionally recognized and thought of as women performing
masculinity onstage, participants frequently explained that anyone who claims the label drag king and incorporates some type of masculinity into his/her performances is a drag king. It is not surprising that freedom of choice in self identification with regard to the label drag king emerged among participants because freedom and self choice became the primary theme among performers’ definitions of gender and identification. However, given this more inclusive definition of who can be a drag king, this particular gender performance began with women performing masculinity and women largely comprise the majority of drag kings. Consequently, much of the research on drag kinging taps into the subversive aspects of masculinity filtered through women’s bodies.

Hanson (2007) also emphasizes the corporeal importance of the female body to “mediate” and transgress cultural frameworks. The female body is what makes female masculinity in all its forms because the body facilitates the embodiment of masculinity. Hanson argues that drag king embodiment is not a role or performance, instead it is “about discovering and experiencing a powerful bodily ‘tool’ for enhancing women’s phenomenal experience of their bodies, affording them an empowering and personally constructed ‘ideal’ or other embodied perspective of the self/body that contests prevailing and even personal constructions and representations of the female body” (Hanson 2007:75). Like Butler, Hanson recognizes the female body as a sexed site. Conceptualizations of the body and identity incorporate a social constructionist perspective and the inclusion of women’s agency. Female masculinity embodiment is the product of subjectivity because the subject becomes an object in order to view the self through a subjective lens.
Although drag kinging holds a larger transgressive potential, I sought to explore how this purposive performance of masculinity influences the performers’ gender identities with the inclusion of a comparison between troupe members and independent performers. I utilized two qualitative methods, interviews and field observations, to elicit both performers’ personal narrative experiences and to gain insight into this particular social scene. A substantial part of my findings align with Shapiro’s (2007) research results. The consistency in findings between this research and Shapiro’s (2007) study serves to strengthen the overall results. Performers in this sample also experienced gender identity shifts as the result of performing as a drag king and the mechanism that allows for gender identity transformation in a drag space exist in this study as well.

I asked two primary research questions: How does performing as a drag king impact individual performers’ gender identities? How do troupe members’ experiences differ from independent performers’ experiences with regard to gender identities and any possible shifts? Within this sample troupe member and independent performer distinctions did not result in any substantial differences. Both independent performers and troupe members frequently identified shifts in gender identities; however, the types of gender identity shifts involved the subtle aspects of gender identification—not necessarily shifts in gender identity labels. Drag kinging undoubtedly provides a space for gender identity transformations that can and do lead to performers coming to terms with a transgender identity, which may or may not necessitate the reconstruction of their biological/anatomical bodies. This study highlights the gray area in between a
nonexistent shift in gender identification as a result of drag kinging and a transgender realization in gender identity through drag kinging.

The relationship between gender embodiment and self perceptions arose as the most unanticipated finding and a central theme in performers’ negotiations of gender identity/identities. Not only did performers actively construct and embody certain gender comportments, they perceived shifts in self feelings according to their gender embodiment. A constant interplay between the subjective and gender embodiment presented itself to performers over time. Participants noted this about how drag impacts their gender identities and understandings of their selves. Participants often narrated their selves through split self discourse. For example, many performers expressed a dualistic, oppositional contrast between their masculine onstage drag personas compared to their onstage selves wherein their drag personas frequently acted in ways that their onstage selves would “never” act. Drag carries different meanings for each performer, but the self outlet component involved with drag kinging allows these performers to be essentially what they are not in their daily lives outside of drag. Field observations supported participants’ explanations into how they become different selves through drag. As participants came closer to drag, temporally and spacially, their overall gender comportments, which included physical appearance, posture, demeanor, gestures, personality, etc. shifted. This particular finding coupled with the more nuanced exploration of performers’ identity shifts contributes to drag king research with regard to depth and breadth. While Shapiro (2007) inverted the scope of drag king research compared to previous literature that focused on the larger social implications of drag
kinging, this research extends that inverted view and probes into the more immediate effects of performing on performers themselves. The results hold implications for gender studies, identity theory, and notions about the self, while engaging a micro sociological inquiry into identity and self tied to gender.

One of the strengths of this research is the rich data that resulted from field observations and interviews. Various themes arose throughout data analysis, but I limited my findings to the original research questions and my next step will be to revisit those themes and analyze them. Although I primarily focused on gender exclusively, the interconnectedness of gender and other social categories, such as race/ethnicity, social class, age, and sexuality (among other social locations and categories) culminate in the process of gender identification. Analysis of the data suggests that the complexity of gender identification among drag kings in this sample includes a matrix of social categories. The next steps of this research include addressing how these other social categories influence performers’ gender identifications and self perceptions and exploring the consequences of individual transformations on the larger group.
Bibliography


Appendix A1

Interview Questions for Troupe Drag King Performers

1. What does it mean to be a drag king?
2. When did you first begin to perform in drag?
3. How long have you performed as a drag king?
4. How did you learn to perform?
5. Are there any rules that an individual must know in order to perform as a drag king? How do you learn what these rules are?
6. Who can be a drag king?
7. Have you ever performed alone?
8. How did you decide your drag name and persona?
9. Is there a difference between you on & off-stage?
10. When you perform, what are you trying to say to the audience?
11. What is the difference between a drag king and a male impersonator? Is there a difference?
12. What are some of the emotions associated with doing drag? How do they affect you?
13. What motivates you to perform?
14. How do you see your drag performances? Is it for entertainment or are you trying to communicate something to the audience?
15. What is the best part of performing?
16. How do you see yourself in relation to other drag kings?
17. What have been some major turning points throughout your life in terms of being a drag king? How have they impacted you?
18. Is there a coming out process for drag kings? Do friends, family, and co-workers know that you perform? Are they supportive?
19. What does gender mean to you? How do you define gender?
20. How did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?
21. Has your gender identification changed since performing drag? How?
22. Do you consider yourself a political activist?
   22a. How are you politically active?
   22b. What has led you to be politically active?
   22c. Has performing as a drag king led to your political activism? How?
   23a. What are some of the [troupe’s] political causes?
   23b. How does the [troupe] support this cause(s)?
24. Where have you performed?
25. How does where you perform influence your performance?
26. Is there anything you want to tell me? Or anything I haven’t asked that you think I should have?
Appendix A2

Interview Questions for Free Lance Drag Kings

1. What does it mean to be a drag king?
2. When did you first begin to perform in drag?
3. How long have you performed as a drag king?
4. How did you learn how to perform as a drag king?
5. Are there any rules that an individual must know in order to perform as a drag king? How do you learn what these rules are?
6. Who can be a drag king?
7. Have you ever performed in a troupe?
   7a. How long did you perform with (group name)?
   7b. Why did you join the group?
   7c. Why did you stop performing with (group name)?
8. How did you decide your drag name and persona?
9. Is there a difference between you on & off stage?
10. When you perform drag, what are you trying to say to the audience?
11. What is the difference between a drag king and a male impersonator? Is there a difference between the two?
12. What are some of the emotions associated with doing drag? How do they affect you?
13. What motivates you to perform?
14. How do you see your drag performances? Is it for entertainment or are you trying to communicate something to the audience?
15. What is the best part of performing?
16. How do you see yourself in relation to other drag kings?
17. What have been some major turning points throughout your life in terms of being a drag king? How have they impacted you?
18. Is there a coming out process for drag kings? Do friends, family, and co-workers know that you perform? Are they supportive?
19. What does gender mean to you? How do you define gender?
20. How did you identify yourself in terms of gender before you started performing as a drag king?
21. Has your gender identification changed since performing drag? Why or why not? How?
22. Do you consider yourself a political activist?
   22a. How are you politically active?
22b. What has led you to be politically active?