LISTENING TO DRAG: MUSIC, PERFORMANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how music is utilized in drag performances to create an oppositional culture that challenges dominant structures of gender and sexuality. I situate this analysis in literature on the role of music and other cultural resources in the mobilization of social movement protest. Drawing from multiple sources of data, I demonstrate that drag queen performers make use of popular songs to build solidarity, evoke a sense of injustice, and enhance feelings of agency among audience members – three dimensions of cognition that constitute a collective action framework, conducive to social protest.

The analysis is based on observations of drag performances; content analysis of the lyrics of drag songs; intensive interviews with drag queens at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida; focus groups with audience members who attended the shows at the 801 Cabaret; and interviews with drag queen informants in Columbus, Ohio. I demonstrate how drag performers use music to construct new alliances and understandings of gender and sexuality among gay and heterosexual members of the audience. The data illustrate that drag performers strategically select songs to evoke an array of emotions among audience members. First are songs that utilize sympathy, sorrow, and humor to build solidarity. These include songs that are intended to educate heterosexuals about gay life as well as songs that parody heterosexuality. Second are songs that express rage and...
anger over dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality, thus fostering a sense of injustice. Third are songs that heighten audience members’ perceptions of agency by portraying images of powerful women and demonstrating the ability to live one’s life outside of hegemonic gender and sexual constraints.

During drag shows, audience members and performers alike engage in gendered and sexual behaviors that transgress binary categories of homosexual/heterosexual and feminine/masculine. Drag shows thus constitute oppositional cultures, or free spaces, where participants enact behaviors that are suppressed in the dominant culture and build politicized views of gender and sexuality. This study therefore provides an empirical example of how music is used as a cultural resource to challenge dominant institutions and construct collective action frameworks necessary to mobilize political protest.
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Writing this dissertation has been a rewarding and exciting experience. I first got involved with research on drag queens and music as a research assistant for Verta Taylor, who with Leila Rupp wrote *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Verta and Leila have nurtured my interests and provided entrée into the drag scene in Key West. In addition to sharing their data, they shared their homes (both in Columbus and Key West) and their lives. They offered constant support, advice, mentoring, and affection, serving as wonderful role models in my academic, as well as my personal life.

From the first time I landed in Key West, I was hooked. This project gave me the excuse to return several times, often with Leila and Verta. The three of us, along with Josh Gamson, conducted interviews with drag queens and focus groups with audience members at the 801. I owe a great debt to the focus group participants and to the drag queens—Sushi, Milla, RV, Scabby, Margo, Inga, Desiray, Kylie Jean, and Gugi Gomez—for sharing their lives and entertaining me all of those nights at the show. In addition, I attended many drag shows in Columbus, Ohio, in order to provide comparative analysis. The drag queens in Columbus were important “informants” on drag beyond the vacation town of Key West. Even more, they were, and are, fantastic fun. All of them have taught me about the power of music, and the fun of social change.
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CHAPTER 1

MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

On a warm evening in June 2002, over 200 people crowd into a gay bar in Columbus, Ohio to attend a drag queen show – a show in which biological men dress and perform songs as women. Most members of the audience have spent the day outside in the sun walking through the downtown streets for the Gay Pride Parade – an annual march that has become a standard form of demonstration worldwide for the gay and lesbian movement (Adam, Duyvendak, Krouwel 1999). As the show begins, Nina West, a local drag queen, comes out on stage dressed in a white satin dress. She begins the show by performing “The Gods Love Nubia” a song from the musical *Aida*. The musical, based on Verdi’s opera of the same name, tells the story of an African princess whose county, Nubia, is at war with Egypt. In this particular song, the Princess Aida attempts to rally the people of her nation, despite the fact that their king has been captured by the Egyptians. The lyrics of the song convey hope for the future and romanticize a nationalist identity, reassuring the listener that “the gods love Nubia:”

Take me in my dreams recurring
Cheerful as a childhood dance
Into one more taste of freedom
One more longing backward glance
The gods love Nubia, the beautiful, the golden

1 In some drag queen shows, performers sing in their own voices. In most, however, the entertainers lip synch to recordings of popular songs.
The radiant, the fertile, the gentle and the blessed
The pain of Nubia is only for the moment
The desolate, the suffering
The plundered, the oppressed
The gods love Nubia
We have to keep believing
Though scattered and divided, we are still its heart

As Nina lip-synchs the words in this crowded gay bar, however, the song takes on a new meaning. Rather than affirming a nationalist identity in the face of war, the song speaks to the need to maintain a united gay and lesbian identity in the face of homophobia and crises, such as the AIDS epidemic, that have devastated the gay and lesbian community.

This interpretation of the lyrics is made explicit by a giant video screen that hangs over the stage. Flashing on the screen are images of famous gay or lesbian celebrities, such as Melissa Ethridge; well-known drag queens, such as RuPaul; leaders of local gay and lesbian organizations, such as the organization that funds the gay pride parade and the organization that maintains statistics on anti-gay hate crimes; demonstrators in the day’s gay pride parade and in pride parades from past years; and individuals, such as Ryan White, who have publicly acknowledged their own personal battles with AIDS. At one moment, the screen flashes a photo of a local drag queen who was murdered in her own house just one month earlier. At this sight, the audience begins to applaud, and as the image of the drag queen fades from the screen, it is replaced with the words, “We are all fighting the same fight.” As the number ends, Nina is joined on stage by six other performers, each in differently colored satin dresses. When these performers come together on stage, the dresses comprise the colors of the rainbow flag – the symbol of both unity and diversity adopted by the gay community in the late 1970s (Epstein 1999: 42).
Observing a musical number in such a show as this raises several questions related to the study of culture and social movements. Do performers strategically select songs with lyrics that lend themselves to a political interpretation? What is the affect of these performances on audience members? How are such musical numbers as this related to the politicized view of gender and sexuality articulated by gay and lesbian social movements?

Recent literature on social movements is filled with debate on the political significance of performances and a newfound attention to the role of culture in social protest (e.g., Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Jasper 1997; Johnston and Klandermans 1995). In this project, I build on this prior literature by studying how music is utilized in drag performances to create an alternative culture that challenges dominant structures of gender and sexuality. I present data on the lyrics of songs used in drag performances, the portrayal of the songs by performers, and the audience members’ responses to the songs. The data illustrate how the musical numbers in drag shows convey an oppositional consciousness about gender and sexuality that contains the dimensions of a collective action frame necessary to mobilize political protest.

Social Movements and Culture

In the last two decades, scholars of social movements have taken a new interest in culture as an important component of protest. In earlier work, resource mobilization theorists (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983) emphasized access to resources and the creation of formal organizations as the key ingredients to mobilizing protest. Political process theorists have argued that opportunities in the political context explain
mobilization (e.g., Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Tilly 1978). But recent work asserts that social movement culture is as important to the mobilization of protest as resources and opportunities (e.g., Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Jasper and Goodwin 1999; Jasper 1997; Johnston and Klandermans 1995).

The central argument made by these scholars, sometimes called *new social movement* theorists, is that understanding protest requires attention to the cultural and cognitive processes through which individuals decide to participate in a movement (Melucci 1989). Although political opportunities are important to understanding cycles of protest (Tarrow 1998), the existence of an opportunity to protest is not a complete explanation for why people choose to join a social movement (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). A discussion of social psychological, cultural, and cognitive processes is necessary to determine how people make meaning of their circumstances and choose to participate in a social movement (Morris and Mueller 1992).

Cultural theorists and social movement scholars have articulated various ways to define and study culture (Johnston and Klandermans 1995). Some view culture as systemic and rigid; others see culture as performed and fluid. Yet much literature on the role of culture and SM focuses on two concepts: *collective identity* and *collective action frames*.

Taylor and Whittier (1992) succinctly define collective identity as the “sense of ‘we’” among social movement participants. Social movement scholars, including both new social movement proponents (e.g., Melucci 1996, 1989) and political process theorists (e.g., Tarrow 1998; McAdam, McCarthy, And Zald 1996), assert that collective identity construction is central to the mobilization of social movements. Melucci’s
(1989) work, which has typically been credited with launching the new social movement paradigm and shifting the focus to identity, criticizes earlier resource mobilization approaches (e.g., Tilly 1978; McCarthy and Zald 1977) for taking group formation for granted, assuming a pre-existing, neat division between members of the polity and the challengers that mobilize against them. Melucci argues, by contrast, that social movement theorists need to problematize group formation and analyze its role in social movement mobilization. Acknowledging the criticism, more recent political process theorists assert the primacy of political opportunities and resources, but nonetheless agree that collective identity is a necessary precondition for social movements (Tarrow 1998).

The consensus that identity is of fundamental importance to social movements has led scholars to apply the concept of collective identity in empirical work. Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) work on lesbian feminist communities was one of the first. The authors identify three basic components of collective identity: the construction of boundaries between insiders and outsiders; the formation of an oppositional, political consciousness; and the negotiation of identity through everyday practices including language and dress. By illustrating with an empirical example, Taylor and Whittier make the concept of collective identity less abstract and help explain how researchers can recognize and operationalize collective identity.

Like identity, collective action frames are important to understanding movement mobilization and participation. Snow et al. (1986) were the first to put forth the term “frame” as it applies to social movements. Drawing from Goffman, they define frames as “interpretive schemata” that make meaning of social life and guide action. Framing is important to social movements because it explains how participants interpret a situation
in a way that facilitates protest. An individual may participate in a movement if her or his framework for understanding a social problem incorporates a sense of injustice and thus aligns with a movement frame (Snow et al. 1986).

Some scholars (e.g., McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996) have incorporated the concept of framing into resource mobilization and political process models of social movements. For example, Cress and Snow (2000) utilize this approach to examine the success of social movement organizations that advocate for the rights of homeless people. They find that various combinations of factors contribute to social movement organizations’ abilities to achieve their goals. The presence of articulate and coherent social movement frameworks is as significant as the existence of formal organizations and the presence of elite allies.

Although the importance of collective action frameworks to social movement mobilization is well accepted, scholars have identified several limitations in this. Benford (1997), an early proponent of the concept of framing, offers an “insider’s critique” of the framing perspective. He suggests that empirical studies of framing too often take a snapshot, static approach to operationalizing social movement frames. Framing is better understood, he suggests, as an ongoing process. Other scholars argue that the narrow focus on collective action frames sidesteps many of the collective, performative aspects of culture. Jasper and Goodwin, pointing to a significant rift in the literature on culture and social movements, suggest that the concept of framing “actually leaves out most of culture” (1999: 29). Likewise, Swidler (1995) suggests that the framing literature wrongly overemphasizes the individual, cognitive dimensions of protest at the expense of more collective dimensions. She suggests that social movement
scholars need to “turn culture inside out” by shifting our focus away from thinking about how culture matters because it is inside people’s heads and affects behavior. Instead, we should look at external manifestations of culture, such as rituals and performances.

_Oppositional Cultures_

Some scholars have begun to explore the collective cultural expressions to which Swidler (1995) and Jasper and Goodwin (1999) call our attention. These scholars document the use of dance, music, and prayer among social movement participants (e.g., F. Harris 2001; Patillo-McCoy 1998; Japer 1997; Morris 1984). A recent collection of essays edited by Mansbridge and Morris (2001) groups many of these collective performances together under the concept of _oppositional culture_. In her contribution to this book, Mansbridge (2001: 7) defines oppositional culture as the “ideas, rituals, and long-standing patterns of interaction that overt political struggle can refine and develop to create a more mature oppositional consciousness.” Similar to the concept of a collective action frame, Mansbridge identifies the central component of oppositional consciousness as a sense of injustice. This sense of injustice is crystallized through protest and social movement participation. Yet, as other essays in the collection describe, the seeds of an oppositional consciousness are contained in the pre-existing cultures of such marginalized groups as African Americans (F. Harris 2001; Morris 1984), those with visual or hearing impairments (Groch 2001), Mexican Americans (Rodriguez 2001), or gays and lesbians (Stockdill 2001).

The concept of oppositional culture thus makes two important contributions to the literature on culture and social movements. First, it bridges the divide between cultural
expressions, such as music and dance, and the concept of oppositional consciousness or collective action frames. By suggesting that pre-existing cultures contain elements of a sense of injustice and critique of the status quo necessary to formulate an oppositional consciousness, proponents of studying oppositional culture combine the ideas of two divergent trends in the literature on culture and social movements. Second, the concept of oppositional culture hypothesizes an empirical link between pre-existing communities, cultural expressions, and the formation of social movements.

Several empirical studies examine the relationship between communities and social movements. Morris (1984) and Morris and Braine (2001) emphasize how structural inequalities can set the stage for protest by segregating marginalized groups and thus facilitating their formation of a critical, oppositional culture. Morris (1984) describes how the tripartite system of oppression – which separated African Americans from whites economically, politically, and personally – set the stage for the civil rights movement. Segregation reinforced the boundary between whites and African Americans and thus facilitated the construction of an oppositional culture, often centralized in Black churches. This oppositional culture not only built a feeling of solidarity and a sense of injustice that were necessary precursors to the movement but also maintained protesters’ commitment to the movement at later stages through the use of collective performances. Civil rights activists often used songs and prayer as a way to boost morale during protest, especially when experiencing repression. Studying more recent protest, Harris (2001) demonstrates that activists use continue to use Black hymns and prayers to mobilize support to elect Black politicians. Groch (2001) suggests that segregation also facilitated
the emergence of a disability rights movement: the creation of separate “free spaces” enabled groups of hearing-impaired individuals to develop an oppositional consciousness.

*Music and Protest*

Like Morris (1984), other scholars have noted the role of song in building an oppositional culture and in the overt protest of the civil rights and labor movements.² Roscigno and Danaher (2001) and Lynch (2001) show that folk songs served to mobilize participants into protests by the American labor movement. Analyzing the lyrics of the songs, Roscigno and Danaher (2001) demonstrate how folk music facilitated a sense of collective identity among American textile workers in the 1930s. Similarly, Patillo-McCoy (1998) examines the lyrics to Black hymns to argue that the culture of the black church – including prayers, songs, and call-and-response interaction – continues to play a role in collective organizing and political activism. Rose (1994) demonstrates that rap music, like church hymns, also fosters a political, oppositional culture among a younger generation of African Americans.

Although these previous examples focus on American social movements, music has played a role in social protest worldwide. Scholars suggest that music has played a role in political change in such diverse locations as South Africa, Germany, Hungary, China, and Argentina (Garofala 1992). Stamatov (2002) illustrates that Italian audiences in the 1840s utilized Verdi’s operas to build a nationalist identity.

² Eyerman and Jamison (1998) also suggest that a reciprocal relationship exists. Analyzing musical trends in the twentieth century, the authors suggest that social upheaval and change brought about by the civil rights movement affected the sound of popular songs.
While focusing on the role of music in building social movements focused on race, class, and nationalism, the literature on music and social change has largely ignored issues of gender and sexuality. Two exceptions to this are the articles by Staggenborg, Eder, and Sudderth (1994) and Shippers (2002) that document the formation of a feminist culture organized around musical performances. Staggenborg, Eder, and Sudderth (1994) examine the annual National Women’s Music Festival as a site where women not only listen to music but also build a feminist collective through socializing, networking, and attending educational workshops. Shippers (2002) examines the alternative hard rock scene as a space where participants transgress conventions of dominant masculinity and femininity. Analyzing the dress code of alternative hard rockers, Shippers states that women often juxtapose such markers of feminine sexuality as mini-skirts with such symbols of masculinity as combat boots and flannel shirts. By combining these seemingly disparate styles, female rockers resist being viewed merely as feminine, sexual objects. Simultaneously, the “geek” look – adopted by men in the hard rock culture – symbolically places them in a subordinate position. The work of Shippers (2002) and Staggenborg, Eder, and Sudderth (1994) provides empirical evidence of how oppositional feminist and anti-patriarchal cultures develop around music. Ironically, however, their work examines the social interactions around music without addressing the actual content of the music.
Discussion and Outline of the Following Chapters

The research set forth in this dissertation examines the role of drag-show music\(^3\) in building an oppositional culture. This project contributes to our understanding of music and social change by analyzing a culture that challenges dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality – two dimensions of stratification that are ignored in much of the existing literature on music and social movements. Unlike prior work on gender and music, I examine the content of song lyrics, as well as the culture around performances and the audience’s responses, to document how music is a resource used to build oppositional culture.

Through the study of drag songs, I combine an analysis of collective cultural practices – music and performance – with two central concepts in the social movement literature – framing and collective identity. Building from other empirical work on oppositional cultures, I explicate the relationship between social communities and their cultural rituals, and the formation of politicized frameworks and social movements. As Benford (1997) suggests, such an analysis elaborates on the concept of framing as an ongoing process and helps explain how frames originate. I examine drag shows as “free spaces” (Groch 2001) where an oppositional, gay culture is formed in order to answer the question: what does this oppositional culture tell us about the role of music in formulating collective action frameworks that facilitate participation in the gay and lesbian movement?

\(^3\) This project focuses on drag queen shows – performances in which men dress as women – rather than drag king shows – performances in which women dress as men. For a discussion of drag kings, see Halberstam (1998).
In order to study the relationship between drag-show culture and social movement frameworks, I utilize W. Gamson’s (1992) description of collective action frame. Gamson suggests that three aspects of social movement frameworks are necessary to mobilize participants. The first is identity, which defines both members of the challenging group as well as their target. In other words, the identity aspect of a collective action frame separates “us” from “them.” The second is injustice. A collective action frame must define a situation as unjust and in need of remedy. The third component is agency. In order to mobilize protesters, a collective action frame must specify how protest can change the situation. In the following chapters, I use drag performances as a concrete example of how people use music to construct an oppositional culture that expresses all three of Gamson’s dimensions of a collective action frame. Specifically, drags performances use music to create a collective identity, evoke feelings of injustice, and promote a sense of agency.

In chapter two, I discuss the history of drag and other forms of cross-dressing to explain why drag shows can be conceived of as “free spaces” where oppositional, gay culture is formed. I also discuss the role of music in this oppositional gay culture. This chapter explains why drag shows are an appropriate case to study in order to further examine the role of music in building oppositional culture. Chapter three details the methodology used in this study and describes the demographic characteristics of the drag performers and audience members.

Chapters four through six correspond to the three dimensions of a collective action frame, as described by Gamson (1992). Chapter four analyzes songs that relate to collective identity. I suggest that drag performers draw from a common repertoire of
songs. Many of these songs can be considered “gay anthems” that speak specifically to the experiences of gay men and lesbians. These songs therefore build solidarity among gay and lesbian audience members, while also educating heterosexuals.

Chapter five analyzes songs about injustice. Specifically, these songs offer a critique of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Some of these songs are written explicitly about gay experiences. Others, however, are popular songs that are given new meaning by being performed in the context of a drag show (Rupp and Taylor 2003). Many of these are songs originally performed by African American women. This chapter therefore suggests that an analysis of context is important for understanding music and that oppositional cultures incorporate various resources in the broader culture.

Chapter six analyzes how agency is expressed through music in drag shows. As Mansbridge (2001) notes, some concepts in social movement theory are better understood as continuua rather than as dichotomies. Here, I utilize a broad definition of agency that differs from that used in most of the social movement literature. Gamson (1992:7) defines agency as “the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action.” A narrow interpretation of this would focus on agency as the consciousness that one can affect policy change through social movement participation. In chapter six, however, I identify as agency the ability to conceptualize alternatives to the dominant sex and gender system, and the realization that groups of individuals do indeed live outside the dominant norms of sex and gender. This broad view of agency is appropriate for an analysis of gay and lesbian politics because, as many scholars note, the gay and lesbian liberation movement can be characterized as the quintessential new social movement that emphasizes changing culture, identities, and cultural codes, in addition to
formal political policies (e.g., Castells 1997). As Morris and Braine (2001:21) suggest, “the essence of such cultural change is to convince people to see things differently.” Thus the possibility to “alter conditions” that Gamson (1992) identifies as a central component of agency relates, in the case of the gay and lesbian movement, to the potential to live outside of dominant, heterosexual gender and sexual norms. This view of agency and social change explains why “coming out” – or publicly declaring one’s self as gay or lesbian – is considered the central strategy of the gay and lesbian movement (Taylor and Raeburn 1995; D’Emilio 1983).

In chapter seven, I summarize the findings of the study and elaborate on its implications for theories of gender and sexuality. I also summarize the findings of the study with respect to social movement literature and return to a discussion of music as a cultural resource for building collective action frames. Finally, I consider the applicability of this study to other groups and social movements.
Chapter one summarizes theories of the relationship between culture and social movements and identifies gaps in this literature. In this chapter, I review the existing research on drag performances to demonstrate how they have been closely associated with the building of gay and lesbian identities and communities in twentieth-century American history. I suggest that music and drag performances are important components of gay culture and studying them provides insight into the oppositional elements of this culture. To identify the oppositional elements of drag, I situate its history in theories about gender and sexuality as systems of stratification.

**Theories of the Sex and Gender System**

Historical and anthropological research reveals that gender categorization has varied over time and place. Institutionalized “cross-gender” or “third gender” categories have existed in such societies as fifth-century Scythians (Bullough and Bullough 1993:24) and various eighteenth and nineteenth-century Native American communities (Blackwood 1984; Whitehead 1981). Likewise, historians of sexuality (e.g., D’Emilio 1983; Rupp 1999) have shown that the classification of individuals as homosexual or
heterosexual is a recent, modern creation. In other times and places, sexuality was structured around power relations, gender performance, or the role played in the sex act, rather than merely around the biological sex of the participants (Brown 1989; Halperin 1989; Keuls 1985; Ng 1989). In modern, western cultures, however, conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality are organized around binary and discrete categories – male and female, masculine and feminine, and heterosexual and homosexual (Lorber 1994). Because these categories are seen as fundamental sources of gender and sexual stratification, much scholarship in gender theory addresses the social construction of these dichotomies (e.g., Lorber 1994; Butler 1990; Connell 1987).

Some scholars explain gender as socially constructed through everyday interaction (e.g., Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet these theories also emphasize that patterns of interaction are repeated with consistency over time, making gender an institution with two stable and hierarchically ranked categories – masculine, which is dominant, and feminine, which is subordinate. Masculine and feminine gender categories are assigned to individuals based on biological sex. For such theorists as Lorber (1994) and Connell (1987), gender is considered a primary system of classifying individuals. Other systems of differentiation – such as class, race, and sexuality – intersect and mutually reinforce gender stratification.

Sexuality is discussed in most of this social constructionist theory in terms of how it reinforces gender distinctions. As a social system, heterosexuality buttresses and stabilizes gender stratification by keeping women dependent on men (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Rich 1986). Conversely, homosexuality disrupts the gender order and is therefore suppressed.
Critics have pointed out some limitations of this social constructionist framework for understanding gender and sexuality. Butler (1990) and other proponents of queer theory (e.g., Seidman 1996; Warner 1993) suggest that gender and sexuality categories are more mutable and fluid than what social constructionists imply. These critics point out that the model of sex and gender as institutions fails to explain the changes that we see in cultures across time and space. Butler (1990) even suggests that many gender scholars are themselves guilty of reproducing gender dichotomies by repeatedly emphasizing that masculinity and femininity are opposing categories.

Butler (1990) asserts that gender is better understood as a performance rather than an institution. However, her views are concurrent with social constructionists on a few points. Similar to other gender theorists, Butler asserts that gender performances are relational and hierarchical: in contemporary, western societies, masculinity is more powerful than femininity. She also states that this relationship between genders works to normalize heterosexuality. Butler differs from social constructionists by emphasizing the numerous ways in which individuals transgress and modify gender through their performances. Individuals do not universally conform to a single definition of masculinity or femininity. The transformation and fluidity of gender should be the focus of scholarship, lest we reify the very systems of stratification that we are studying.

Butler points to drag specifically as one type of practice that de-stabilizes the gender order. Drag performers subvert gender not only by taking on the dress and mannerisms of the other sex but also by showing that gender itself is a hoax. Drag performers reveal to their audience that gender is a performance with no basis in biology. Butler and other queer theorists suggest that same-sex sexuality, transexuality, female
masculinity, and male effeminacy (e.g., Seidman 1996; Warner 1993; Halberstam 1998) are all practices that disrupt binary classifications of gender. Queer theorists focus on the potential for change through the production of these multiple and dynamic genders.

By focusing on transgression and disruption, queer theory minimizes attention to the stability of the sex and gender system. It sidesteps an analysis of the real world constraints that compel individuals to conform to social norms and to define themselves in terms of binary gender and sexuality categories (Ault 1996). This theoretical framework has thus been criticized for being too abstract and removed from actual, lived experiences (Stein and Plummer 1996; Ault 1996).

In this research project, I integrate social constructionist and queer frameworks. As queer theory suggests, my research examines the production of multiple, dynamic, transgressive genders and sexualities. However, I apply this framework to a concrete, empirical study. By examining how audience members understand and interpret drag shows, I try to balance attention to gender resistance with recognition of the social stability of gender categories. I acknowledge that dominant sex and gender norms exist, but look at drag shows as an oppositional culture where these norms are challenged.

**Drag, Cross-Dressing, and Gay Culture**

The effect of drag on sex and gender systems has been the subject of much debate. Some feminist scholars argue that when men don the accoutrements of femininity and perform for an audience, they are reifying dominant gender relations by imitating and mocking images of womanhood (e.g., Feigen 2000; Schacht 2000). Others suggest that cross-dressing is liberating because it creates new gender and sexual
categories rather than reinforces existing, dichotomous ones (e.g., Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998). Despite the interest of scholars of gender and sexuality in cross-dressing, there has been surprisingly little empirical research on drag performances that actually includes data on how audiences interpret them.

Some scholars have approached the topic of drag from the fields of literary and performance studies. For example, Baker (1994) presents the history of drag as a theatrical performance. Marjorie Garber (1992) analyzes depictions of drag queens and other cross-dressers in art and literature – using such diverse texts as Shakespearean plays, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, the film *Tootsie*, and the fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood.” Garber suggests that cross-dressers in literature represent a “category crisis” because they cannot be characterized as masculine or feminine. As a result, cross-dressers trouble a dichotomous gender system – as well as binary categorization all together – by creating space for a third category.

Others have approached the study of drag from social science disciplines using interviews with performers and observations of shows, rather than literary texts, to understand drag. Esther Newton’s (1979) well-known study, *Mother Camp*, documents the lives of drag queen performers in New York, Chicago, and Kansas City in the 1960s. She recognizes the challenge that drag poses to the dominant gender and sexual order by noting how drag performers often mock heterosexuality and express anger about the subordination of gays and lesbians in dominant culture. However, Newton situates her discussion of drag in the language of deviance, stigma, and submission, and ultimately paints a picture of drag queens as marginalized and somewhat pathetic. Quoting one of her interviewers, she ends her book with the statement that “The female impersonator is
in reality a very sad person. They want to belong, yet they’ve jumped off the bridge of society… there is no female impersonation in society” (quoted in Newton 1979: 130).

Sociologist Steven Schacht (2000) presents a different picture of drag queens. Rather than portray them as oppressed and powerless individuals, he suggests that drag queens embrace male privilege by appropriating and exploiting femininity for their own financial and status gain. Based on personal observations of drag shows, Schacht argues that drag queens imitate dominant conceptions of femininity and attempt to appear as “real” women. He concludes that drag reifies sex stratification and binary gender categories, rather than challenges them.

By contrast, Rupp and Taylor (2003) argue that drag queen performances disrupt hegemonic gender and sexuality and thus constitute an important part of the collective action repertoire of the lesbian and gay movement. They suggest that the political significance of drag performances stems from the fact that drag shows often play to mixed audiences of both gay and straight men and women. Drag shows reinforce a collective identity among gay men and lesbians. In addition, drag performers often walk a fine line of critiquing and mocking heterosexuality while simultaneously appealing to heterosexual audience members and educating them about gay life.

Historical evidence supports Rupp and Taylor’s interpretation of drag by showing that throughout the twentieth century, drag performances have been an important social institution within gay and lesbian communities. Mumford (1997) and Katz (1976) describe large social gatherings of men dressed in drag, dating back to the 1890s. As Mumford reports, a physician described in 1893 that “there is, in the city of Washington D.C., an annual convocation of Negro men called the drag dance, which is an orgy of
lascivious debauchery” (quoted in Mumford 1997: 75). Drag balls gained in popularity in the 1920s and began attracting more diverse crowds of both men and women. By the 1930s, drag balls in New York City were not only the largest communal events for gays and lesbians, but also attracted large numbers of curious heterosexuals too (Chauncey 1994; E. Garber 1989). Drawing from evidence in newspapers, Chauncey shows that drag balls in New York attracted several thousand participants and onlookers, contributing to what he terms “a pansy craze.” In Harlem, in particular, drag balls attracted crowds that were diverse along lines of class and race. Drag was also visible in private parties during the Harlem Renaissance and in night clubs with cross-dressing performers, such as the lesbian musician Gladys Bentley who performed nightly in a tuxedo and top hat (E. Garber 1989).

Such scholars as Chauncey (1994) and Garber (1989) situate drag performances within more general types of cross-dressing that were central to the formation of gay and lesbian communities in American cities in the twentieth century (Chauncey 1994). Although some scholars argue that gay male communities existed as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (e.g. Saslow 1989; Trumbach 1989), the communities that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and flourished in the 1920s and 1930s are some of the earliest gay communities that are well documented. These communities were organized not only around same-sex sexual object choice, but also around gender transgression. Chauncey (1994) and Johnson (1997) document that in both New York and Chicago the primary means through which working class men interested in same-sex sexuality proclaimed their sexual identities and found others like themselves was through gender transgression. These self-proclaimed “pansies” and “fairies” manipulated
symbols of femininity in order to create their own identities. For example, most fairies took on women’s names and called each other by feminine terms of endearment such as “princess” or “sister.” While fairies did not typically dress completely in women’s clothes, they did often wear one feminine article or piece of clothing, color their hair, pluck their eyebrows, or wear cosmetics such as lipstick or face powder. Fairies could also be identified by their gestures and demeanor that imitated feminine mannerisms. For example, fairies’ style of swiveling their hips while walking was known as “swishing.”

The research of Kennedy and Davis (1993) suggests that gender transgression was also important to building a lesbian community during the homophobic political climate of the 1950s. Kennedy and Davis document a working class, lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, from 1940 to 1960. This community, like others of the time period, was organized primarily around bars and structured by butch and fem roles. Butches enacted their sexual and gender identities by adopting a particular style of dress. Typically, they wore short, greased-back hairstyles, pants, and starched men’s dress shirts. Butches challenged the boundaries of socially acceptable gender appearances, often becoming the victims of verbal and physical harassment as a result. Fems, by contrast, did not follow a dress code unique to the lesbian community but instead conformed to the dominant fashion trends for women. Kennedy and Davis suggest that by adopting such distinctive gender presentations, butch-fem women were easily identified as lesbians, and thereby claimed visibility and public space for their community.

Such scholars as Kennedy and Davis (1993) and Chauncey (1994) convincingly argue that communities organized around same-sex sexuality and cross-dressing in the
first half of the twentieth century were necessary precursors of the overt political action on the part of gays and lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s. Members of gay and lesbian communities – particularly those who were easily identified by virtue of their gender transgression – were often the victims of police harassment (D’Emilio 1983; Chauncey 1994; Kennedy and Davis 1993). Police raids of bars, which were the primary social institutions in these communities, became routine in the 1950s and 1960s, as did resistance to police harassment by bar patrons (Adam 1987; D’Emilio 1983; Duberman 1994). Confrontations in bars, such as the famous Stonewall riot in 1969, ignited various forms of protest across the country in the 1970s in the name of gay liberation.

Importantly, drag queens and other cross-dressers were key players in these acts of resistance. Although accounts of the Stonewall riot vary, several scholars provide evidence that drag queens and cross-dressers were at the center of this uprising. According to Kaiser (1997), the first patron to throw a punch at a police officer in the Stonewall Inn was a lesbian dressed in men’s clothes. Drag queens were the next to use violent resistance. Duberman (1994) notes that some who were present during the Stonewall riot contradict this order of events. However, Duberman and Kaiser both describe how drag queens fueled the protest by taunting the police. Duberman explains that the Tactical Patrol Force, a highly trained riot-control unit of the New York police, attempted to confine the protesters, but bar patrons dispersed only to run around the block and attack the police from behind, throwing bottles and debris:

When the police whirled around to reverse direction at one point, they found themselves face to face with their worst nightmare: a chorus line of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other, kicking their heels in the air Rockettes-style singing at the tops of their sardonic voices:
“We are the Stonewall girls
We wear our hair in curls
We wear no underwear
We show our pubic hair…
We wear our dungarees
Above our nelly knees!” (Duberman 1994: 200-201).

The participation of drag queens in such acts of protest underscores their importance to gay and lesbian activism. Such evidence as this supports the view that drag performances have political significance (Rupp and Taylor 2003). But the importance of drag also lies in its relationship to the formation of gay communities and gay culture.

That drag performances continue to be an important institution of gay culture is evident in the variety of drag shows that exist in cities across the country. Scholars have documented drag shows not only in large, urban areas, such as New York and Chicago (Newton 1979), but also in smaller towns such as Key West, Florida (Rupp and Taylor 2003); Kansas City, Missouri (Newton 1979); and Spokane, Washington (Schacht 2000). Moreover, as Halberstam (1998) documents, drag king shows are gaining in popularity in urban areas from New York to San Francisco.

Clearly, drag performances differ from other types of cross-dressing that such scholars as Chauncey (1994) and Kennedy and Davis (1993) have shown to be significant in the emergence of gay communities. Newton (1996) cautions against the temptation to assume that all types of cross-dressing and gender transgression are similar. Drawing from her earlier research on drag queens (1979) to highlight the differences between drag queen performances and the butch-fem bar scene, Newton writes, “gay male camp culture of the 1960s, I have argued, was self-consciously theatrical, played on incongruity and had to be funny.” By contrast, butch-fem culture was “utterly serious, always ‘for real,’
completely different in feeling and tone from the fabulous and bittersweet excesses of the camp drag queen” (Newton 1996: 163-164). Likewise, Halberstam (1998) is careful to differentiate between drag kings, whose performance is theatrical, and drag butches, who use masculine attire to reflect their everyday, self-identities. She also argues that the campy, exaggerated femininity performed by drag queens is completely different from the understated, contained masculinity performed by drag kings.

Despite the differences between drag queens and other types of cross-dressing, both have served similar purposes in the creation and elaboration of gay culture. Newton (1996) suggests that gay culture maintains its own unique gender system. The dominant, heterosexual system revolves around two dichotomous sex/gender categories: masculinity, which is associated with men, and femininity, which is associated with females. By contrast, gay sex/gender categories include “butch (for masculine gay women and men), femme (primarily for feminine gay women), and queen (only for effeminate men)” (Newton 1996; 189). Thus while drag queen performances may differ from other types of “everyday” cross-dressing, both have the same cultural outcome. Both produce genders and sexual identities that transgress dominant masculinity and femininity and hegemonic sexuality. Both are practices that produce an oppositional culture.

In the research presented here, I analyze drag queen performances as part of a gay oppositional culture that challenges hegemonic gender and sexuality. Previous scholars have discussed how drag performances disrupt gender and sexual categories through the use of dress and gestures (e.g., Halberstam 1998; Newton 1979; Rupp and Taylor 2002). Here I focus on the use of music to illustrate how drag performers draw from mainstream
culture in order to transform it. This analysis therefore examines the complex, symbiotic relationship between dominant and oppositional cultures.

Music and Gay Culture

As noted in chapter one, social movement scholars argue that music is important to protest and the creation of an oppositional consciousness. Despite this attention to music, scholars have not adequately addressed the role of music in the gay and lesbian movement. Likewise, no research on drag has systematically analyzed the use of music in these shows, even though songs are used in all drag performances.

Some scholars have commented on the relationship between music and the construction of gender and sexuality systems, but this literature is often contradictory. Frith and McRobbie (1990), for example, suggest that rock music – dominated by male performers – cultivates a macho style of performance, which they term “cock rock.” Rock music, they conclude, reproduces hegemonic masculinity. By contrast, Whitely (1997), in her study of performances by Mick Jagger, argues that male rock musicians project gender and sexual identities that are much more ambiguous than those described by Frith and McRobbie.

A few scholars have specifically discussed the relationship between rock music and lesbian culture. Bruzzi (1997) traces the career of k.d. lang and suggests that her ambiguous, androgynous performances play with gender but ultimately sidestep lesbian identification. Nonetheless, lang draws a lesbian following. By contrast, performers in the “riot grrrls” music subculture blatanty discuss issues of feminism and sexuality in
order to create what Kearney (1997: 42) calls a “radical political community” around their music and concerts (see also, Shippers 2002; Leonard 1997). For example, riot grrrl performers often designate the area in front of the stage as women-only space. Doing so subverts the gendered demarcations of typical rock concerts, in which the front section is male terrain.

These studies are interesting in their recognition of the role that music plays in creating an oppositional, lesbian feminist culture. However, their conclusions are limited. Most research in this area has focused on the careers of lesbian and/or feminist performers without adequately addressing how the audience interprets the music. In addition, this research has sidestepped the question of how gays and lesbians appropriate mainstream songs to create oppositional culture. This is an important oversight because scholars (e.g., Eyerman and Jamison 1998) suggest that social movements often appropriate popular songs in order to reach out to a broad audience.

Cultural theorists have addressed how gay culture draws from and transforms popular culture, without discussing music specifically. Daniel Harris (1997), for example, points out how gays have appropriated aspects of mainstream, Hollywood films to build gay culture. Specifically, he talks about how gay male fashion and humor have involved the “diva worship” of certain actresses, such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Marlene Dietrich. Yet Harris does not address the appropriation of popular music. Likewise, when Walters (2001) mentions the queer images of such musicians as Madonna, RuPaul, Melissa Ethridge, and k.d. lang, she discusses their dress and appearance in magazines and videos, but does not discuss the lyrical content of their
music. These scholars mention music in passing but do not offer a complete analysis of its role in gay culture.

Despite the lack of attention to music in studies of contemporary gay culture, historical studies often mention music as central in the building of gay communities. Music and dance were prominent features in gay parties and drag balls of the 1920s and 1930s (Chauncey 1994; E. Garber 1989). Field notes taken by Ernest Burgess, a sociologist at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, document some of the specific songs and lyrics that emerged within gay social settings and deliberately commented on gay life. One of them makes specific reference to “fairy town,” Chicago’s gay neighborhood at the time: “Fairy town, Fairy town, that's where all the boys go down. Whoops! my dear, whoops! my dear even the Chief of Police is queer.”

But not all songs popular among gay men in the 1930s were so blatant. Chauncey (1994) notes how many songs, such as Beatrice Lillie’s “There are Fairies at the Bottom of Our Garden,” made use of double entendre and coded language to appeal to a gay audience. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) call this use of coded references “signifying” and note that many songs in the civil rights movement used this technique to comment on social problems. They suggest that signification has been a tradition throughout black history because it enabled African Americans to critique society in subtle ways that would escape notice from white oppressors. Here, we see the tradition of signification in gay music and culture as well.

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4 Scrap with jokes (2 sides), n.d., Box 98, folder 2, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections. Thanks to Heather Miller for providing me with the information on this source.
In addition to historical research on gay communities, evidence within gay and mainstream cultures suggests that gay music not only exists but also has been commodified. For example, consumers of gay culture can purchase compact discs entitled *The Best of Gay Dance*, *Gay Anthems* (Volumes 1-3), *Gay Classics*, *Lesbian Favorites*, *Fabulous Gay Tunes*, and *Fruit Cocktail: A Gay Lounge Collection*, to mention just a few of the music collections targeted specifically to a gay audience. The popular television show *Will & Grace*, one of several recent television shows to portray gay characters (Walters 2001), also contains references to “gay music.” In one episode, two of the main characters enter an unfamiliar bar. Just after they wonder aloud if it is a gay bar, the song “I Will Survive” comes over the sound system. They smile and nod affirmatively; of course it is a gay bar. Not only do the producers of this television show assume that it is common knowledge that this song is part of gay culture, but some scholars do also. Whiteley (1997a) suggests that heterosexuals in the country music industry are re-appropriating “I Will Survive.” However, no one has analyzed how gay culture appropriated this song in the first place.

While academics have failed to adequately analyze the relationship between music and gay culture, popular authors have not. Michele Kort, the author of a recently published book on Laura Nyro explains that gay audiences appreciated Nyro’s music not because the singer was bisexual, but because her lyrics resonated with the life experiences of gays and lesbians and thus helped to build a gay collective identity. Kort (2002: 58) writes:

> When we fell head over heels for pioneering female singer-songwriter Laura Nyro in the late 1960s, it wasn’t because we thought of her as gay. Rather, Nyro… helped us realize we were gay… [I]t was Nyro’s mystical combination of music
and lyrics and stage persona – rich with complexity, confession, and the exquisite pain of love lost and found – that helped us acknowledge we were bent.

Just as music has been important to building gay culture and identity, research suggests that music is also central to drag performances (e.g., Baker 1994; Newton 1979; Schacht 2000; Rupp and Taylor 2003). As Newton (1979) describes, some drag performers sing in their own voices, while others lip synch to pre-recorded songs, but all drag shows use music. Newton mentions a few of the particular songs used in the shows she studied in the 1960s. She suggests that some of the music selected by drag performers comes from a repertoire of songs that “are well liked by the gay community” (48). As an example, she notes one song performed in a drag show in Chicago in 1965: “There’s Fairies in the Bottom of My Garden.” That this song was mentioned in Chauncey’s (1994) work on gay male communities in 1930s exemplifies the way in which songs are institutionalized in gay culture and remain popular for decades.

Newton also provides evidence that drag performers take mainstream songs and transform their meanings. Some of the drag performers in her study sang popular melodies – often associated with female entertainers who were gay icons or divas (D. Harris 1997) – but changed the words to convey a different message. An example noted by Newton is a drag performer who used the song “Falling in Love Again,” popularized by Marlene Dietrich, but changed the words to “Having It Done Again” in reference to having a face-lift. Interestingly, this example shows how drag queens simultaneously re-create and mock the attention to beauty that is associated with femininity.

Because drag performers appropriate and transform the meaning of popular songs, they provide an interesting case for studying the role of music in protest. Drag-show
music illustrates that the meaning of songs is context specific. Stamatov’s (2002) research on Verdi’s operas similarly suggests that the audience’s response must be studied in order to understand the political implications of music. Stamatov uses newspaper reviews of opera performances in Italy in the 1840s in order to assess how the audience interpreted the music. These are an adequate data source for reconstructing the audiences’ responses because the reviews state the size of the audience as well as moments where patrons applauded or booed. Drag shows provide an excellent opportunity to study audience response. In this research, I present data not only from observations of drag shows, but also from focus groups with audience members. This enables me to analyze the context in which the songs are performed and the way that they are understood by the audience.

In the following chapters, I build on the prior work of scholars of music and culture by studying how particular songs are used in drag performances to convey messages about gender and sexuality. This contributes to our understanding of how drag shows are related to an oppositional culture of gender and sexuality and to the gay and lesbian liberation movement. I show that the music in drag shows contributes to an oppositional culture by fostering a sense of collective identity, injustice, and agency. Drag shows thus advance our knowledge of how groups use music to build oppositional cultures and collective action frameworks.
CHAPTER 3

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The research presented here seeks to elaborate theories of gender and sexuality, social movements, and culture. By studying drag show music, I illustrate how cultural performances facilitate politicized understandings of gender and sexuality – developing a framework conducive to social protest. While other scholars have documented the association between social movement protest and the existence of collective action frames (e.g., Snow and Benford 1992; Cress and Snow 2000), the framing literature says little about how movement participants construct such politicized viewpoints (Benford 1997). Here, I extend the framing literature by documenting the formation of collective action frameworks within oppositional cultures such as drag performances.

Because this project attempts to advance existing theories of culture and social movements, I utilize qualitative methods in order to produce a rich description of the processes through which music and performance are significant to social protest. Qualitative methods are appropriate for such a project, which seeks to elaborate existing theories and concepts rather than test hypotheses (Ragin 1994). Because this research examines drag show participants’ understandings of gender and sexuality, I utilize triangulation – collecting data through multiple techniques – in order to accurately assess
the socially constructed meaning of these performances. Specifically, this project utilizes transcripts and observations of drag shows, interviews with performers, and focus groups with audience members in order to assess the meaning of drag performances.

Data

This research draws primarily from a data set collected for a study by Rupp and Taylor (2003). Rupp and Taylor examine drag performances at one particular location, the 801 Cabaret, in Key West, Florida. Key West is a small island, approximately four miles by one mile, located off the southern coast of mainland Florida and only ninety miles from Cuba. Its main industry is tourism. Along with the sunny climate, Key West attracts vacationers because of its reputation as a diverse, flamboyant, and open-minded town (Rupp and Taylor 2003). Key West is known for having a large and visible gay community as well as Bahamian and Cuban communities (Rupp and Taylor 2003). Local residents, business owners, and politicians have self-consciously cultivated the image of diversity and tolerance. For example, locals have distributed thousands of bumper stickers reading “We are all one human family,” Key West’s “official philosophy” (Rupp and Taylor 2003). As a tourist destination, Key West provides an interesting setting for such a study because it attracts a varied population of travelers from around the world.

Like Key West itself, the 801 Cabaret attracts a wide-variety of customers. The 801 is a popular bar located on Duval Street, the major commercial thoroughfare in Key West. The downstairs is a small rectangular bar and seating area. The second floor is the cabaret, which hosts nightly drag shows at eleven o’clock. The 801 bar and cabaret is

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part of a complex of gay bars within close proximity on this street, giving it the reputation as the “gay end” of Duval. The audience at the 801 is not, however, exclusively gay. The bar attracts a mixed crowd because the performers always stand on the street before the show, talking with passersby, inviting them to the show, and reminding them that the performance is free. As a result, a variety of tourists, many of whom have never before seen a drag show, come into the 801 Cabaret because they are looking for inexpensive entertainment while on vacation. Because the audience consists of both experienced drag fans and people who have never before seen a drag show, the 801 provides an exceptional setting in which to examine how drag shows affect audience members’ conceptions of gender and sexuality.

From 1998 to 2001 Rupp and Taylor observed, recorded, and transcribed over fifty drag performances. I have had access to all of their transcriptions. I also observed twelve performances myself. The 801 shows are similarly structured each night. A typical show is carried out by three to five drag queens who perform a few group songs but more commonly take turns occupying the stage to do their own individual numbers. A show consists of anywhere from thirteen to twenty-two songs. In between the musical performances, drag queens speak on the microphone – introducing the next song, bantering with the audience, telling jokes, or soliciting tips.6

All of the performers at the 801 lip synch to songs played over the sound system, rather than sing in their own voices. While lip synching, performers dance on stage, often with members of the audience. In fact, audience members commonly participate in the 801 shows. Sometimes performers will step off the stage and mingle with the people

6 Tips are a critical source of income for the drag queens. In addition to receiving a regular salary from the bar owner, the 801 performers also share the total tips collected each night.
seated at the tables near the front of the bar. Other times the drag queens will pull an
audience member onto the stage when he or she comes up to tip the performer. The
shows also involve what the drag queens call the “shot” segment. During this part of the
show, the drag queens bring audience members onto the stage and ask them a variety of
personal questions. When drag queens solicit audience members for the shot segment,
they typically ask for a gay man, a lesbian, a heterosexual man, and a heterosexual
woman. In return for their participation, audience members are given a free drink – or
shot. At the 801, performers commonly ask audience members to declare their sexual
identification. This occurs not only during the shot segment, but also at the beginning of
a performance when one of the drag queens will ask the entire audience to applaud if they
are gay, and then if they are heterosexual. Because sexual identification is prominent
during the performances, it is clear that the 801 show plays to a mixed crowd of gays,
lesbians, and heterosexuals.

Although the shows follow a consistent format, they also vary during the week.
Each night of the week a different performer directs the show and gives it a different
theme. For example, Thursday nights are directed by 801 performer Gugi. Emphasizing
his Hispanic ethnicity, Gugi titles this performance “A Night in Havana” and includes
several songs recorded by Latina artists, such as Gloria Estefan, Selina, and Albita.
Saturday nights, by contrast are “Kylie’s Sex Shows,” with most of the songs revolving
around love, relationships, and sex. The 801 shows attract anywhere form twenty
audience members on a very slow night, to well over one hundred on a busy night. The
peak tourist season in Key West is between Halloween and Memorial Day. The shows,
therefore, are typically larger during these months than during the off-season.
In addition to analyzing the show transcripts, I also code interviews conducted by Rupp and Taylor with nine of the 801 performers: Sushi, Kylie, Milla, Scabby, Gugi, Inga, Margo, RV, and Desiray. In these interviews, performers were asked about their own personal histories. For example, they explain when, why, and how they first started doing drag. The interviews also cover questions about the performances at the 801, including questions about specific songs and costumes. In addition to the interviews conducted by Rupp and Taylor, I also interviewed each of the performers to ask them specifically about their choices of music. I asked them how they selected songs to perform, which songs were their favorites, and why they preferred some songs over others.

All of the 801 performers are gay men. With the exception of one, all are in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. One is Japanese American, one is Puerto Rican, and the remaining seven are non-Hispanic whites. Although they all find both personal satisfaction and a somewhat steady income by doing drag, each has a different story about being and becoming a drag queen.

Sushi is known as the 801 “housequeen” because she serves both as a performer and as a manager for the other 801 drag queens (or, as they call themselves, the “801 girls”). Sushi is paid by the bar owner and distributes checks to the other performers. She is also a local celebrity, participating in a variety of community fundraisers and festivals in Key West. For example, during the Key West New Year’s Eve celebration, the town marks the dawn of the next year with Sushi’s descent from a Duval-street rooftop in a giant, high-heeled shoe.
Sushi’s male name is Gary, though she prefers to be called Sushi. With a long ponytail and delicate features, she never really looks like a man, even when out of drag. Sushi first started dressing in drag when he was in high school. At that time, he met Kevin, who is also a performer at the 801. Kevin’s drag name is Kylie, though he responds to either name. He began dressing in drag with Sushi, while growing up in their small hometown in Oregon.

Another popular 801 performer is Milla who connects his career in drag to his childhood, during which, he explains, he was always interested in “girlie things,” such as Barbie dolls. Milla, whose male name is Dean, describes himself as an introverted, insecure, and overweight child. He explains that he began dressing in drag when he was sixteen, during the 1980s, when musician Boy George was gaining popularity for cross-dressing. Drag, Dean states, helped him build self-confidence: “I found a place where I could be, I could hide. I could mask myself behind wacky makeup, crazy hair colors, the wildest outfits, and feel strong, feel good.” When Dean was seventeen, he moved to Key West and began performing drag professionally.

Unlike Milla, who is often described by audience members and other performers as beautiful, Scabola Feces (or Scabby) is known for doing “scary drag.” As the name might suggest, Scabby’s performances are intended to shock the audience. Her appearance is typically outlandish and extravagant, including garish eye makeup that extends into her hairline. She also often incorporates into her costumes items that are not intended to be worn, such as a wig made out of Slinky toys. Scabby, whose male name is Matthew, says that he learned to dress in drag and apply makeup from watching the
Australian film about drag queens, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. Matthew lived in Massachusetts before coming to Key West and performing drag professionally.

Gugi lived in Chicago where he occasionally performed drag before coming to Key West to perform full-time. Gugi’s male name is Rov, though few people know this because he rarely uses his male name. Shy and soft-spoken as a man, Gugi explains that drag “brings out the core of him,” allowing him to feel more comfortable and expressive. Gugi began working at the 801 Cabaret in 1999, but then left to work at another club. He has recently returned to the 801, however, and was performing there during the time period on which this research focuses.

Like Gugi, Inga also left the 801 to take a more lucrative position, doing drag at a club that charges a cover fee for the performances. Inga performed in only a few of the shows that I analyze here. Inga, who prefers to be called Roger when he is out of drag, began performing drag in Sweden, where he pursued an interest in theater and performance before immigrating to the United States.

Margo came to Key West from New York, where he held several different careers, including working as a school teacher, realtor, and interior decorator. In addition to performing at the 801, Margo, who is typically called David when he is not in drag, also writes an entertainment column for a Key West newspaper. He never performed drag until he was fifty-nine and working at a guest house in Key West where all the employees dressed in drag for Halloween. Currently in his sixties, Margo refers to himself as “the oldest living drag queen in captivity.” With age have come a number of health problems, however. David is battling cancer, and the other 801 drag queens held a fund raising performance to help him pay his medical bills.
RV, whose male name is Timothy, grew up in rural Ohio. Like Inga and Milla, he was involved in theater and drama clubs when he was young. He first performed drag while working at Disney World in Orlando. From there, he began working at a gay drag bar in Orlando and is now a regular performer at the 801. Timothy also travels to perform in other parts of the country, such as Provincetown, Massachusetts. Like Gugi, Timothy is quiet when out of drag. On stage, however, he is loud-mouthed and bawdy.

The last performer to be interviewed was Desiray, who was also the last one to begin performing drag. Desiray first came to the 801 as Joel, an audience member. He was so taken with the shows that he began performing drag himself and is now on the regular line-up at the 801. Joel, who is from a small town in California, describes coming to Key West and performing drag as “liberating.”

When referring to the performers in this research, I typically use their stage names, and occasionally their male, legal names. All of the performers have public personae and gave permission to be identified by name. I also refer to them as both “he” and “she.” This is consistent with how they talk about themselves and each other, often vacillating between both gendered pronouns. Moreover, as I will discuss in chapter six, drag performers often blur the boundary between male and female, making it hard to classify them simply as he or she.

In addition to observations of performances and interviews with drag queens, this research also incorporates focus groups with forty audience members. The focus groups constitute an important source of data for studying performances (Rupp and Taylor 2003). In most prior literature on drag, scholars utilize their own interpretations of performances without presenting data on how the audience members view the shows.
(e.g., Schacht 2000; Butler 1990; Newton 1979). The focus groups analyzed here, however, provide empirical evidence of how drag show observers, rather than just scholars, make meaning of the shows.

The focus groups were conducted by Leila Rupp, Verta Taylor, Josh Gamson or myself. During 801 performances, we handed out flyers explaining the research and asking for people to return to the bar the following afternoon for a discussion of the show. In all, we conducted twelve different focus groups, ranging from two to twelve participants, with a total of forty audience members. In the focus groups, participants were asked to describe their favorite and least favorite parts of the show. They were also asked how they would describe the show to a friend who had not been there and whether they thought of the performers as men or as women. Unlike the performers, audience members who participated in focus groups were assured of anonymity. I do not use their names in this research, and commonly refer to them by providing some background information, such as their sex, hometown, profession, or sexual identification.

The participants in the focus group were somewhat diverse along the lines of age, race, education, socio-economic class, and other demographic variables. (See Tables 3.1 and 3.2.) Participants ranged in age from nineteen to sixty-two years old. Two participants were Latino/a, two were of mixed race, and the remainder were non-Hispanic, whites. Twenty percent identified as working class, twenty-five percent middle class, and the remainder upper-middle or upper class. A majority (55%) held bachelors
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Class Identification (N)</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lower-Middle Class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Upper-Middle Class</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate or</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Upper Class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants: Race, Education, Class, Religion, and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Sexual Preference</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Gay or Lesbian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Full-time Key West Locals</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outside of Key West</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersexed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dual Residence (Key West and Elsewhere)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Did not mark / Other *</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other Comments included “queer” and “trysexual”

Table 3.2 Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants: Sex, Sexual Preference, and Residence
or graduate/professional degrees. Thirty-five percent held high school degrees, and the remaining 10% had not completed high school. Along religious lines, the focus group participants were quite diverse. Although 25% stated they had no religious affiliation, 25% were Catholic, 22.5% were Jewish, 17.5% were Protestant, and 10% marked their religious affiliation as “other.” Half of the focus group participants were men, nineteen were women, and one was intersexed. Nearly two-thirds of the focus group members identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Thirty percent identified as heterosexual, and 7.5% identified as “other” or did not identify their sexual orientations. Eleven focus group participants were residents of Key West. The remaining members were from such diverse locations as Philadelphia; New York City; Boca Raton, Florida; Malibu, California; Queeche, Vermont; Old Bridge, New Jersey; Columbus, Indiana; or Montreal. Seven had never seen a drag show before coming to the 801 Cabaret.

The 801 Cabaret in Key West provides a useful setting for a case study of drag performances because of the nightly frequency of the shows and because of the diversity of participants. However, drag shows are popular not only in Key West but also around the country. Scholars have documented vibrant drag institutions in such cities as New York and Chicago (Newton 1979); Kansas City, Missouri (Newton 1979); and Spokane, Washington (Schacht 2000). In order to assess the generalizability of the findings from the 801 drag show, I supplement Rupp and Taylor’s data with interviews with three drag informants from Columbus, Ohio. Each of these informants is a drag performer who lives in Columbus but travels to perform shows in other parts of the country including Cleveland, Ohio; Dayton, Ohio; New York City; Louisville, Kentucky; Washington, D.C.; Birmingham, Alabama; Chicago, Illinois; and Provincetown, Massachusetts.
Rather than ask these performers about their own personal histories with drag, I asked them to comment on the regional differences and similarities among drag performers. Specifically, I asked what songs are commonly performed by drag queens around the county. I use this information to assess the extent to which patterns in Key West are typical of other locations.

**Analytical Scheme**

In the research presented here, I synthesize these varied sources of data in order to assess the role of music in drag performances and the message that drag communicates to the audience. To analyze how songs are used by drag performers, I first created a representative sample of songs by examining all of the music used in the shows recorded by Rupp and Taylor in 1999. I listed all of the songs that were performed in the 1999 shows. Any song that was performed more than twice, I consider a typical song for this show. From the twenty-five shows recorded in 1999, I obtained a list of seventy-three typical drag songs.

After compiling this list of songs, I examined the lyrics of each song and the talk used to introduce each song during the performances. I also analyzed the performers’ discussions of particular songs during the interviews, paying attention to their descriptions of why they chose to perform these numbers. Finally, I examined what focus group participants stated about the songs in order to understand how viewers

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7 Because popular songs change over time, the repertoire of drag songs also changes constantly. I therefore limited the time period that I examined to one year, in order to determine which songs were used repeatedly.
interpreted them. From these sources, I determined what message each song expressed in the drag performances.

Based on this coding scheme, most of the typical drag songs could be categorized into three different types. Many songs (30) were used to build solidarity or collective identity. Some songs (16) expressed injustice or rage over the marginalized status of women, gays and lesbians, or others who fail to conform to dominant sex and gender norms. Nearly half (35) evoked feelings of empowerment or agency. These three functions of music in the drag performances correspond with Gamson’s (1992) three dimensions of collective action frames. As Table 3.3 illustrates, all but five of the typical drag songs could be categorized into one of these three groupings.

In the following chapters, I present empirical evidence that illuminates this categorization of drag songs. I provide rich descriptions of the drag performances in order to demonstrate how the songs communicate the three components of collective action frames: identity, injustice, and agency (Gamson 1992). Several songs fit into more than one, indicating that they communicate multiple meanings or messages to the audience. Therefore, I often discuss the same song in more than one chapter. In the final chapter, I reflect on what the data reveal about music and social protest, and more general theories of sex and gender.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Collective Identity</th>
<th>Injustice Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All that Jazz – Sushi</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic / I’m So Excited (80s Medley) – Group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbie Girl – Inga</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch – Milla</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohemian Rhapsody - Milla</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boogie, Woogie, Bugle Boy - RV</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brass in Pocket – Sushi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break it to Me Gently - Margo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabaret – Margo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter’s Medley - Scabby</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell Block Tango – Group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago, Illinois – Gugi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy World – Sushi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cruela De Vil – Scabby</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dream Girls – Group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erotica – Gugi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Your Mind – Group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From a Distance – RV</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanky Panky – Sushi and Desiray</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaven’s What I Feel – Gugi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey Big Spender – Inga, Kylie, Margo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am the Body Beautiful – Gugi, Inga</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am What I Am – Margo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Kissed a Girl – Scabby</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Love the Nightlife – Margo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Think He’s Gay – RV and Inga</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Will Survive – RV, Gugi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If You Could Read my Mind – Group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a Woman – Kylie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m Beautiful Dammit – RV</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not a Fucking Drag Queen – Scabby</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m the Only One – Kylie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s not Right, But it’s Okay – Milla, Desiray</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson’s Theme Song – Milla</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify my Love – Gugi</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiss Me – Kylie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Marmalade - Milla</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3: Typical Drag Songs Used in 1999 (n=73), continued
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le Jazz Hot</td>
<td>Sushi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at Me</td>
<td>Inga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain’s O’ Things</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Discarded Men</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Heart Will Go On</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No One Else on Earth</td>
<td>Kylie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Oldest Profession</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Man’s Trash is Another Man’s Treasure</td>
<td>Sushi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oye</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate Kisses</td>
<td>Kylie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour Me a Man</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pussy Cat Song</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen of the Night</td>
<td>Kylie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saved</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shady Dame from Seville</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>Milla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spice Girls’ Medley</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strut</td>
<td>Kylie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuff Like That There</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Me or Leave Me</td>
<td>Sushi and Milla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell Me</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are Worse Things I Could Do</td>
<td>Margo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Kiss</td>
<td>Kylie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torn</td>
<td>Milla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>Milla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are What We Are</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding Bell Blues</td>
<td>Scabby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Makes a Man</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s Up</td>
<td>Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a Man Loves a Woman</td>
<td>Milla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When You’re Good to Mamma</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is My Man</td>
<td>Scabby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Don’t You Do Right</td>
<td>Margo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Don’t Own Me</td>
<td>Margo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Oughta Know</td>
<td>Milla, Scabby, Gugi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ve Got to See Mamma, Every Night</td>
<td>Margo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Totals | 30 | 16 | 35 |

Table 3.3: Typical Drag Songs Used in 1999 (n=73), continued
CHAPTER 4

“MUSIC MAKES THE PEOPLE COME TOGETHER.”
DRAG SHOWS AND THE NEGOTIATION OF GAY IDENTITY

Social movement theory defines collective identity as the solidarity – or sense of “we” – that is constructed by social movement participants (Taylor and Whittier 1992; see also, Melucci 1989; Gamson 1992). Some scholars (e.g., Melucci 1989; Giddens 1991; Castells 1997) suggest that the identity building, cultural work performed by social movement participants is becoming increasingly important and worthy of study. This view is outlined in Melucci’s (1989) Nomads of the Present – a book that puts forth a theory of “new social movements.”

In explaining why a new type of social movement has emerged, Melucci (1989) suggests that contemporary societies have undergone profound changes, making them different from earlier industrial societies. Scholars refer to these changes by using the terms “post-industrial” or “postmodern” to characterize contemporary societies. The most salient change, according to Melucci, is the growing importance of information and communication in complex societies. Increasingly, material production is replaced by the “production of signs and social relations” (1989: 45). Contrary to Marxist theories, materialism and the mode of production are no longer the ultimate determinants of social

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systems. Instead, complex societies revolve around “networks of high-density information” (1989: 45). In order to maintain themselves, societies thus need individuals to know how to decode, process, and communicate information. This greater access to information creates a paradox within contemporary systems. Individuals have more possibilities and choices, but simultaneously, social institutions increasingly attempt to control the everyday aspects of individuals’ lives.

Because of these changes in contemporary society, collective action and social movements have changed and become more complex. These new social movements emerge in response to the conditions of contemporary, information societies – the expansion of education and information, the globalization of the economy, and the increasing individuality and multiplicity of cultural identities. Most important, social movements emerge in response to the contradiction between individuation and bureaucratization. Everyday life and self-realization are thus the focus of conflict. New social movements have moved away from political and material domain and toward conflicts over cultural codes and symbols.

A key characteristic of contemporary collective action is the creation of social spaces in which alternative cultural codes and systems of meaning are expressed. Thus, Melucci argues that contemporary social movements are increasingly focused on identity, or the “freedom to be,” rather than material resources, or the “freedom to have” (1989: 178). Giddens (1991) sets forth a similar explanation of the changes that have occurred as we move into a stage of advanced capitalism. Giddens asserts that individuals are increasingly engaged in “life politics,” which consist of everyday choices of lifestyle and identity. Rather than view life politics as strictly individualistic, Giddens suggests that
self-actualization and personal growth have broad, social consequences. As an example of the global implications of life politics, Giddens notes that by changing the way that women construct their individual identities, feminism has changed gender on a large scale.

Castells (1997) also argues that in the current information age, identity is a powerful arena of social change. Castells views identity as a product of social movements, but also notes that the deployment of collective identity can facilitate change in institutions. Drawing from Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1978) and Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), Castells notes that “Civilization, as historically known, is based on taboos and sexual repression” (1997: 203). Social institutions that mandate heterosexuality include family, law, economy, and politics. Documenting the rise of gay and lesbian movements in the U.S. and China, Castells argues that these movements facilitate sexual liberation but also signal a “fundamental breach… in the institutional scaffolding constructed to control desire” (1997: 220). Thus, identity can affect institutional change and is an important outcome of social movements.

While such scholars as Melucci (1989), Giddens (1991), and Castells (1997) theorize that identity is important to studying “new social movements,” other scholars (e.g., Calhoun 1994; Taylor and Rupp 2002; Gamson 1992; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996) note that identity is also important for understanding how and why any social movements emerge. Calhoun (1993) documents how characteristics associated with new social movements, such as collective identity, can be found in social movements dating back to the nineteenth century.
Critiquing earlier social movement theories, Melucci (1995, 1989) states that prior work has often sidestepped the question of collective identity by assuming that neat, pre-existing groups exist a priori, making the study of collective identity irrelevant. He states, however, that “The empirical unity of a social movement should be considered as a result rather than a starting point” (Melucci 1995: 43). Similarly, Taylor and Whittier describe collective identity as a process, continually negotiated by movement participants. By studying the solidarity within lesbian feminist communities, Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) work illustrates the on-going construction of a lesbian feminist identity.

Other work by Taylor (1995; 1996) emphasizes that movements not only build identities, they also build positive self-conceptions that challenge both images in dominant culture and structural arrangements. For example, women involved in postpartum depression self-help groups, which Taylor (1996) views as a type of social movement, transform feelings of shame about failing to conform to dominant ideals of motherhood into feelings of pride at having endured hardships. As a result, women in the movement to recognize postpartum depression transform cultural images of motherhood.

The focus on positive identity construction and the transformation of emotions is particularly salient to the gay and lesbian movement (see e.g., Gould 2001; Britt and Heise 2000). Gould (2001) suggests that in the years since the 1969 Stonewall Riot, the movement has worked to make pride a normative emotion for gays and lesbians. The creation of gay pride challenges dominant culture and institutions that “construct lesbians and gay men as an abnormal, deviant, perverted ‘other’” (Gould 2001: 137).

Here, I examine the process of constructing a positive gay identity. Rather than study a self-defined movement organization, however, I look at drag shows as gay
community institutions in which identity is formed. This research documents Melucci’s (1995) statement that collective identity is an outcome of political participation, not a starting point. I therefore examine the roots of gay and lesbian collective identity in drag shows.

Music, Ritual, and Unity

The study of drag performances at the 801 Cabaret conducted by Rupp and Taylor (2003), from which this research draws, demonstrates that a collective identity is formed around drag shows. Participants in focus groups speak directly of the feeling of community and solidarity that the shows create. For example, a heterosexual woman who lives in Key West described the 801 bar as a “family.” Similarly, a gay man who lives in Key West and attends the shows regularly states, “It’s about community. It’s about all of us. We’re all here for the same reason. Like we all love each other but we’re all here because we love the great show.” The drag queens themselves also talk about close-knit network organized around the shows. Milla states, “We are a group. We are a community.”

Other focus group participants, typically tourists from other parts of country, speak less of the specific, intimate networks created at the 801, but nonetheless describe a general sense of “gay” culture and solidarity that is present in drag shows. A 23-year-old lesbian health teacher from New Jersey explained why she and her partner came to the show, stating: “I think the reason we came here… was because we knew we would be in an atmosphere where we could be ourselves and not have a problem. So we didn’t – yes, we came to see the show, but we also came because we knew it would be okay for us
Likewise, a 36-year-old lesbian who had attended other drag shows in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco stated that she definitely sees drag as “a form of gay entertainment.”

Prior work has also discussed the emergence of gay identity, community (Rupp and Taylor 2003), and culture (Newton 1979; Duberman 1994) around drag shows. These works have focused on the talk during shows and the networks between drag performers as the key components in building a sense of gay solidarity and culture. Prior work has not analyzed how music – which is present in all drag shows – contributes to this construction of collective identity. This study fills that gap, showing how music facilitates the sense of solidarity created in drag performances.

Social movement literature suggests that music is a useful resource in creating such a sense of solidarity. For example, Roscigno, Danaher, and Summers-Effler (2002) note that music’s power to unify may lie in the rituals surrounding performance of songs. Taylor and Whittier (1995) similarly suggest that rituals are used to express solidarity. Berezin (2001) writes that “public rituals serve as arenas where ritual actors, both participants and observers, blur the boundary between self and other” (2001: 84). In her work on Fascist Italy, she suggests that rituals “act out emotion” and thus bring people together into a community of feeling and erasing the line between the individual and the collective. The same process of merging the performer and audience with common emotion is eloquently described in an interview with one of the 801 drag performers. Describing the act of performing and reaching out to the audience, Milla states “I’m pulling you in. I want you to feel stuff together with me.”
Research on “deadhead” subculture (Adams and Sardiello 2000) documents the ritualistic aspect of Grateful Dead concerts, including bodily movements and gestures that build a sense of solidarity. Eyerman also notes that “collective experience is the core of collective identification/identity formation” (2002: 449). Summarizing literature on German nationalist movements, Eyerman describes the highly ritualized aspects of concerts in which “songs are usually introduced with short, highly ideological statements and ended with a series of collective gestures, a raised and pointed right arm, and the shouting of slogans” (2000: 450). Because “music encourages bodily movement and contact” – including singing along – it is particularly powerful for breaking down social distance between performers and audience members (Eyerman 2002: 450).

Eyerman’s description of rituals can easily be applied to drag shows at the 801 Cabaret. Performers introduce each number, often with explicitly political remarks, and after each song audience members not only clap, but often chant as a form of applause. For example, songs performed by Milla are often followed by chants of “Diva, diva, diva.” Also, the repetition of the same songs used over and over in the drag shows makes the performances somewhat predictable or even ritualistic to frequent attendees. Each night of the week, a different performer is assigned to direct the show, and the assignments remain the same week after week. For example, Monday night is always “Milla’s Martini Madness,” with Milla doing most of the speaking throughout the night. Moreover, there is significant consistency in each director’s shows. For example, in all seven shows analyzed here that Kylie directed, “Free Your Mind” was the first song, followed by a song performed by Gugi, and then Kylie returned to the stage to perform “I’m the only One.” Milla’s performances are also consistent, even repetitive. For all
twenty-five shows from 1999 that I coded, Milla performed only ten different songs. The repetition makes the shows predictable or ritualistic to those who attend regularly. Thus ritual accompanies music in drag shows.

Analysis of the 25 drag shows observed in 1999 suggests that the particular songs used in the performances contribute to the sense of collective identity that emerges. Often familiar, popular songs are used. Focus group members commonly reported that during the drag shows, they enjoyed hearing songs with which they were familiar. When asked what her favorite songs in the show were, a 26-year-old lesbian from Orlando stated: “Well, of course, the songs that we know. We liked them.” Her partner, who was also attending the show, agreed: “The ones that are more popular – that we know.” The use of popular songs thus integrates audience members into the show, making it more enjoyable.

In addition to using popular songs, the data suggest that 3 different types of songs are used in the shows to construct a gay collective identity. (See Table 4.1.) First, performers use songs that describe aspects of gay life and therefore resonate with gay and lesbian audience members while simultaneously educating heterosexuals. Second, performers use songs that are associated with gay icons or gay culture. Third, performers used “camp” interpretations of songs in order to draw on gay and lesbian “in-group” humor and further construct a sense of solidarity. Together, these songs not only comprise a typical drag show repertoire at the 801, but they also illustrate the construction of gay collective identity.
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<td>Stuff Like That There – RV</td>
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<td>We are What We Are – Group</td>
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<td>Wedding Bell Blues – Scabby</td>
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<td>What Makes a Man a Man - RV</td>
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<td>Where is My Man - Scabby</td>
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<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
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<td><strong>12</strong></td>
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Table 4.1 Classification of Songs that Build Collective Identity (n = 30)
Songs about Gay Life

One of the most common drag show songs identified by name in the focus groups is French singer/songwriter Charles Aznouvar’s “What Makes a Man a Man.” The song is appropriate for a drag show because it gives a first-person account of the life a drag queen. The lyrics describe the drag performance from the eyes of the performer: “Each night the men look so surprised / I change my sex before their eyes / Tell me if you can / What makes a man a man?”

RV, who performs the song regularly at the 801 Cabaret explained that he first heard it during a performance at “Wigstock,” a New York City event held annually between 1983 and 2002 and billed as a “dragstravaganza,” attracting drag performers, gay men, lesbians, and transgendered individuals. RV performs this song by coming onto the stage in “full drag,” wearing makeup, wig, and a sequined dress. As the song progresses, RV removes his makeup with a towel, takes off his wig, and finally exchanges his dress for a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, eventually emerging as his male persona.

Although the song obviously comments on the life of drag performers, it also addresses the homophobia that the singer experiences as a gay man. The lyrics state:

So many times we have to pay
For having fun and being gay
It’s not amusing
There’s always those who spoil our games
By finding fault and calling names
Always accusing
They draw attention to themselves
at the expense of someone else
It’s so confusing
Yet they make fun of how I talk
And imitate the way I walk
Tell me if you can
What makes a man a man? (emphasis added)

This verse of the song revealingly begins with the pronoun “we,” rather than “I,” which was used in the first verse. The lyrics here address not only the individual experiences of a drag queen but also the homophobia encountered collectively by gay men and lesbians.

Several focus group participants therefore stated that this song educates heterosexuals about the difficulties faced in gay life. A 23-year-old lesbian from New Jersey stated:

If they [heterosexuals] look into those songs and really try to listen to the words, especially ‘What Makes a Man a Man’, then maybe they would start thinking about what it means to be gay… You know, especially for people who aren’t really sure about what it is, and I think they could – if they’re looking for a message or if they really pay attention – I think that they could get it.

RV similarly explains the response he receives from members of the audience after performing the song: “With ‘What Makes a Man a Man,’ mothers come up to me on that one. And they say, ‘you just put it all into a nutshell, what my son goes through. Now, I can understand what my son’s going through.’ It makes me shiver just thinking about it.”

In addition to describing homophobia, the song also describes how the singer asserts a positive self-identity, rather than internalize the negative images of gays and lesbians: “I know my life is not a crime / I’m just a victim of my time… Nobody has the right to be / The judge of what is right for me.” The lyrics therefore empower the gay listener while chastising the homophobe.

Interviews with performers suggest that the choice of such songs is deliberate. Sushi is self-conscious that drag shows provide an opportunity for him to educate
audience members about gay life. Sushi explains how drag show may promote tolerance:

I have a platform now to teach the world. We have so many people from everywhere in the world... Even in less than five minutes of talking to somebody -- just that little moment I share with somebody from New Zealand or Africa or your college professor or whoever -- they go back to their hometowns. They remember that five minute conversation, and they realize, “I’m not gonna call this person a fag.” You know what I mean? It’s just a little part that I am a real person.

Some songs used in the shows are not directly about gay life, but in the context of the drag show, the lyrics take on new meaning and can be interpreted as describing issues faced by the gay community. One popular example is the song “Bohemian Rhapsody,” originally performed by Freddie Mercury and the band Queen in the early 1980s, and re-recorded by the pop duo The Braids. The song was originally written to describe the pain and suffering that result from gang violence. When Milla introduces the number at the 801 show, however, she explains that it is dedicated to friends he has lost to AIDS: “This song goes out to a lot of friends, some very dear friends of mine. I just want to say that we’re here, baby, we’re not going anywhere. And this is for all my dearest, and for the rest of you.” Milla also suggests that the performance is a collective experience, and that he, as the performer, needs the support of the crowd: “Please at this time give it up for Milla. Come on, I need you tonight.”

The lyrics of the song are strangely applicable to the agony of dying from AIDS:

My time has come,
Sends shivers down my spine,
Body's aching all the time.
Goodbye, everybody, I've got to go,
Gotta leave you all behind and face the truth.
Mama, ooh, I don't want to die,
Sometimes I wish I’d never been born at all
Margo, describing how Milla’s performance, explains the emotional impact that the song has on her and other drag queens who are watching back stage: “It’s very funny when you hear somebody doing it and you know they’re lip-synching but it’s as if they’re doing it. She put so much of her anger into it. You could see it on stage. And we all sat back sobbing every time that she did that.” By alluding to the pain and suffering encountered all too often by members of the gay and lesbian community, the song evokes anger and sorrow, emotionally appealing to the listener.

Not all songs about gay life evoke such serious emotions. Some rely on humor and make use of popular stereotypes of gay men. For example, RV’s performs “The Oldest Profession,” a song from the musical The Life. In the musical, the song is performed by a prostitute who laments that: “I’m getting too old for the half hour session / I’m getting too old for a pro.” In the context of a drag show, however, the song’s references to promiscuity and numerous male sexual partners describe the stereotypical image of the hyper-sexualized gay man (for a discussion of the hyper-masculine and hyper-sexual gay male identity, see Levine 1979). Likewise, the song “I Think He’s Gay” conjures up stereotypical and recognizable images of gay men. The singer, whose voice sounds like a woman (though the song was actually recorded by a drag queen) laments that her male love interest is likely gay because “He speaks of Jane Russell / And how he loves the hustle / Talks like Liberace/ Walks like Wilma Flintstone.”

Both of these songs appeal to audience through humor. The use of stereotypical images may seem self-deprecating on the surface. However, the talk between songs contradicts this interpretation by routinely stating positive affirmations of gay life. For
example, as Margo frequently states on stage, “We are faggots in dresses… and we are proud of what we do.” Rather than degrade, the humor asserts gay identity and images – even those deemed negative in the dominant culture – in the face of heterosexuals in audience. Therefore, both the humorous and the serious songs educate heterosexuals about gay life. A 32-year-old gay man from Vermont explains in a focus group that the major point of the show is to educate heterosexuals about gays:

I think they show, more or less, to the straight people that we’re not as bad as the media make us out to be… It [the gay community] is just a variety of different people who just do something different that they’re not used to, and they [heterosexuals] leave here thinking, ‘well, okay, to each their own’.

**Songs Associated with Gay Culture**

Little academic literature analyzes how songs become associated with gay culture. However, performers interviewed in this study indicate that some songs are continually used in drag shows because they are recognizable as parts of gay culture. An example is “I Am What I Am” – which was introduced in a drag show in Columbus, Ohio, as “the gay national anthem.” The song comes from the musical about drag performers called *La Cage Aux Folles*. Through the use of the “closet” metaphor, the lyrics hint at gay experience and building a positive identity.

I am what I am
And what I am needs no excuses
I deal my own deck
Sometimes the ace sometimes the deuces
It’s one life and there’s no return and no deposits
One life, so it’s time to open up your closets
Life’s not worth a damn ‘til you can shout out
I am what I am

---

9 For exceptions, see the brief discussion of disco and gay culture in Kutas (2003) and of “I Will Survive” in Whitley (1997a).
At the 801, the song is typically performed by Margo, but the performers there also do a group number with a second version of the song entitled “We Are What We Are.” Margo introduces the number with an explicit message about pride, gay identity, and tolerance:

> Now darlings, the next song I’m gonna do for you will explain to you who, what, why we are. What we are, are drag queens. And what we do, we love doing, and we’re very proud of what we do. Do you like what we do? (cheers from audience) Good because we love it. This is how we make our living, believe it or not. Now, whether you are gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, trisexual, asexual, transgender, transsexual, anything else, just be proud of who you are. You’re proud of who you are? (cheers from audience) Be proud and try to understand and accept those who may not be exactly who you are. So at this time, welcome to the stage, the oldest living drag queen in captivity, or at least Key West, ladies and gentlemen, Margo!

Margo’s introduction involves a back-and-forth dialogue with the audience, exemplifying the interaction between performer and audience that enhance feelings of solidarity at concerts and shows (Berezin 2001). The actual performance of the number amplifies the message by making the performer’s identity as a drag queen explicit. At the end of the number, Margo takes off her wig and states, “You see, I’m not a little old lady after all. I’m a little old man.” Commenting on Margo’s act, Sushi explains that the performance of this song – complete with removing the wig – is so commonly used in drag shows that it can be considered “old school drag.” Despite the repetitive use of this number, Margo explains in an interview that the audience always responds well to it: “They come back, and they keep saying over and over and over that they want to see it.”

A 35 year-old-lesbian from Orlando described her feelings when seeing “I Am What I Am” performed at the first drag show she ever attended in Provincetown, Massachusetts:
He ended up taking off the make up and singing ‘I am What I am’ and I always get choked up now because it – there was a thing of acceptance and I was really struggling with accepting [being gay] and I just felt a connection and I think that’s what made me want to keep coming back, is feeling that connection.

Her comment reveals the song’s emotional impact on audience members. It also demonstrates the power of song to mobilize a sense of solidarity or “connection” with others.

A second song that performers describe as a standard drag song is “I Will Survive.” Some academic literature notes that this song is associated with gay culture (e.g., Whitley 1997a; Kutulas 2003). Kutulas (2003) suggests that “I Will Survive” is part of a broad genre of “disco diva” music that was popular with gay men in the 1970s. Indeed, several other disco songs, such as “Lady Marmalade” and “I Love the Nightlife” appear in the list of typical drag songs from the 801 that I analyze here. In addition, the use of disco songs was so popular in the shows I observed in Columbus, Ohio that some performances were advertised as a “Disco Divas Show.”

The continued popularity of disco in gay culture is likely due to an historical association. Disco’s emergence in the 1970s coincided with the period in which gay communities flourished across the country (D’Emilio 1990; Murray 1996; Armstrong 2002; Taylor, Kaminski, and Dugan 2002). As Eyerman and Jamison (1998) note, social movements often utilize tradition as a resource for building collective identity. In particular, social movements revive older songs to build a sense of a common history. The continued use of disco songs in drag shows may serve a similar purpose by alluding to gay history and the “heyday” of gay community building.
Kutulas (2003), however, puts forth a different explanation for disco’s popularity within gay communities. Analyzing hit disco songs such as “Lady Marmalade” and “I Will Survive,” Kutulas notes that these songs project an image of sexually liberated and sexually assertive women. Disco divas, she writes, “were seductive, symbolizing sexual freedom and sexual success” (Kutulas 2003: 189). This image resonates with the cultural ideals expressed in gay bars and communities: sexual liberation, assertiveness, and pride.

Milla states that he purposely chooses song by powerful, assertive women: “All of the women I have chosen are women who are strong and they believe in themselves. I wouldn’t sing about it if they didn’t believe in themselves.” Indeed, the lyrics of “I Will Survive” depict a woman who regained her self-esteem through strength and perseverance after being left by a lover:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It took all the strength I had not to fall apart} \\
\text{Kept trying hard to mend the pieces of my broken heart} \\
\text{And I spent oh so many nights just feeling sorry for myself} \\
\text{I used to cry} \\
\text{But now I hold my head up high}
\end{align*}
\]

The transformation from weakness to strength portrayed in the song parallels the cultural project of transforming shame into pride within gay communities (Gould 2001).

Several audience members comment on the appeal of using “I Will Survive” in the drag show. A young hairstylist in a focus group, for example, explains that he enjoys hearing the song because of the message it sends about sexual liberation. In addition, the song resonates with his life as a gay man by reminding him of a time when he was young, single, and going out to gay nightclubs where the song was played:

The songs like “I Will Survive” and like any of the disco anthems, they’re always about relationships and love and sex and having a good time and things like that and usually I associate them with when I was younger and when I was single and
going out to the bars and having a good time and having fun – not that we don’t
do that now as a couple – but those songs remind me of those times.

Because songs such as “I Will Survive” are associated with gay culture, their use in drag
performances reinforces a gay collective identity by reminding listeners of common
experiences and shared cultural knowledge.

Other female entertainers, outside the disco genre, project similar images of both
strength and femininity. Kutulas writes that “Gay men had a history of embracing female
singers like Judy Garland, Bette Midler, and Cher, singers with the same kind of
cheekiness disco divas manifested” (2003: 189). While academic literature has said little
about the association of these singers with gay culture, even the artists themselves
acknowledge the connection. In a recent farewell concert, televised on April 8, 2003,
Cher explained that she planned to wear lots of beads, wigs, and different costumes
during the performance; “because if I don’t, drag queens all over the country will be
calling each other saying, ‘oh my god, she’s lost the will to live.’”

Drag shows commonly make use of songs by gay icons including Bette Midler,
Cher, Eartha Kitt, Barbara Streisand, and Tina Turner. Songs by Bette Midler are very
popular in drag performances. Five of the typical drag songs that I code here are
recorded by Bette Midler. Several of them contain an explicit message about self-esteem
and positive identity. An example is her bold assertion that “I’m beautiful, damn it,” in
her song of the same title. After all, she sings, “Ain’t this my sun/ Ain’t this my moon /
Ain’t this my world to be who I choose.” When describing why so many performers do
Bette Midler songs, Vivi Velour, an informant and drag performer in Columbus, Ohio,
explains that it’s her “style and charisma.” Other female artists, including Eartha Kitt and
Tina Turner, who project similar images of strength and assertive sexuality are also incorporated into drag shows. Two of the typical drag songs coded here are recorded by Eartha Kitt. Such songs are, in the words of Vivi Velour, “classic fag” and are popular within general gay culture and drag shows in particular.

Such songs as these project an image of feminine empowerment meant to appeal to various groups in the audience. Milla explains: “Women see my performance, and gay men see my performance; and gay men and women are similar.” These songs illustrate how music lyrics are used to send a message to the audience about the construction of a positive identity. However, this message is particularly relevant to the cultural project of transforming shame among gays and lesbians into pride. Noting the power of music to communicate this message, Vivi Velour states:

You know, it took me a long time to be comfortable with who I was. I’m very proud of being a gay man. I’m very proud…. I do a song called “Great Big Woman.” Basically, it’s sung by an ex-porn star and she’s huge – a huge, fat woman. And her name is Candy Kane, and at the end of the song she says – she has a little talking part at the end – “my message for you is to love yourself and love your body and love everybody else’s body if you get the chance.” And I would say that would be my message. Just be true, and be true to yourself, and treat yourself well.

Camp Performances

Scholars have debated an exact definition of “camp” (for a review see Cleto 2002). Yet many social theorists see camp as a unique aspect of gay culture, a “homosexual taste” (Newton 1979) or “gay sensibility” (Babuscio 2002). In a classic work on camp, Susan Sontag (2002) defines the term by identifying fifty-eight common characteristics of camp. Among them, Sontag writes, camp is “the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (2002: 56). Camp also
involves “the spirit of extravagance” and both “self-parody” and “self-love” (Sontag 2002: 58-59).

Sontag and other social theorists (e.g., Dyer 2002; Cleto 2002) suggest that particular structural relations have caused the association between camp humor and gay culture. They see camp as a form of self-defense or a survival mechanism. Dyer (2002) suggests that camp is a defense mechanism through which gay men have responded to homophobia. “[T]he fact that gay men could so sharply and brightly make fun of themselves meant that the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay” (Dyer 2002: 110). In other words, as Dyer writes, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going” (2002). Camp is therefore a strategy that those who are not accepted into mainstream society use for survival (Barbuscio 2002). By going so far beyond acceptability, into the realm of extravagance and exaggeration, camp parodies the social conventions that exclude gay men and lesbians.

Moreover, camp reinforces gay identity by invoking in-group humor. Dyer explains, “to have a good camp together gives you a tremendous sense of identification and belonging” (2002: 110). In the 801 drag shows, songs performed in a camp style often exaggerated heterosexuality and hegemonic gender in order to provoke laughter and reinforce an oppositional gay identity. A typical example of a camp performance in the 801 show is Inga’s interpretation of the song “Barbie Girl.” The song “Barbie Girl” is a spoof of the ideals of feminine beauty that are reinforced through Barbie dolls. The lyrics state:

I’m a Barbie Girl
In a Barbie World
Life in Plastic
It’s fantastic  
You can touch my hair  
Undress me anywhere…

The parody of Barbie is so blatant that the MCA Records, the recording label for the song, was actually sued by Mattel for using a trademark name without permission and degrading the image of the Barbie product. ¹⁰

Similarly, Scabby’s performance of “Wedding Bell Blues” parodies heterosexual marriage and the image of women being dependent on men. Through the lyrics, the singer pleads with her boyfriend for a marriage proposal: “Won’t you marry me Bill / I love you so / I always will.” Scabby’s performance is a parody, rather than an emulation of heterosexuality and the institution of marriage because she performs the song in a torn wedding dress, coke-bottle glasses, and make-up that gives the appearance of wrinkles and warts. Mocking images of dependent women, Scabby pulls an attractive young man out of the audience during the song, jumps on his back, wraps her arms around him, and refuses to let go. As Sontag describes, “the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious” (2002: 62).

Many of Scabby’s performances involve such camp humor and parody. These numbers involve the camp ideals of exaggeration and of “dethroning the serious” (Sontag 2002: 62) or challenging the status quo (Babuscio 2002) by taking it beyond the realm of social acceptability. Other camp songs in the 801 shows include The Carpenter’s Medley performed by Scabby in a 1970s-style polyester jump-suit. Poking fun at Karen Carpenter, who struggled with an eating disorder, Scabby pretends to throw up in a metal bucket on stage. Performances such as these portray an image of hyperfemininity that is

¹⁰ Mattel Inc. v. MCA Records, Inc., No. 98-56453 (9th Circuit, July 24, 2002).
jarring, unsettling, or ugly, which explains why other performers describe Scabby’s style as “scary drag.” For example, Scabby’s rendition of Eartha Kitt’s song “Where is my Baby” is performed with five-inch-long talons in place of fingernails.

Scabby is not the only drag queen at the 801 to utilize camp humor. RV performs a version of “Reciprocity,” from the musical *Chicago,* while wearing a bathing suit and hair curlers, and dangling a cigarette butt from his mouth. Likewise, several 801 girls use this type of camp in a group medley of songs from the 1980s, performing this number in clashing neon green and pink outfits with ruffles. The glaring colors mock the “Day-glo” look popular in the 1980s.

Camp performances also elicit laughter by juxtaposing two seemingly contradictory things. Barbuscio notes that camp involves an “incongruous contrast,” such as “youth/(old) age” (2002: 119). Many of Margo’s performances fit into this type of camp humor. Margo frequently calls attention to her age, calling herself “the oldest living drag queen in captivity.” Margo’s white wig and visible wrinkles reveal that she is at least in her 60s. She often contrasts this image of herself with songs that valorize youth and beauty. For example, when Margo performs the Alecia Bridges hit “I Love the Nightlife” – “I want to go where the people dance. / I want action. / I want to live.” – the lyrics speak of staying out all night dancing and seducing young men.

Another example of camp incongruity is revealed in the performance of the song “Saved” from the musical *Smokey Joe’s Café.* The lyrics describe salvation, stating, “I used to drink and smoke… But now I’m saved.” However, at the 801 the song is performed by drag queens in choir robes with drinks and cigarettes in their hands, performing in front of an audience that is also typically drinking alcohol and/or smoking.
That the same number is performed in Columbus, Ohio, complete with choir robes, reveals this common repertoire of drag performers nationwide.

Such camp performances as these reinforce gay identity through in-group humor. In addition to drawing upon stereotypes of femininity, as described above, other songs use not-so-subtle double entendre, such as “The Pussycat Song,” to objectify women’s bodies. Other camp performances also utilize exaggerated racial stereotypes. For example, Milla performs “Lady Marmalade” and the theme song from the 1970s sitcom The Jefferson’s in a giant afro wig and disproportionately large, padded hips and buttocks.

The audience also interprets these songs as making fun of heterosexuality and of straight men. In many of the “scary drag” songs, performers deliberately try to appear ugly and then approach, flirt with, and touch heterosexual men in the audience, as in “Wedding Bell Blues.” Many gay men in the focus group state that they enjoy the laughter at the expense of heterosexuals. For example, a 27-year-old gay man from Philadelphia, when asked about his favorite parts of the show stated, “I love it when they hassle straight men.” His partner, who was also in the focus group, chimed in, “That’s one of the best things. We love that.”

In addition to invoking in-group humor, camp also asserts a boundary between gays and straights. Dyer describes this phenomenon stating, “The togetherness you get from camping about is fine – but not everybody actually feels able to camp about” (2002: 111). In drag shows, however, the divide between gays and straights is constantly blurred (Rupp and Taylor 2003). One way in which heterosexual members of the audience are integrated into the show is by bringing them on stage to become part of the
In the “shot” segment of the 801 shows, drag queens ask for a “straight woman,” a “lesbian,” a “straight man,” and a “gay man” from the audience to volunteer to get onto the stage and introduce themselves. Although the straight volunteers are often teased or laughed at, they are also given a free drink and thanked for being “good sports” (Rupp and Taylor 2003).

Heterosexuals are thus integrated into show, even if they are simultaneously teased. This complex pattern of integrating and simultaneously excluding heterosexuals is not unique to Key West, but commonly occurs at shows in Columbus as well. For example, in Columbus, a drag show in 2001 was held as a fund-raiser for local organizations that provide services to people with AIDS. While circulating around the bar, show director Mary Ann Brandt passed a table of women who identified themselves as heterosexual. Brandt sarcastically mumbled into the microphone, “Oh, straight people don’t have any money to donate. They have kids to raise.” When the laughter subsided, though, Brandt thanked the table for coming and “showing their support”.

The choice of songs also helps the drag performers walk the fine-line between integrating and mocking heterosexuals. Performing the song “Lady Marmalade,” Milla typically pulls a heterosexual man out of the audience and onto the stage. She often removes his shirt and sometimes his pants offering him to become part of the performance. The lyrics of the song parallel the interaction on the stage. The song tells a story of a man who has a one-night stand with a prostitute (Lady Marmalade) during his travels in New Orleans.

He met Marmalade
Down in Old New Orleans
Struttin’ her stuff on the street
She said, “Hello, hey Joe, you wanna give it a go?”

After their one-night affair, he goes back to his “normal” life, but he still fantasizes about his night with Lady Marmalade and secretly wants more.

Now he’s at home doing nine to five
Living his grey flannel life
But when he turns off to sleep
Old memories creep
More, more, more…

The lyrics correspond with the performance in the bar. The heterosexual tourist on vacation from out of town is the object of Milla’s attention on stage. Singing the role of Lady Marmalade while stripping the straight man on stage, Milla suggests that the audience member, like the man in the song, might secretly fantasize about his outrageous interaction with the drag queen. The song and performance suggest, then, that the divide between gay and straight is not so clear.

Based on the data from focus groups, it is clear that the audience understands the sexual ambiguity created in the show. The 27-year-old gay man from Philadelphia who was quoted above later qualified his suggestion that he “love[d] it when they hassle straight men,” explaining that the show also provides an opportunity to bridge divides. Discussing a heterosexual couple that got up on the stage the night he attended the show, he stated, “That was totally great. I mean they were amazing. They’re like one of the best parts of the show. It was really beautiful. It sounds weird but it was really beautiful to see them be able to come up there and cross that boundary from the straight world to the gay world and participate and have a good time.” Likewise, a heterosexual, 48-year-old woman who had never been to a drag show before stated: “To me a drag show is in part for straights. It’s not focused just on gays.” A lesbian woman from New York
concurred, stating that the shot segment of the show was “a device to get everybody engaged and keep people engaged and not too focused on one group or another… I like the fact that the audience was diverse.”

These data provide concrete examples of how sexual identities are blurred in drag shows. It is common for drag performers to ask “who here is straight?” Heterosexuals in the audience are therefore identified, and often singled out and made fun of through the use of camp songs. However, they are simultaneously thanked for their attendance (and, as RV regularly notes, thanked for breeding more homosexuals), integrated into the performances, and become, in the words of the focus group participant, “one of the best parts of the show.” In drag shows, heterosexuals become “outsiders-within” (Collins 1991); they hold the contradictory status of being members of the collective while they are also differentiated from the larger group. They are thus forced to see themselves through the eyes of the gay men and lesbians around them, exposing them to an oppositional gay consciousness.

**Discussion**

Scholars of social movements have noted that the boundaries of collective identity are not always clear. Esterberg (1997) notes that lesbian communities sometimes include and sometimes exclude bisexual women. Josh Gamson (1996) suggests that social movement participants face an ever-present dilemma between building a discrete collective identity and deconstructing that identity in order to create coalitions and appeal

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11 The concept of the “outsider-within” can be used to describe the status of African Americans (DuBois (1989 [1903]), African American women (Collins 1990), African American lesbians (Lorde 1984), and gays and lesbians (Escoffier 1998; Gould 2001) in dominant American culture.
to by-standers. The drag performances discussed here provide a concrete example of how gay identity is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed. Specifically, drag shows both single out and make fun of heterosexuals and incorporate them into the collective experience of the performance.

Music is a useful resource through which drag performers create these shifting alliances. Some of the songs used in drag shows at the 801 may be offensive to various members of audience: heterosexuals, women, gay men, or African Americans. However, because a variety of songs are used in the shows, they appeal to a broad spectrum of audience members. Milla suggests that drag may be a particularly useful strategy for building fluid and shifting identities because of the ability of drag queens to constantly change their personae. Describing her own performance, Milla states “There’s somebody out there in the audience who will connect with Milla with the long hair, or Milla with the afro.”

In addition, music is useful to achieve this goal. Flacks (1999) notes that songs enable people to temporarily take on different roles. Performer Gugi Gomez echoes this sentiment when explaining why he chooses particular songs. He states that he is “very analytical” and likes to perform to songs that allow the listener to “get inside someone else’s head.” Some of the songs used in the 801 performances directly refer to taking on the role of the performer. For example, the hit performed by Stars on 54 invites the listener to “Read my Mind”: “If you could read my mind, love / what a tale my thoughts could tell.” Audience members also note the way that music allows the listener to take on the role of the performer and vice versa. When asked about the message the shows communicate, a gay man from Key West stated, “Sometimes a particular number might
trigger a particular incident that you may have experienced… and they [the drag
performers] want to let you know, ‘yeah, I know how you feel.’” Similarly, a 26-year-
old lesbian from New York explained that watching the performance of “What Makes a
Man a Man” triggered her own feelings of sorrow about not being entirely accepted by
others because of her sexuality: “When I was listening to some of the words, I was
thinking of my life in general because my parents don’t know.”

By encouraging audience members to take on the role of the performer at the
same time that performers change their appearance and on-stage persona, music and drag
work together to accomplish the contradictory task of building a collective identity and
simultaneously deconstructing it. Although audience members see the shows as “gay
space,” they simultaneously recognize how heterosexuals are entertained, educated, and
integrated into the performances. As Milla explains:

> We all created something so that we are attractive to everybody. We have taken
gender and thrown it out of the way, and we’ve crossed a bridge here. And when
we are all up there, there is no gay/straight or anything…. It’s not about what you
are out there (referring to identity outside of the bar), when you’re up there with
us we lock the door. You’re nothing; we’re all one. We are all sharing something
and nobody cares.

The broad appeal of the shows is not based just in the talk of the performers but
also in the choice of music, as shown here. A gay man from Key West alludes to the
power of music and collective singing to unify the audience when he states in a focus
group that, “The different sexualities can actually get together and have fun and be
together and sing rude and not worry.” Likewise, Vivi Velour comments on the power of
drag to unify and to reach out to heterosexuals:

> I think drag is good – it’s an important part of the gay community because it helps
us do outreach… It mainstreams some things, and it at least makes us more visual
to other people. It’s the first thing they see when they see a gay person. I think it’s a good point of contact because we are so visual and always out and about.

This chapter suggests that drag shows build identity by mobilizing emotions (see also Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Melucci 1995). Camp songs use humor to appeal to various members of the audience. In addition, songs that describe gay life and gay culture elicit feelings of sorrow, sympathy, pride, and acceptance among gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals. Many of the songs also elicit anger and rage and promote a sense of injustice, a second component of collective action frames discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 5

“I’M GETTIN’ TIRED OF YOUR SHIT”\textsuperscript{12}: MUSIC, ANGER, AND INJUSTICE

Social movement scholars have recently begun to consider the roles that emotions play in the mobilization and manifestation of protest (see, e.g. Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Taylor 2000; Taylor 1995). This scholarship corrects an oversight in prior social movement theory, which largely neglects the discussion of emotions. Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2000) describe this “rise of emotion” in the literature, suggesting that resource mobilization theory (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983), which dominated the social movement literature in the 1960s and 1970s, shifted attention away from emotions in an effort to focus on the organized and logical dimensions protest. Resource mobilization theorists challenged prior understanding of social movements that suggested that protest, like other types of mob behavior, was spontaneous and motivated by alienation. In the political climate of the 1960s, social movement scholars wanted to portray activism in a more positive light, and thus focused on the organized, logical dimensions of protest. Because social scientists – following in the tradition of Max Weber – have commonly associated emotions with irrationality, resource mobilization theorists turned a blind eye to the emotions that fuel protest (Goodwin, Jasper, and

\textsuperscript{12} From the song “Tyrone”, performed by Eryka Badu. 1997. Universal Records.
Polletta 2001, 2000). Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2000) suggest that even scholars who began in the 1990s to focus on social movement cultures also neglect a focus on emotions.

Scholars who have begun to examine the affective dimensions of protest highlight two ways in which emotions intersect social movement participation. First, emotions draw participants into protest, which helps explain social movement mobilization. For example, Stein (2001) documents that shame over past personal experiences, such as drug and alcohol abuse, motivates activists in the Christian right. Taylor and Rupp (2002) show that emotions were also important to the mobilization of transnational women’s rights and peace organization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Transnational women’s organizations were able to build a collective identity that transcended national boundaries by constructing intense affective ties that often built on the emotional template of motherly love (Taylor and Rupp 2002). Because emotions are powerful in recruiting movement participants and sympathizers, a variety of social protests – including those staged by Polish workers’ in the solidarity movement (Barker 2001) and by fascists in Italy (Berezin 2001) – include public displays of emotion.

Second, emotion cultures are a distinct product of social movements. Taylor (2001) documents how women in the postpartum depression self-help movement redefine the emotional norms of motherhood. Participants reject the ideals of instinctive motherly love and joy by calling attention to the anger and frustration that many women feel following the birth (and in some cases the adoption) of a child. Because movements

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13 Interestingly, Groves (2001) notes that activists also denigrate emotions in an effort to gain legitimacy. Women in the animal rights movement often belittle the very emotions that caused them to participate in activism – compassion and love of animals – and instead appeal to scientific and philosophical arguments to explain why animals should not be used in research laboratories.
produce their own emotion cultures, participants often undergo a change in their own self-conceptions and identities as a result of social movement participation (Kiecolt 2000). Gay and lesbian activists, for example, transform shame over stigmatized identities into pride by adopting the framework of gay and lesbian liberation (Britt and Heis 2000; Gould 2001). Interestingly, the shift from shame to pride is also apparent among participants in Christian Right movements (Stein 2001).

Although studies of emotion in social movements help explain the “nuts and bolts” of social movement emergence, mobilization, and outcomes (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001), this scholarship has remained largely on the periphery of social movement literature. Emotions have not been fully integrated into the causal models of movement mobilization put forth by political process theorists (e.g., McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). Moreover, as Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) note, even scholars of the cultural dimensions of social movements have sidestepped questions of emotions.

In the research presented here, I expand on prior studies of emotions and attempt to integrate this literature with work on social movement framing. Gamson’s (1992) discussion of injustice as a critical element of social movement frameworks provides a point of convergence with the literature on emotions. Gamson defines injustice as “moral indignation expressed in the form of political consciousness” (1992: 7). He also notes the intense feelings of range and anger that underlie a sense of injustice. Describing injustice as a “hot cognition,” Gamson writes, “Injustice focuses on the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (1992: 32).

Gamson’s analysis examines the frameworks produced by the media around four controversial political issues: affirmative action, Arab-Israeli conflict, the troubled
American industrial sector, and nuclear power. Gamson addresses whether the media
frameworks inhibit or encourage movement mobilization around these issues. Although
Gamson notes the emotional underpinnings of injustice, he shifts his attention to other
dimensions when he examines these four frameworks. Gamson’s analysis hones in on
the extent to which media and movement frameworks specify a clear attribution of blame.
If a concrete entity can be blamed for the injustice, Gamson argues, individuals are more
likely to take action. Similar to other scholars of social movement frameworks, Gamson
mentions emotions, but leaves them out of his actual analysis (Goodwin, Jasper, and
Polletta 2001).

In this research, I utilize Gamson’s concept of injustice but focus more explicitly
on its emotional aspects. In particular, I examine how anger and rage over dominant
conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are conveyed in drag performances.
This chapter thus examines how cultural performances may facilitate social movement
mobilization by creating a sense of injustice – an important component of collective
action frameworks.

Prior discussions of drag (e.g., Schacht 2000; Butler 1990; Feigan 2000;
Tewksbury 1993, 1994; Dolan 1985) and its relationship to hegemonic gender have not
addressed this aspect of the performance. Sontag’s (2002) discussion of drag and camp,
for instance, describes camp as inherently apolitical because it is devoid of content and
merely aesthetic. By contrast, I show that drag queens convey a sense of injustice and a
critique of the social order in their performances, and they do so through the strategic use
of music. In the shows I examine at the 801 Cabaret, drag queens use songs to express
injustice in two ways. First are songs about men exploiting women in personal
relationships. The drag performers use these songs to make an explicit critique of gender inequality and, more specifically, of masculinity and patriarchy. Secondly, drag performers use songs that make a more general critique of social inequality, intolerance, or materialism in American culture.

**Masculine Exploitation and Feminine Outrage**

At the 801, the performer who most consistently expresses the emotions of rage and injustice in her performances is Milla. She is so well known for this type of performance that she sometimes refers to her onstage persona as “Angry Milla.” In an interview, he explains that he uses performance as an outlet for his emotions. In particular, he expresses the anger that he feels when others prejudge him based on his appearance and dismiss him because he does not conform to hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Explaining why he expresses this anger in his performances, Milla states:

Because I was hurt, and one of the best parts of being able to be a performer is that you can use your feelings. And not only that, but people who are out there watching you, they’ve all felt anger, they’ve all felt pain, they’ve all felt love, they’ve all felt this, that, and the other. They can understand it.

Milla thus explains that performance allows him to express his own anger and to connect with others.

Milla also notes how the strategic choice of music can help to convey this anger, by discussing his performance of Alanis Morissette’s “You Oughta Know” – a popular drag song that is also performed by Gugi at the 801 and by various performers in Columbus, Ohio drag bars. The lyrics of the song portray a woman’s fantasy of telling her ex-lover how much he disrupted her life by leaving her for another woman, declaring:
“I’m here / To remind you / Of the mess you made when you went away.” Milla explains that this song allows him to convey the anger he feels toward men – including ex-boyfriends as well as his own father – who mistreated him. Describing his first performance of the song, Milla explains how he portrayed this fury by pulling a man out of the audience onto the stage and pushing him around, physically confronting him:

I could feel I was talking to my father... I was talking to every mother fucking man that ever hurt me, and to every man that ever hurt anybody. At one point in the song I was so angry, I was almost crying. I was so angry, releasing it. I take this guy – I don’t know where the energy came from – where the strength for me came from, especially in those heels and everything, and this is when I was still teetering on those heels. And I took him and I pulled him onto the stage, and there was no struggle. It was just like a flop, like a bird plucking a fish out of the ocean. And I just yanked him and threw him on that fucking chair, and I beat the hell out of him. I don’t mean literally – he didn’t walk away bleeding. And the audience went crazy. And that’s when I realized I was going to get success with this.

The crowd’s enthusiastic response to this number suggests that members of the audience understand the sentiment that Milla attempts to convey.

Milla performs several other songs that express indignation and hostility toward men. Most of these songs contain lyrics about men who exploit women in personal relationships. For example Natalie Imbruglio’s “Torn” is about a woman who feels disillusioned and ashamed for trusting a boyfriend who ultimately left her:

I'm all out of faith
This is how I feel
I'm cold and I am shamed
Lying naked on the floor
Illusion never changed
Into something real
I'm wide awake
And I can see
The perfect sky is torn
In an interview, Milla explains that she chose this song to express her own emotions about a boyfriend who treated her badly and even turned her friends against her. The same personal incident also motivates her performance of “Special,” a song about a woman who was mistreated in a violent relationship with a man she once loved. The lyrics of this song by the band Garbage state:

There was nothing that I wouldn’t do
To keep myself around and close to you
Do you have an opinion?
A mind of your own
I thought you were special
I thought you should know
That I’ve run out of patience
I couldn’t care less

A similar story is told in Milla’s rendition of a Whitney Houston song in which the singer declares that her boyfriend’s behavior is “not right, but it’s okay” because she plans to end the relationship and happily live without him.

Milla performs each of these songs with similar movements and gestures. He emphasizes the rage and indignation expressed in the lyrics by taking a defiant pose on stage, with his fists clenched. As in the song “You Oughta Know,” Milla often singles out a man in the audience and directs the song toward him, pointing at him and sometimes bringing him onto the stage. His performances thus enact an angry confrontation with men. In an interview, Milla gives an account of the personal experiences that lie behind her anger toward men. When Milla, or rather Dean (his legal name), was a young boy, he was manipulated and molested by a man who was the counselor for the theater program at his school. As a child, Milla was also abused by his father; and as an adult, he has had a series of unsuccessful relationships with men.
Though motivated by personal experiences, Milla’s performances convey a broader statement about the injustice of gender relations. Milla often introduces her songs with statements that generalize the exploitation by men detailed in the lyrics. Milla’s songs therefore do more than express an individual’s sense of anger and resentment; they formulate a critique of masculinity and address the unjust treatment of women in a patriarchal society. For example, Milla typically introduces Eryka Badu’s song “Tyrone” with a lengthy explanation of why he – as a white, gay man – performs a song by an African-American female artist. The song provides a script for him to critique hegemonic masculinity.

You know I’m not black, right? I’d like to be. You know, I’ve always thought about this. You know, all these drag queens, they do Barbara, Liza, Bette. All these characters, right? You know where I found myself? I’ll tell you. I do ethnic. That’s right. I don’t do personalities. I do color. I am a woman of color. And what is it about, ladies? Gentlemen, you can close your ears because I don’t really give a shit about you anyways. We are powerful women, are we not, women? (Cheers from the audience.) Are you not powerful? Come on, girl, what do you think you are? Yes, ladies and gentlemen, women are power. (Cheers from the audience.) You wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for them. You wouldn’t. Ain’t that an “amen.” And that’s why we spend all of our time being effeminate and looking up to women and thinking they are all that they are. Don’t you agree? (Cheers from the audience.) All these guys, they just want to go back to a circuit party, swing their tee-shirts around, think it’s all good, love, have sex. It’s not all about that, sisters. Let me tell you.

Here, Milla’s rejection of masculinity is so complete that he identifies as a “woman of color.” His introduction suggests that drag queens emulate women because women are strong, powerful, and knowledgeable. By contrast, men, he claims, are only interested in sex, fun, and parties. This statement directly refutes some prior scholars’ interpretations of drag (e.g., Feigan 2002) that suggest that drag performers appropriate aspects of femininity for the sole purpose of mocking women.
The song “Tyrone” depicts a woman’s unhappiness with how her boyfriend treats her. In the lyrics, the singer confronts her boyfriend because he does not give her enough attention and seems to value his friends more than her.

I'm gettin' tired of your shit
You don't never buy me nothin'
See every time you come around
You got to bring Jim, James, Paul, and Tyrone
See why can't we be by ourselves, sometimes
See I've been having this on my mind
For a long time
I just want it to be
You and me
Like it used to be, baby
But ya don't know how to act

In the chorus, the singer states that she has had enough of her boyfriend’s behavior and suggests that he “call Tyrone” to help him pack his belongings and move out of the house.

Milla’s introduction explains that the performance of “Tyrone” is more than a recounting of one individual woman’s relationship. Instead, the song is used to make a structural critique. Milla connects individuals’ problems with macro-level, cultural definitions of gender – particularly masculinity. He speaks not of an individual “woman” or “man,” but of men, women, and women of color in general. Milla thus turns his performance into a message about the injustice of male privilege and of men’s exploitation of women.

Milla’s self-identification as a “woman of color” illustrates how performers manipulate conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality during the shows. In order to express anger over male-privilege, Milla appropriates the voice of an African-American artist. Here, Eryka Badu’s disparaging remarks about her male lover’s behavior become
a cultural script through which Milla can denounce masculinity. Because our culture offers few models of how men can oppose male privilege and masculinity, Milla embraces the words of women in order to make this critique.

When Milla performs such numbers, he often receives an enthusiastic response from the crowd. “Tyrone” is typically performed near the end of a night’s show and represents an emotional peak in the performance. Audience members – both men and women – cheer throughout the song, and even during Milla’s introduction. At the conclusion of these numbers, the audience often chants, “Diva, Diva, Diva,” a form of applause uniquely reserved at the 801 for Milla. In addition to these demonstrations of approval, two young lesbians from Orlando specifically commented, in a focus group, on Milla’s performance of “Tyrone” and of his message about masculinity, femininity and injustice.

(First Focus Group Participant) I thought it was interesting how they brought women into the shows and some of the songs they had – what was that one song he sang? I thought that was interesting. It was something about women and how she was talking about women being superior…
(Focus Group Facilitator) I think Milla did that one, right? Where she came out, and she said, “I’m a woman of color.” Did you hear that?
(First Focus Group Participant) Right. And how you wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for women. I’m like – this is kind of a rough call to be saying that, you know. I was kind of surprised.
(Second Focus Group Participant) But it’s true.
(First Focus Group Participant) Yes, it’s true. But I mean, the audience is predominantly male.

That this focus group participant describes Milla’s performance of “Tyrone” as “bringing women into the show” suggest that she interprets the song as a way to give voice to the concerns and experiences of women. Contradicting prior feminist critiques of drag as sexist (e.g., Feigan 2000), this audience member suggests that drag actually promotes a
feminist message. Moreover, her comment that the male viewers were a “rough” audience for this message reveals that she also interprets the song as a critique of male power and masculinity.

Similar to “Tyrone,” Milla’s performance of “When a Man Love’s a Woman” also formulates a critique of heteronormative gender relations. At first glance, the lyrics of the song appear to reinforce dominant conceptions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality. The lyrics elaborate the lengths to which a man will go when he loves a woman:

When a man loves a woman
He’ll spend his very last dime
Trying to hold on to what he needs
Give up all his comforts
Go out and sleep out in the rain
If she said, “Baby, that is how it’s gonna be.”

Milla’s performance of the song and his strategic choice of the recording made by Bette Midler, however, cast the lyrics in a new light. Milla introduces the song by turning the title into a question. “When a man loves a woman?” he asks facetiously. “Why can’t he just love me for once?” Singling out one specific man in the audience, he points to him and asks: “I do all this for you, and what do you give me?” Immediately, the song’s romanticized portrayal of heterosexuality is cast under suspicion.

As the song continues, Milla’s message becomes clearer. Throughout the number Milla’s gestures become increasingly more aggressive. Early in the number, she holds her limbs close to her body, sometimes placing her hands gently on her chin – a gesture often associated with demure femininity. By the end, however, she holds her fists clenched and stomps her feet on the stage. After the standard verses of the song, a key-
change signals the musical climax. Milla, lip synching Bette Midler’s mix of talking, singing, and screaming, declares “Well, you told me you loved me, baby. But darlin’, this is a \textit{man’s world}.” Thus, Milla’s performance exposes the male dominance and control that lie under the romanticized view of chivalry and masculinity described in the lyrics. The song becomes a critique of masculinity and of the culture of romance. Importantly, this critique is not just about individual men, but of a patriarchal system – “a man’s world.” Milla therefore uses “When a Man Loves a Woman” to communicate a message about the injustice of male dominance.

Though Milla is the 801 performer best known for such demonstrations of rage, she is not the only drag queen to convey such emotions. Kylie’s performance of “Strut” by Sheena Easton conveys anger about the sexual exploitation of women. The song is about a woman who is threatening to leave her lover because she feels that she is merely being used for sex. She explains that she is beginning to feel more like a prostitute than a partner.

\begin{verbatim}
Strut, pout, put it out
That’s what you want from women
Come on baby, what’cha taking me for?
Strut pout, cut it out, all taking and no giving
Watch me baby while I walk out the door
\end{verbatim}

During Kylie’s performance, he pulls a man out of audience, pushes him around the stage, and eventually knocks him to the ground and sits on top of him for the remainder of the number. Much like Milla, Kylie performs this number with angry gestures: he glares at the male audience member, points a finger at him, and at times clenches his fists.
Milla explains that such songs express anger and expose the unjust treatment of women – and gay men – in a male dominated society. However, the songs also send a message about the listeners’ abilities to overcome bad situations:

All the songs are similar. They’re about being victimized by men, and pain and anger. But they’re all different women, and that’s why there is that Black girl in the audience, maybe I don’t see her, but she’s in that audience, and I become her. I’m what she can’t do. Maybe I helped her. Maybe she went home that night and told that mother fucker to get out of her god damn house. She’s now living a happy life. Maybe I changed somebody’s life… And women allow themselves to be victimized so much. They sit back and don’t say anything. And they say “it’s okay, it’s okay,” and it’s not okay. If I can be a woman on that stage – portray a woman – and help girls and help women say “it’s not okay.” I shouldn’t even say women, it’s gay men too.

Through music and performance, Milla formulates a critique of masculinity and sends an explicit message of empowerment to women and gay men. The focus on telling women how to resist male domination is significant because, as Gamson (1992) notes, a sense of injustice facilitates change only if it contains a concrete way to remedy the situation.14

Rupp and Taylor (2003) note the oppositional elements of drag queen culture, but other scholars (e.g., Schacht 2000; Feigan 2000; Tewksbury 1993, 1994) have not addressed the explicit critiques of masculinity that drag queens convey in their performances. By examining only the outward appearance of drag performers – by looking at but not listening to drag – one might conclude that drag reifies exaggerated stereotypes of femininity. By analyzing the music used in the shows, however, it becomes clear that drag performers strategically select songs to make a feminist critique of male dominance. These songs are performed with utter seriousness and

14 Milla’s discussion of how to overcome injustice reveals a complex mixture of individual and collective solutions. Milla largely discusses the need for individual women and gay men to stand up to abusive lovers. However, he also discusses women’s subordination as systemic in our culture, and he sees himself as a role model of how women, as a collective, can become empowered. In chapter six, I focus more directly on this complex relationship between the individual/personal and the collective/political.
demonstrations of rage and anger, unlike the camp numbers discussed in the prior chapter. Through such songs about injustice, drag performers – as gay men – give voice to their own exploitation at the hands of other men and use women’s music and women’s voices to do so.

Intolerance and Injustice

In addition to formulating a condemnation of masculinity, some drag songs also offer a broader critique of the social order. Gugi explains that some of his songs are “about rage and anger” brought about not only by men exploiting women but more generally by “people dumping on other people.” Like Milla, Gugi explains that performing is an outlet for his own sense of rage – an emotion that his family often told him to suppress: “always having a stiff upper lip, you know, growing up the way I did.”

Gugi puts this emotion into his performance of “Mountains O’ Things,” a song recorded by Tracy Chapman. The lyrics offer a direct critique of materialist culture:

Consume more than you need
This is the dream
Make you pauper
Or make you queen
I won’t die lonely
I’ll have it all prearranged
A grave that’s deep and wide enough
For me and all my mountains o’ things

In an interview, Gugi explains that materialism is often divisive, distracting people from achieving greater goals of tolerance and acceptance. The song, he explains, is about “fame and wealth”: But it’s very critical of that. It’s like, be careful what you wish for… I used to want those things when I was growing up in Chicago, and I was living with my
family. And we owned a little flower store; my mom and dad did. They owned this little flower store, and I thought that what I wanted was to make a lot of money. And so I worked all these different jobs... I did a lot of things because I thought that’s what I wanted, but then I realized that all I really wanted was to be accepted. And those other things, they don’t matter. They’re just things. That’s why the song is called Mountains O’ Things.

Performing in a red satin dress and feather boa, Gugi uses the lyrics of the song to undermine, rather than reify, the inequalities brought about by materialism and ostentatious consumption.

Sushi’s performance of “One Man’s Trash is Another Man’s Treasure” by the Jody Grind also criticizes aspects of American culture. Rather than focus specifically on materialism, however, this song comments on stereotypes and hierarchies based on morality or “virtue”:

Virtue is a thing
That defies easy measure
Some nasty words, some idle talk
Can lower a lady’s stature
To judge another
Before you really know
Can turn to yellow the whitest snow
I won’t let you take away none of my pleasure
One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.

Drag songs such as these offer a broad critique of dominant culture. Unlike many of the numbers performed by Milla, these songs are not explicit commentaries on gender and patriarchy. However, because they are performed by gay men wearing dresses, the songs send a subtle message that the victims of inequality and stereotypes are those who transgress gender and sexuality norms.

When performed in the context of a drag show, the meaning of a song can shift. An example is the song “Free Your Mind,” which is performed with regularity every
Saturday night at the 801. The lyrics of the song, recorded by four African-American women, challenge racial and sexual stereotypes.

Prejudice
Wrote a song about it
Want to hear it?
Hear it goes…
I wear tight clothing
And high heel shoes
It doesn’t mean that I’m a prostitute

When performed by four men in high-heeled shoes and tight clothing, the meaning of the song is slightly altered. The song still speaks of social justice and the need to “free your mind” from prejudice. However, in this context, the song challenges stereotypes of drag queens, gay men, or others who defy sex and gender norms.

Some of the songs that describe gay life, which were discussed in chapter four, send a similar message of injustice also by transforming the original meaning of a song. For example, Milla addresses the lives lost to the AIDS epidemic with a song – “Bohemian Rhapsody” – about the lives lost to gang violence. Describing this song, Margo remarks that it is powerful because Milla “put so much of her anger into it.”

Multiple audience members commented, in the focus group, about the message of injustice contained in “What Makes a Man a Man,” another song that describes gay life. As discussed in the prior chapter, focus group participants stated that this song conveys some of the difficulties that gays and lesbians experience as a result of homophobia. Overall, however, few focus group participants commented on the anger expressed by performers. This may be due to the fact that only sixteen of the seventy-three typical drag songs analyzed here convey anger and injustice. (By comparison, thirty songs address collective identity and thirty-five address agency.)
However, the relative scarcity of audience comments on injustice may not be solely based on the number of songs but also on the ambiguity of the message. The angry performances discussed here do not specify a clear target of blame, which makes the allusion to injustice vague (Gamson 1992). Although the performers speak of putting rage and anger into their shows, the message is confusing because the lyrics do not identify a discrete source of injustice. Milla’s condemnation of “men” creates too broad a category – a category that includes many audience members and, in a biological sense, includes Milla herself.

Similarly, some songs convey anger and rage, but only vaguely allude to a source of injustice. For example, the song “What’s Up?” performed by both Gugi and Desiray offers no clear critique of structural or cultural arrangements and only makes a passing reference to the concentration of power in the hands of men:

> I realized quickly when I knew I should  
> That the world was made up of this brotherhood of man  
> For whatever that means…

The song also describes a general sense of pain and isolation. The lyrics state: “I cry sometimes when I’m lying in bed / Just to get it all out what’s in my head.” During the chorus, Gugi forms clenched fists, the gesture commonly used by drag queens at the 801 to convey anger. He takes this posture when lip synching the lines in the chorus:

> And I wake in the morning  
> And I step outside  
> And I take a deep breath  
> And I get real high  
> And I scream from the top of my lungs  
> “What’s going on?”
Although the song offers no clear attribution of blame for “what’s going on,” the lyrics convey a diffuse sense of anger over obstacles that one faces in life. The words also suggest that a massive social change or “revolution” should occur.

And I try, oh my god do I try
I try all the time, in this institution
And I pray, oh my god do I pray
I pray every single day
For a revolution

Because the song’s attribution of blame and prescription for change are vague, it serves as an outlet of anger for the performers, but offers only a weak articulation of social injustice (Gamson 1992). The message of injustice may also be difficult for performers to convey in a show that also utilizes humor and generates sympathy in order to build alliances. The data here indicate that drag shows, and perhaps other forms of entertainment, are less effective in eliciting anger and rage among audience members, and more effective in eliciting sympathy and affection to build collective identity, as discussed in chapter four.

Discussion

Drag shows are laden with emotion. Chapter four demonstrates that humor, sympathy, and sorrow, are used by drag performers to construct a collective identity among audience members. In this chapter, excerpts from interviews with the 801 performers reveal that drag queens also utilize music to express anger and rage. However, they are somewhat less adept at conveying these emotions and the concomitant sense of injustice than they are at constructing a sense of collective identity. Nonetheless,
the emotions of outrage and injustice are part of the gay, oppositional culture that is formed around drag shows.

Focusing on the sense of injustice and the oppositional elements of drag performances sheds light on questions raised by prior studies of drag queens. Prior research suggesting that drag is anti-feminist or sexist (e.g., Dolan 1985; Feigan 2000; Schacht 2000; Tewksbury 1993, 1994) has missed the complexity of drag performances. These studies have noted drag queens’ use of camp humor, discussed in chapter four, which mocks heterosexuality and hegemonic femininity. However, drag queen performances also incorporate women’s voices through the use of music. As one focus group participant explained, this is a useful tactic for “bringing women into the show.” In addition, drag queens select songs that describe the exploitation of women and thus formulate a critique of patriarchy. Drag shows bring together a variety of music and therefore cannot be understood simply as sexist or feminist because they include some elements of both.

The anger expressed by performers is often rooted in personal experiences. Through their performances, however, drag queens connect their own experiences to broader social injustices – male domination, the subordination of femininity, and the marginalization of those who fail to conform to hegemonic gender roles. Because these emotions are linked to structural and cultural inequalities, they demonstrate the way in which drag shows build an oppositional consciousness (Taylor and Whittier 1992) or a collective action framework (Gamson 1992) conducive to social protest.

This analysis of the emotional content of drag shows extends prior studies of the use of emotion in social movement mobilization (e.g., Jasper, Goodwin, and Polletta
Much of this prior literature focuses on how emotions are used to build collective identity and allegiance to a group. For example, Baumeister, Dale, and Muraven (2000) suggest that social movement participation is facilitated by an individual’s need to feel a sense of belonging. Although emotions are clearly a part of the construction and maintenance of solidarity, the focus on identity building over-emphasizes the personal aspects of emotion and sidesteps their systemic causes. By focusing on rage and injustice, this study examines how emotions that may facilitate movement mobilization result from structural arrangements.

This study also reveals how gender and race permeate social protest and oppositional cultures (see also Taylor 1999). In the drag shows analyzed here, men give voice to their own experiences of sexual exploitation at the hands of other men. Yet, we have few scripts in our culture for men to talk about this. The drag queens therefore literally take women’s words to formulate their critique. In particular, the performers often use songs by women of color, for example, Eryka Badu, Whitney Houston, Tracy Chapman, and En Vogue. These songs comment on racism and sexism in American culture, but when performed by drag queens the message shifts, slightly, to more explicitly address gender and heterosexism. The performers hone the meaning of these songs with spoken introductions that directly address patriarchy and male dominance.

These examples illustrate how drag queens draw from the long tradition of oppositional music within African American culture. Scholars have documented how music has played a role in African American protest (e.g., Eyerman and Jamison 1998). African slaves used songs to record history, maintain traditions, and build solidarity, thereby fostering a culture of resistance (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Collective singing
in Black churches and during demonstrations helped to foster networks, maintain
collective identity, and enhance commitment to the cause of civil rights (Morris 1982;
Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Moreover, Black hymns and spirituals continue to play a
role in community organizing to elect African Americans to political office (Patillo-
McCoy 1998). Rose demonstrates that rap music is a contemporary example of “cultural
expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” and critically
asseses dominant culture and institutions (1994: 2). Male rap artists commonly critique
the police, the media, and the government. Female rap and hip hop artists “are more
likely to render social and political critiques against limitations on female independence,
identity, community, and most critically, the sexist character of black heterosexual
relations” (Rose 1994: 105). In the shows analyzed here, drag queens draw from Black
female rappers and hip hop artists to similarly critique sexism and limitations on
women’s sexuality and also to apply this logic to expose the injustice of homophobia.

Meyer and Whittier (1994) suggest that social movement organizations “spill
over” into one another, often sharing members, tactics, frameworks, and organizational
structures. For example, leaders in the American anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s
included several activists from the second wave of the feminist movement, who brought
the feminist goal of non-hierarchical organizing to the peace movement. By
documenting how drag queens utilize hip hop music to articulate a critique of hegemonic
gender and sexuality, the research presented here extends Meyer and Whitter’s (1994)
theory by showing how spillover occurs not just among formal social movement
organizations but also within the free spaces where oppositional cultures are constructed.
This chapter demonstrates how drag queens use songs by female artists to formulate a critique of dominant structures of gender and sexuality. These songs are laden with emotions of rage and anger. They also often propose a solution to the injustice they describe, instructing listeners on how to overcome bad situations and resist gender exploitation. In the following chapter, I focus on this empowering aspect of drag performances and describe how music is used to enhance participants’ feelings of agency.
Agency is defined in social movement literature as the belief in collective efficacy – the ability to change the social structure through social movement participation (Gamson 1992). Much social movement literature notes that this sense of efficacy is fundamental to social movement participation (e.g., Snow et al. 1986; Klandermans 1997). McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) – leading proponents of the political process theory of social movements – suggest that the socially constructed and collectively shared belief that a problem exists but can be remedied is as important to social movement mobilization as formal organizations and political opportunities. Likewise, McAdam (1982) argues that “cognitive liberation” was a necessary precursor to the Civil Rights Movement.

While there is general consensus that a belief that change is possible is necessary for people to join a social movement, scholars have not agreed on what exactly constitutes change. Recent social movement scholars (e.g., Giugni et al. 1999; Gamson 1990) have articulated a need for greater precision in how we define a social movement goal or outcome. Because change lies at the center of collective efficacy, agency can take on many different meanings.

Many early studies of social movements assumed that movements targeted the state. Tilly’s classic work, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978) described social movements as organizations of challengers competing for access to the polity, or state decision making. Tilly’s view on social movement targets has permeated other scholars’ discussion of social movements. For example, Gamson’s book *The Strategy of Protest* (1990) elaborates a typology of social movement outcomes based on two dimensions: acceptance and new advantages. Acceptance occurs when a challenging group, or social movement organization, is perceived as presenting legitimate interests and thus is given a voice in the political arena. New advantages are the actual benefits that movement constituents receive. Gamson’s typology implicitly assumes that the state is the target of protest and that benefits are received when the state changes policy or directs resources toward a challenging group. Other scholars have used Gamson’s conceptualization to study how movements affect federal (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992) and local (Cress and Snow 2000) policy change. Agency, in this view, is a belief that laws can be changed through social movement participation.

By contrast, other scholars argue that culture needs to be taken more seriously in social movement research (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Johnston and Klandermans 1995). Policy outcomes and changes in the government are not the only goals of social movements. As discussed in Chapter four, contemporary social movements attempt to transform aspects of culture including identities (Melucci 1989; Castells 1997; Taylor 1996), emotion cultures (Taylor 1995, 2000), frameworks for understanding social problems (Gamson 1992), and other aspects of everyday life (Einwohner 1999; Jasper 1997; Taylor and Whittier 1992).
While social movement agency implies a collective, it must be conceptualized broadly enough to include the everyday acts of resistance or “personalized political strategies” (Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Melucci 1989, 1996) in which new social movement activists engage. This approach appears to present a dilemma: how can we conceptualize agency in a way that is simultaneously individual and collective? Melucci (1996) addresses this question by stating that scholars need to move beyond thinking about public and private or state and civil society as simple dichotomies. Tarrow (1998) draws from Melucci’s argument to state that “disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values” (1998: 5 emphasis added). This view on social change, however, is largely absent from the remainder of Tarrow’s book.

Indeed many movement analysts nod to cultural change without fully integrating beliefs, values, or ideologies into their analysis (Jasper and Goodwin 1999). For example, Cress and Snow (2000) argue that movements may change the beliefs and values of the public while pursuing changes in public policy. However, they view such changes in culture as an indirect effect of the movement’s direct efforts to target the government. Thus Cress and Snow focus on how movement organizations create frameworks and beliefs in agency to pursue legal change; cultural change is pushed aside of their analysis. This article therefore sidesteps an understanding of the everyday lifestyle choices or “life politics” (Giddens 1991) used by social movement activists.

Giddens (1991) argues that everyday lifestyle choices should not be dismissed as self-centered, individualistic, and therefore unrelated to broader social change. To the contrary, identities and lifestyle choices are intimately related to broader social structure.
After all, resources are often distributed according to lifestyle choices. Melucci (1996) likewise argues that power permeates everyday life and therefore individuals’ efforts to assert and name their own identities are struggles for power with broad social consequences.

As evidence that personal growth and self-actualization can affect social structure, Giddens (1991) discusses Betty Friedan’s publication of *The Feminine Mystique* – a book often credited with facilitating the mobilization of the second wave of the American feminist movement. By detailing her own dissatisfaction with the role of housewife, Friedan’s book raised questions about her own personal identity. By bringing this debate into the public sphere and encouraging other women to ask themselves who they wanted to be, Friedan facilitated a large scale change in gender relations.

Taylor’s (1996) study of women with post-partum depression provides a second empirical example of what Giddens calls “the dialectical interplay of the global and the local” (1991). Taylor documents the lives of women involved in post-partum self help groups, which might appear to be individually focused. However, she demonstrates that these women’s personal efforts toward self-improvement also contribute to the re-definition of motherhood and gender roles in popular culture (Taylor 1996).

Analyses of gay and lesbian activism indicate that this movement has also focused on changing social structure through changing the self. Specifically, “coming out” or publicly declaring one’s own gay or lesbian identity has been a leading tactic through which the movement pursues broader social change and acceptance of gays and lesbians (Gould 2002; D’Emilio 1983). Valocchi (1999) also notes that the frameworks put forth by the gay and lesbian movement have not focused on the state as a target, but on broad
cultural themes such as “sexual liberation” and “gay is good.” Castell’s (1997) describes
the social conditions in which the gay and lesbian liberation movement emerged. He
states that movements of the 1960s, such as feminism, created an insurgent cultural
environment that endorsed the questioning of authority and personal, sexual liberation.
Feminism laid the cultural groundwork for gay and lesbian protest by making it possible
to “think and act the unthinkable” (Castells 1997: 204). Castell’s discussion suggests
that the sense of agency that lies behind gay and lesbian activism is the personal belief
that one can live outside of the constraints imposed by dominant sex and gender norms
and in the process transform broader cultural practices.

Cultural politics thus requires a broad conceptualization of agency. Agency
includes not only the belief in the possibility to change an external target, such as the
state, but also the belief that changing the self can change the social order. In the
research presented here, I examine how a sense of agency is created during drag
performances. Drag performers demonstrate the ability to live one’s life outside of
hegemonic gender and sexual constraints. During the shows, performers and audience
members alike participate in gendered and sexual behaviors that transgress binary
categories of homosexual or heterosexual and masculine or feminine. The shows thus
expose audience members to other possibilities and ways of living outside of the gender
order. Audience members learn, in other words, how to “think and act the unthinkable.”
The concept of agency is implied in this ability to conceptualize ways of living that are
suppressed in dominant culture.

The drag performances analyzed here use music to achieve this effect. Three
different types of songs are used in shows to send a message of agency. First are songs
that speak of a general ability to change one’s own life for the better. Second are songs that create new gender possibilities. The performance of these songs exposes audience members to the possibility of life outside of the constraints imposed by the binary categorization of individuals as either man or woman. Third are songs that create new sexual possibilities and expose audience members to fluid ways of conceptualizing sexuality.

Agency and “Strong Women”

Several focus group participants suggested that the 801 performances create a sense of agency by explaining that the shows were “about freedom” and liberation. A gay teacher from Vermont, for example, described the 801 show as “a liberating experience.” One audience member, who loved the 801 performances so much that he began performing drag himself, explained how the shows communicate a message of self-efficacy. He described his childhood and early adult life, growing up in a small town in southern California where he had no positive, gay role models and could not imagine how to live happily as a gay man. Coming to Key West and seeing the shows “shattered” that perception and caused him to feel “liberated” because the drag performers articulated a message of tolerance and provided a model for how one could challenge heteronormativity. He therefore stated that “the point this show gives to me is that you can do whatever the hell you want to do.”

The drag performers communicate this message of self-actualization by choosing songs that promote images of self-sufficient women who are able to overcome obstacles in their own lives. As Milla states, “All of the women I have chosen are women who are
strong and they believe in themselves. I wouldn’t sing about it if they didn’t believe in
themselves.” The drag performers thus deliberately choose songs that convey a message
of self-efficacy. Of the thirty-six typical 801 songs that convey a message of agency,
approximately one-third (13) do so by promoting such images of self-sufficient women.
These include several of the songs associated with gay culture that were discussed in the
collective identity chapter. For example, in “I’m Beautiful Dammit,” gay icon Bette
Midler not only challenges dominant conceptions of beauty but also asks the question,
“Aint’ this my world to be who I choose?”

Several of Margo’s numbers also contain lyrics about women who assert their
own subjectivity. For example, she performs the Leslie Gore classic “You Don’t Own
Me,” in which a young woman tells her boyfriend: “So don’t tell me what to do/ And
don’t tell me what to say/ And please when I go out with you/ Don’t put me on
display.” Another Margo standard, “Cabaret,” from the musical of the same name, tells a
romanticized story of “Elsie,” the quintessential good-time girl, who lived life to the
fullest by socializing, entertaining, and enjoying herself right up until her dying days.
The singer vows to follow Elsie’s model of agency and self-fulfillment by living as
though life were a cabaret. The implication of this song is that audience members can
live their own lives with as much freedom and self-assertiveness as the drag performers
of the 801 Cabaret.

Kylie explains that asserting yourself and standing up for what you want is the
message behind his performance of Mary Chapin Carpenter’s “Passionate Kisses.” Kylie
states,
It’s the strength of that song – of standing up and saying what you want and thinking I deserve this. Because that’s what she’s saying, “Is this too much to ask? Shouldn’t I have this?” And that’s what I am trying to convey is the emotion of the song and standing up for what you want and saying “Don’t I deserve this, and shouldn’t I have this” to other people. And everyone needs to do that. If anything, I would convey that.

In an interview, Gugi suggests that audience members are indeed affected by this message conveyed in the shows. He stated that audience members have often told him that the drag performers have served as role models in their lives, guiding them to make changes:

There’s a lot of people that we’ve changed their lives. Because of us, they stood up to their mother or broke out and did their own thing because of us… As if we were so prominent in your lives, a catalyst for change in your life, the one thing that made them change something they were unhappy with.

Several of the songs about injustice discussed in the prior chapter also convey a message of agency and self-determination. For example, the lyrics of “Tyrone” tell the story of a woman who is unhappy with her boyfriend’s behavior and ultimately throws him out of the house. Similarly, in the Whitney Houston song “It’s Not Right, But It’s Okay,” the singer leaves her boyfriend deciding that “I’d rather be alone than unhappy” and that “I’m gonna make it anyway.”

In addition to describing self-efficacy, some of the 801 songs also touch on the broader social implications of changing one’s life. An example is the Salt ‘N’ Pepa song “I am the Body Beautiful.” In her book on rap music, Tricia Rose notes that Salt ‘N’ Pepa is a quintessential example of female rap artists who “render social and political critiques against limitations on female independence, identity, community, and most critically, the sexist character of black heterosexual relations” (Rose 1994: 105). Gugi’s performance of “I am the Body Beautiful” similarly defies social limitations on gender
and sexuality as he lip synchs the words, “I am the ocean / and I rule the world / I’m visual / I am body beautiful.” Like the Bette Midler song, this number discusses the power of those who have been deemed ugly – because of weight, race, or in this case gender transgression – to reclaim the label beautiful. This song also conveys a direct message about self-determination: “Whatever the mind can conceive and believe you will achieve.” The lyrics instruct the listener how to assert her or his own sexuality and be “the body beautiful”:

Bodies come in all different shapes and sizes
You’re beautiful too just realize it
Can’t you see the beauty in me?
Open up your heart and set your mind free.

These final lines suggest that changing the self can also change how one views others. As Giddens (1991) and Melucci (1996) suggest, self-actualization and personal growth are not merely individualistic endeavors because they often carry broader social consequences. Here, the song hints that self-empowerment can create a greater sense of tolerance and understanding.

Originally recorded by three female African-American artists, “I am the Body Beautiful” speaks of reclaiming and asserting Black women’s sexuality (Rose 1994). Performed in the context of a drag show, however, the song suggests that drag queens, gay men, and others who transgress dominant sex and sexuality norms can likewise assert positive self-identities. The drag queens convey a similar message when they perform En Vogue’s “Free Your Mind,” which also instructs the listener to stop judging people on the basis of race, sex, gender, or sexual orientation.
When the drag queens perform these numbers at the 801, they illustrate how self-actualization is simultaneously individual and collective. The drag performers appropriate songs by powerful, assertive women in order to provide audience members with a model of personal agency. The songs also suggest that by embracing this model, listeners can create a more just and tolerant world, free of discrimination.

Subverting Sex and Gender Limitations

In addition to providing a general model of self-efficacy, the drag performances also send a specific message about the ability to transgress the limitations of dominant gender roles. The appearance alone of the drag performers suggests that men can successfully achieve femininity which dissociates one’s gender performance from biological sex. The music used in the shows amplifies this message and destabilizes binary conceptions of sex and gender, thereby undermining the constraints of the gender order and creating opportunities for greater personal freedom.

The song “Bitch” recorded by Meredith Brooks and performed at the 801 by Milla speaks directly to the ability to transcend dichotomous gender categorization by asserting seemingly incongruous characteristics. The lyrics of the song note the hegemonic definition of femininity as being passive: “You look at me like maybe/ I’m an angel underneath / Innocent and sweet.” Yet the next verse suggests that the singer cannot be judged so simply: “Just when you think / You’ve got me figured out / The season’s already changing.” In the chorus, the singer explains that she is not a one-dimensional, passive, feminine woman; but a complex, assertive, and multi-faceted person:
I’m a bitch
I’m a lover
I’m a child
I’m a mother
I’m a sinner
I’m a saint
I do not feel ashamed
I’m your hell
I’m your dream
I’m nothing in between
You know you wouldn’t want it any other way

The song not only challenges dichotomous thinking but also comments specifically on
gender by re-claiming the word “bitch” for women who transgress dominant gender
norms. In the 801 show, Milla adds another layer of complexity to the song by
performing it in drag. The audience sees a man, dressed in women’s clothes, singing
about resistance to the constraints imposed by femininity. By embodying both maleness
and femininity, Milla’s performance illustrates that binary gender categories and the
constraints they impose are socially constructed and illegitimate. Moreover, Milla serves
as a role model for everyday acts of resistance to the gender order.

Kylie’s performance of “I’m the Only One” is another example of how drag
performers intensify a song’s meaning. The song, performed by well-know lesbian
performer Melissa Ethridge, speaks of a bold, sexually assertive woman pursuing a lover
– “I’m the only one who’d walk across a fire for you.” Kylie’s performance magnifies
the image of a risk-taking woman. During the song, he jumps off the stage, grabs a low-
hanging ceiling rafter, and swings himself around the bar over the heads of the audience
members. During the chorus of the song, she jumps down from the rafters and lands on a
table near the stage, often knocking over the drinks of the patrons who are sitting there.
Audience members in the focus group note how Kylie’s performance of the song
confuses conceptions of masculinity/femininity and even man/woman. A heterosexual man in the audience explained:

That’s a more masculine type of thing to be doing, definitely. I think it’s neat to see a woman expressing all sides of her – it’s a man, but I mean – no, I mean it’s a woman who can explore her masculine side and can jump through the rafters.

Audience members thus interpret the performance as an example of how individuals – whether men, women, or drag queens – can and do challenge binary gender constraints in their everyday lives.

Not all of the songs chosen by the 801 performers portray strong, assertive women, thereby challenging stereotypes of femininity. Sometimes the performers use songs that, on their own, convey hegemonic ideals of women as sex objects. For example, Kylie also performs Peggy Lee’s “I’m a Woman,” declaring that “I can bring home the bacon / Fry it up in a pan / And never let you forget you’re a man / ‘Cuz I’m a woman.” The meaning of the lyrics is, however, altered when performed by a drag queen. Rather than reify dominant conceptions of gender, Kylie’s performance suggests that “woman” is a social performance that can be played quite convincingly by a biological male. Likewise, the title song from the musical Dreamgirls becomes a parody of the naturalness of gender when the “dreamgirls” performing it are four men. In performing these songs, drag queens expose the socially constructed and fluid aspect of gender and demonstrate that gender norms are not biologically determined but socially constructed and open to reform.

Other 801 songs contain lyrics that more explicitly blur the boundary between man and woman. For example, Sushi performs “Crazy World” from the musical Victor/Victoria, which tells the story of a woman who passes as a man who is a female
impersonator. The lyrics addresses how sex and gender categories can become confusing, suggesting that we all live in a “Crazy world / Full of crazy contradictions.” Sushi’s interpretation resonates with the lyrics. She performs the number stripping behind a semi-sheer curtain on the stage, removing her dress, reminding the audience of what is underneath, and demonstrating gender performance and biological sex are not necessarily congruous.

The song “Tell Me” similarly invites the listener into the confusion of crossing sex and gender boundaries. As Gugi describes it, this song, by female recording artist Billie Meyers, is about “if the woman was the man and the man was the woman.” In the song, the performer sings to a male lover and asks him if he ever wonders what it would be like to be a woman while they are having sex:

Tell me
Who would you be?
Would you be me?
A woman like me?
Would you like to be
Under my skin?
Gonna let you in.
I want
I want to know what you’re feeling
I want to crawl under your skin
I want to know how you feel in me.

The lyrics of the song provoke the audience to think about experiencing sex – and life – as the other sex. This message of the song is magnified when performed by a biological male who is dressed as a woman and provides another example of how the choice of music contributes to the gender transgression that is accomplished in drag performances.

Scabby’s performance of “I’m Not a Fucking Drag Queen,” from the soundtrack to the film Better than Chocolate, directly comments on the lives of those who violate
gender norms and defy a simple categorization. The lyrics state: “I’m not a fucking drag queen / I’m in another bracket.” In the film, the song is performed by a transgendered lesbian who dislikes being mistaken for a man:

When you say “good day, sir”
You stab me all the way through
My tender,
Transgendered heart.

At the 801, however, Scabby performs the song while stripping down to tight, black spandex shorts and exposing his own bare chest. He therefore calls attention to the fact that he is biologically male, but simultaneously defies the audience from categorizing him as man, woman, or drag queen, suggesting that individuals need not be confined to any of these categories.

Removing clothing to expose male bodies juxtaposed with makeup, wigs, and a female “voice” in the music is a common strategy with which the 801 performers transgress dominant conceptions of sex and gender. Kylie performs Whitney Houston’s “Queen of the Night,” coming out on stage in a white robe. As the song begins he first removes the padding that creates the illusion of breasts. After throwing his “breasts” at the audience, he takes off the robe, exposing his body, completely naked except for high-heeled shoes, a wig, and makeup. Several audience members explained that they were “shocked” or “taken aback” by the contrast between Kylie’s feminine face and male body. The lyrics of the song, which declare that the performer is powerful, sexual, and has “got the stuff that you want,” intensify the contradictory image:

I’ve got the stuff that you want
And the things that you need
I’ve got more than enough
To make you drop to your knees
‘Cause I’m the queen of the night

A young gay man from Philadelphia announced in the focus group that he found this song to be the most powerful and liberating part of the show: “That’s awesome, isn’t it? That’s sort of like coming out of the closet and all that, isn’t it? I mean it’s sort of like being able to do what you want. Whatever feels right.” By connecting the performance to the gay liberation strategy of “coming out,” this comment illustrates how the drag queens’ disruption of gender binaries is interpreted by the audience as freeing and liberating. The performances therefore contribute to audience members’ perceptions of agency.

In addition to creating the feeling that one can do whatever one wants, the shows also alter audience members’ perceptions of the naturalness of gender categories. After watching the shows, many audience members questioned the validity of the binary sex categories that are the foundation of sex and gender stratification (Butler 1990). Some audience members conveyed this by explaining that they did not know what to call the drag performers: he or she? This sentiment was expressed by one young heterosexual woman who had come to the 801 to see her first drag show. She explained that she was “confused” and “having a hard time articulating” whether she thought of the entertainers as men or women: “You look at her face and she’s a woman. Then you look down and she’s a man. And I’m just trying to figure it all out.” A young gay man in a focus group stated more explicitly that drag performers disrupt dichotomous sex categories. When asked “do you think of them as men or women,” he responded:

I don’t think of them as really any of it. I feel like they’re their own thing. I feel like a drag queen is something completely different. Almost like – I don’t know – it’s almost like they’re an angel or a messenger or a shaman or something like
totally – it’s like a different persona all together than male / female. I look at them as a woman because that’s what you see. But I mean when you see it and the performance and everything else it’s way more than being a woman and it’s definitely not being a man.

A lesbian physician from New York concurred, stating “You have everything in one person.”

Drag performers disrupt sex categories in part through their appearance. However, their use of music, and their lip synching in particular, is also vital in accomplishing this goal. The performers not only portray femininity through their dress, hair, and makeup, but they also portray femaleness by using women’s voices. However, the audience is constantly reminded that the performers are men when, between numbers, they speak in male voices. Sometimes the drag queens deliberately exaggerate their masculinity. For example, one evening when Gugi was heckled by an audience member, he responded by adopting an obviously masculine stance with his legs spread apart, grabbing his crotch, and dropping his voice to the lowest possible pitch to say, “Are you talkin’ to me?” The audience responded with laughter at the juxtaposition of the masculine voice with the feminine appearance and the feminine voice heard just seconds before in the music. Several audience members explained that they found such moments during the show – including times when the lip-synching did not exactly match the music – to be “jarring.” A heterosexual man in a focus group explained that “when they were not in sync with the music, as they were in a couple of cases, we were taken aback a bit.”

Through manipulating their appearance and carefully selecting music, drag performers create alternatives to dominant, binary sex and gender categories. As a result, audience members are forced to think differently about sex. Some describe this as a
sense of personal agency – the realization that people can break free of constraints imposed by the gender order. For example, a thirty-two year old gay man explained: “I think one of the most basic roles we sort of pick up at birth is gender. And so that’s what the drag show really does is it flip-flops. You don’t have to be that way. I can play the woman if I want to play the woman.” Similarly, a heterosexual female college student discussed how the shows create a sense of self-determination by breaking down sex categories. She stated:

I just kept thinking throughout the whole show, these people can do whatever they want to do and get away with it, just because they did for the whole show. You’re just so wrapped up in it. They can do anything, and you are convinced… The thing I kept thinking is that you don’t have to be one person for them to be able to be a man today and tonight a woman. You don’t have to be any certain way.

Audience members’ comments reveal the way that breaking free of sex and gender constraints is simultaneously personal and collective. During the shows, audience members embrace a message about individuals’ abilities to transgress dominant gender norms. However, by questioning the validity of the fundamental categories of man and woman, the audience simultaneously “troubles” (Butler 1990) the entire gender order.

**New Sexual Possibilities**

In addition to troubling sex and gender categories, the drag performers also use music to deconstruct binary sexuality categories. The 801 performers commonly use songs with sexual, provocative lyrics by performers, such as Madonna, who are considered sex symbols. By doing this, the drag queens draw on existing cultural scripts to arouse audience members, often in ways that contradict their own self-identified sexual orientations.
In an interview, Guigi explained that he often witnesses audience members undergo a transformation during the shows. He described how people who have never been to a drag show before may be shocked, initially, but then come to a new understanding of sexuality:

They walk in saying, “oh my god, I’m in a gay bar. I’m seeing men in dresses.” After that, you know, halfway through the show, I get on them, and I jump on their laps. They’re having a ball; they give you twenty bucks and tell you, “this is the first drag show I’ve ever seen in my life.” It’s just opening up to people. You know, all these restrictions that people put on themselves, just throw them aside, and live your life, and enjoy yourself. Don’t give a hell about what other people say.

Gugi alluded to the sense of agency created by this experience, stating that drag shows “open up a possibility of new things, new ideas that you never thought of.” He noted how drag performers serve as role models, demonstrating these new possibilities: “That’s why I refuse for anyone to say, ‘I can’t do this. I can’t do that.’ I just did it.”

Various members of the audience similarly reported in the focus groups that drag shows altered their conceptions of sexuality. Many stated that they felt attracted to the drag performers during the show. Often this attraction was experienced as confusing or jarring to them because they realized that they were “not supposed to be” attracted to them. As one forty-six-year-old heterosexual man in the audience explained, “I’m sitting there and there’s a little bit of me saying, ‘this is sexually exciting.’ And there’s another part of me saying ‘wait, you’re not supposed to be sexually excited. This is a man.’”

Similarly, Gugi explained in an interview that “lesbians always tell that they fall in love with me during the show.” One evening a woman who identified as a lesbian approached Gugi at the bar after his performance. She told him that she thought he was beautiful, was in love with him, and wanted him to have her dress because it would look better on
him then her. She then removed her dress, handed it to him and left the 801 wearing the slip that was under her dress. Further confusing the definitions of homosexual and heterosexual, one woman exclaimed in a focus group that she was “very drawn to Milla. I felt like kissing her, and I’m not gay at all.” By exposing audience members to erotic experiences that are incongruous with their conceptions of sexuality, the drag shows open up a range of new sexual possibilities.

Drag performers arouse audience members by choosing songs performed by women who are sexualized in popular culture. Sometimes performers will imitate the image of the recording artist. For example, Gugi performs several Madonna songs wearing a short, blonde wig and a metal bustier, recreating a look that Madonna popularized in one of her music videos. The image of the artist and the songs themselves are associated with a sexual response. For example, the lyrics of Madonna’s “Hanky Panky” graphically describe sadist/masochist sexual fantasies:

Tie my hands behind my back
And ooh, I’m in ecstasy
Treat me like I’m a bad girl
Even when I’m being good to you
I don’t want you to thank me
You can just
Spank me

When Desiray performs this number at the 801, he often pulls a man out of the audience onto the stage and bends over, inviting the audience participant to spank him. The lyrics of Madonna’s “Erotica” also invite the listener to “Put your hands all over my body.”

In addition to the provocative lyrics, several songs are sexually suggestive due to the actual sound of the music. For example, Madonna’s “Justify my Love,” a song that generated public controversy when it was released due to its sexually explicit video, is
mostly sung in a breathy whisper interrupted by heavy panting. Likewise, Billie Meyer’s “Tell Me” begins with the sound of a sitar playing an ametric rhythm and therefore has an Eastern or Asian sound – cultures that have historically been eroticized by Westerners (Yegenoglu 1998).

By choosing these songs, drag performers make use of music’s power to elicit a behavioral and emotional response. As De Nora explains, music is a cue for behavior because it has a “recognizable social ‘content’” (De Nora 2000: 13). De Nora draws from a variety of sources to buttress this statement. For example, she summarizes a study of male youth culture by Paul Willis. One of the “bikeboys” in Willis’ research states, “if you hear a fast record you’ve got to get up and do something” (quoted in De Nora 2000: 7). De Nora also notes that store managers commonly make use of data from market research, which suggests that particular music can alter the energy levels of the staff and clientele. She even states that managers with the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal and the Tyneside Railway Station deliberately play classical music in stations because it is associated with fewer incidents of vandalism.

In drag shows, the use of music that is associated with sexuality – due to the lyrics, the image of the performer, or the sound of the melody – contributes to the sexual excitement described by audience members. The audience responds to the drag queens’ performance of sexualized femininity, rather than their biological sex. In an interview, Kylie explained how his gender performance, rather than his male body, arouses heterosexual men in the audience. Specifically, Kylie discussed the meaning of one particular line, which states “that’s what you want from women,” in the Sheana Easton song “Strut.”
Women wonder why their men will go for drag queens, and it’s because of the way that I dress. That’s “what they want from their women,” you know? And I’m giving it to them! I love the idea of playing with them like that.

Similar to “Strut,” other songs contain lyrics that suggest that eroticism is not rooted in the natural, biological body, but in the performance of seduction. In “Tell Me,” for example, Billie Meyer proposes that “When I fake it, you like me more.” By eroticizing a socially constructed gender performance, drag performers suggest that sexuality and desire are more malleable than what the static categories of homosexual and heterosexual suggest. Drag performers serve as models of how individuals can transgress dominant conceptions of sexuality; they therefore teach the audience about new sexual possibilities. As one audience member explained, seeing the 801 show “is like taking the blinders off the horse. They get a wider field of vision.”

Several song lyrics make reference to illusion, fantasy, and reality. When performed by drag queens, these lyrics remind the audience of the ambiguous sex and gender status of the performers. For example, the song by ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, states “What you see ain’t what you are getting.” This is one of the more popular 801 songs, and has been performed by Inga, Gugi, and Desiray. In the context of a drag show, the lyrics in the chorus play on the double-entendre of the word “queen”: “Look at me/ You can take it all because this face is free/ Maybe next time use your eyes to look at me / I’m a drama queen if that’s your thing baby/ I can even do reality.” The words call attention to the performers’ contradictory presentation of themselves as simultaneously men and women by declaring that the illusion that you see (“what you see ain’t what you are getting”) can also be reality. Because the categories of homosexual and heterosexual are based on the clear, sex identification of one’s object choice, the drag performers also
complicate these binary sexuality categories. Interestingly, it is the ambiguity and confusion that drag queens eroticize. Lip synching the Pretenders’ song “Brass in Pocket,” Sushi explains that she is “special,” able to seduce audience members with her body and “imagination”:

Gonna use my arms
Gonna use my legs
Gonna use my, my imagination
‘Cause I’m gonna make you see
There’s nobody else here
No one but me
I’m special
So special
I’ve gotta have some of your attention
Give it to me

While performing these numbers, the drag queens dance seductively around the stage, swaying their hips to the rhythm. They also typically approach members of the audience, dance with them, caress them, or sit on their laps and bounce to the beat. Thus through their appearance, the lyrics of song, and a melody that is conducive to sensual movement and dancing, the drag queens arouse audience members based on their gender performance, rather than their biological sex. The seduction through gender performance is clear in the comment of one heterosexual woman in a focus group who declared that she is attracted to the drag performers not because they are biological males, but because “they’re women. Beautiful women.”

Historians of sexuality (e.g. Keuls 1985; Halperin 1989) have described cultures in which sexual classification is based on the gender performance and status of participants, rather than their biological sex. For example, in some Latin American societies, men who had sex with men were only classified as members of a distinct, non-
If they also adopted feminine characteristics or assumed the passive, penetrated role in intercourse (Almaguer 1991; Lancaster 1997). In the modern United States, however, sexual categorization is based on binary categories of biological sex and object choice. Scholars have argued that the modern American conception of sexuality is replacing older, traditional sexual systems found in such parts of the world as Latin America (Adam, Duyvendak, and Krouwel 1999). However, drag performances constitute a space in which audience members are exposed to alternative ways of conceptualizing sexuality that are based more on gender performance than biological sex or object choice. As the quote above suggests, audience members are attracted to drag queens, not because they are biologically men, but because of their performance as women. Interestingly, the lyrics of the song “I am the Body Beautiful,” performed by Gugi at the 801, directly state that attraction is based largely on gender performance. Salt ‘N’ Pepa rap “carry yourself like a queen and you will attract a king.”

By eroticizing gender performance, rather than biological sex, the drag queens confuse the binary categories of heterosexual and homosexual. The performers also trouble these categories in more humorous ways. For example, Scabby performs “I Kissed a Girl,” a song about two women who are complaining together about their boyfriends – one of whom, according to the lyrics, is “dumb as a box of hammers / but he’s such a handsome guy.” In the song, the two women end up being drawn to their own similarities and kissing:

I kissed a girl
Her lips were sweet
She was just like kissing me
When Scabby performs this number, he mingles among the audience members, kissing women, and then affecting an exaggerated look of surprise. At the end of the song, one night, Scabby asked a heterosexual woman in the audience if she is now a lesbian “after being with me.” Clearly the performance toys with the categories of lesbian and heterosexual. Similarly, the song “Take me or Leave Me” from the musical *Rent* is performed by Milla and Sushi who re-enact a lover’s quarrel between two lesbians.

Through such songs as these, the drag shows send a message about the fluidity of sexuality and the failure of dominant, binary categories to capture the realm of human experience. Audience members commonly discussed this during the focus groups. One woman, a Key West local, explained that she had brought to the show a female friend who “fell in love with Milla” and announced that “I want to make love with her.” The woman emphasized that her friend is heterosexual and “she has a boyfriend who’s very straight, but she’s totally in love with Milla now.” A second woman in the focus group, a tourist from Montreal, expressed her confusion, “But what does this mean?” The first woman replied, “What’s more interesting is that you can’t – none of those labels really fit, do they?” The shows provide audience members an opportunity to experience and express sexuality that is normally off limits. For example, a forty-three year old, male realtor explained: “I think that one of the beauties of attending a show like this is that you realize what you didn’t when you walk in there, you know. You shouldn’t walk out and say ‘I only like men’ and you shouldn’t say ‘I only like women’ and it all just kind of blends together a lot more. So, that may be what we want to live in our normal daily lives.” The shows thus expose audience members to everyday ways in which they may challenge the sex and gender order, creating a sense of individual and collective efficacy.
The words of the audience members also suggest that the shows may do more than momentarily disrupt people’s typical experiences of sexuality. The challenge posed by the drag shows may lead to broader social change. For example, the realtor quoted above suggests that his sexualized experience at the drag show may affect his “normal life.” Other audience members explained that the shows may force people to re-think sexuality and sex and view the world through new eyes. A thirty-nine year old gay male physician explained that the show “does something where we have an opportunity to see something different about ourselves or to see the world through different eyes.” He elaborated, stating that by “having someone say clearly I’m a guy and clearly I’m a woman allows some glass to be shattered.”

Some focus group participants indicated that the sense of freedom to live outside of dominant sex and sexuality categories, which is experienced during the show, may alter audience members’ worldview and tolerance for others. A gay business owner from Indiana explained that he thinks the show has a lasting impression on audience members: “They’re not exactly the same. They opened up a little bit.” A woman in the focus group agreed, saying that because the audience members participated in the performances (by dancing with the drag queens and sometimes getting on stage) they will likely remember the message of the show: “You’ll remember that for a long time. It’s not something that’s gonna fade out of your memory.” Another man in the focus group chimed in “They have a whole new perspective. Maybe they’ve learned something. Maybe they changed from what they were raised to think.” The man from Indiana summarized the discussion stating, “I think that it helps open up a lot of people’s eyes as far as they go back home and run across somebody and they find out they’re gay. They’re going to be a
little bit less judgmental of that gay person.” These comments illustrate that audience members are aware of the personal and collective dimensions of the sense of agency created during the shows. The drag performances expose audience members to new ways of thinking about their own sexual selves. In doing so, the shows also foster a collective understanding and greater level of tolerance.

Discussion

Through music and performance, drag shows provide a space in which performers and audience members alike create new discourse and ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. Drag shows help audience members to conceptualize ways of living that are outside of the dominant sex and gender system. Although gender scholars (e.g., Butler 1990) and queer theorists (e.g., Warner 1993; Seidman 1992) have suggested that binary sex, gender, and sexuality categories must be deconstructed in order to achieve equality, they have provided few empirical examples of how individuals might do that. Drag shows provide the concrete example of how participants can conceptualize sexuality as fluid, shifting and non-dichotomous. Drag shows are particularly effective for communicating this complex idea in part because they are entertaining and humorous, or as one focus group participant explained, they “take something difficult and make it light.”

Drag shows therefore constitute “free spaces” or “safe spaces” of cultural experimentation (Groch 2001; Morris and Braine 2001). Audience members discover alternative views of gender and sexuality that disrupt the dominant system. Although the freedom and liberation experienced by audience members during drag shows may seem
individualistic, the group-setting allows for a collective re-definition of gender and sexuality. As Giddens explains “In struggling with intimate problems, individuals help actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them” (1991: 12)

The logic of the dominant gender order dictates that it is impossible to be neither woman nor man. Similarly, modern conceptions of sexuality prohibit heterosexuals from experiencing attraction to members of the same sex. In drag shows, however, audience members experience a range of fluid sexual responses that not only promote a sense of individual agency, but also open the door to transforming conceptions of sexuality on a larger scale. Drag performances provide a space where people can transcend sexual categorization – being more than women, and certainly not men (as one focus group member said) – and therefore create a sense of agency by showing audience members how to think and act the unthinkable.

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16 See Kessler 1998 for a discussion of how parents impose a binary sex category onto intersexed children.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

*A song
That hits you so hard
Filling you up
And suddenly gone*

These lines are sung by the lead character in the rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Although this particular song, “Midnight Radio,” was not performed in the drag shows analyzed here, it emerged from the same cultural context. The musical, written by John Cameron Mitchell, was first performed in drag bars in New York City where it became so popular that it was later performed by American and European theatre companies and even turned into a movie. Like drag shows, the musical also revolves around themes of sex and gender transgression. The plot of the musical chronicles the life of German-born Hedwig, a male-to-female transsexual, who tours the United States with her rock ‘n roll band. The band includes her lover, Yitzak, who aspires to be a drag queen. In this particular song, Hedwig comments on the power of music to give life a sense of meaning or, in other words, to “fill you up.” The lyrics also note music’s ability to communicate feelings and forge personal ties. In a later verse, Hedwig fantasizes about finding love, fame, and acceptance – to be “shining like the brightest star / a transmission on the midnight radio.”

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Social movement scholars have recently begun to examine how social psychological variables motivate political activism (e.g., Klandermans 1997; Morris and Mueller 1992; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). In contrast to resource mobilization theories (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983) and early political process models (e.g., McAdam 1982), these scholars examine how activists’ identities and worldviews facilitate social movement participation. Like the character of Hedwig, scholars also note that music is a tool with which individuals make meaning of their own lives, making music significant to the mobilization of social movements (e.g., Roscigno and Danaher 2001; Eyerman 2002).

The research presented here contributes to the growing body of literature on music and social protest by documenting how music shapes listeners’ identities and frameworks for understanding the social world. Through the use of music, drag performances manipulate audience members’ views of sex, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, this research demonstrates how drag performances use music to transform audience members’ understandings of identity, injustice, and agency – three dimensions of cognition that can create a framework that facilitates social movement participation (Gamson 1992).

**Oppositional Cultures and Social Movement Frameworks**

Prior research has documented how social movement frameworks are linked to peaks and valleys in movement mobilization (Snow and Benford 1992), media and government propaganda (McCarthy 1994), activist identities (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994), and even success in achieving movement goals (Cress and Snow 2000). However,
framing literature has offered few explanations of how individuals construct, adopt, and negotiate collective action frameworks. Too often, scholars describe “framing” in the passive voice, neglecting the actors engaged in framing work. As Benford describes in his “insider’s critique” of the framing literature, “Movement scholars often write about social movements as ‘speaking,’ ‘framing,’ ‘interpreting,’ ‘acting,’ and the like, that is engaging in activities that only human being are capable of doing. Social movements do not frame issues; their activists or other participants do the framing” (1997: 418). When scholars do attribute framing to particular individuals, it is often to elite leaders inside the movement rather than rank-and-file participants (Benford 1997).

An exception is Babb’s (1996) study of the Greenback movement following the American Civil War. Babb documents how laborers, as rank-and-file movement constituents, extended the Greenback frame to include such issues as the eight-hour work day and government intervention in the economy, in addition to the movements original goal of keeping greenbacks – dollars not based on the gold standard – in circulation. Babb’s work thus demonstrates how movement actors construct and revise collective action frameworks.

In the research presented here, I extend Babb’s model by documenting how drag show performers and audience members construct an oppositional framework conducive to gay and lesbian protest. This analysis therefore illustrates that framing processes do not occur exclusively within social movement organizations. Rather, actors in community-based, cultural institutions negotiate collective action frames.

This research shifts attention away from discrete social movement organizations toward the cultural spaces, or “free spaces” (Groch 2001), in which actors negotiate new,
politicized interpretations and frameworks. Focusing on such cultural spaces contributes to our understanding of social movement participation. Prior research notes how activism may alter individuals’ feelings of efficacy and attributions of blame for social problems (e.g., McAdam 1988; Keicolt 2000). Thus, social movement participation often encourages further participation by exposing activists to collective action frameworks (Keicolt 2000). While this circular model may hold true, a focus on the cultural spaces on the periphery of social movements gives further insight into the formation of political views and oppositional frameworks that give rise to protest before one participates in a social movement.

Historians have noted that drag bars and drag performers are often associated with moments of overt gay and lesbian protest, such as the Stonewall Riots (e.g., Duberman 1994). The research presented here explains this association between drag and movement activism: drag shows constitute free spaces in which participants’ feelings of solidarity, injustice, and agency are altered in ways conducive to protest. By documenting the formation of political frameworks during drag shows, I explicate the relationship between communities, oppositional cultures, and social movements.

The data presented here demonstrate that music is central in constructing the oppositional frameworks that emerge in drag performances. I explore how music is used to construct three dimensions of collective action frames. First, drag shows use music to bridge divides based on sex and sexuality and to construct a collective identity among diverse individuals. Second, drag performers also use music to express anger and to educate audience members about the inequalities faced by women and by individuals who violate sex and gender norms in a patriarchal, heteronormative society. Thus drag
shows enhance participants’ perceptions of injustice. Third, drag shows heighten audience members’ feelings of efficacy. Drag queens often select songs by women who are assertive and powerful to create a performance that audience members describe as “freeing” or “liberating.”

Complicating Collective Identity

The negotiation of collective identity that takes place in drag shows is linked to emotions. Some drag songs are humorous; others are sorrowful. By eliciting delight, sorrow, and ultimately sympathy among audience members, drag queens use music to forge alliances that transcend sex, gender, and sexuality divides. By documenting the creation of solidarity in drag shows, this research exposes the contradictory aspects of the collective identity process.

The concept of collective identity has been defined as a boundary that separates an “us” from a “them” (e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1992; Gamson 1992). The alliances created at drag shows, however, illustrate that boundaries are not always clearly defined. Social movement theorists have noted that identity borders may be fluid (e.g., J. Gamson 1996; Esterberg 1997; Melucci 1989), but have seldom applied this theory to empirical data. Drag shows provide a concrete example. Drag shows simultaneously alienate and integrate heterosexual audience members, drawing them into a broad, shifting, gay collective. The sense of solidarity found among drag show participants demonstrates how unity can be found through difference, suggesting that diversity may contribute to a group’s survival (see also Armstrong 2002).
Heterosexuals are both by-standers and participants in the gay culture enacted in drag performances. Drag shows thus communicate gay, oppositional frameworks to those who might otherwise be distant from gay and lesbian politics. This suggests that such cultural performances as drag shows may be important tactics through which movements reach out to by-standers and attract them to the cause. In the words of one informant in this research, drag queens are more than activists; they are “spokesmodels for the gay and lesbian movement.”

This research also demonstrates that the line between movement insider and outsider is often ambiguous. Another example of the complexities of movement identity can be found in the group Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Although members of this group identify as heterosexuals, they simultaneously distinguish themselves as actors in the gay and lesbian movement (Broad 2000). Similarly, by participating both in the 801 shows and in the construction of a gay, oppositional framework, performers and audience members alike render ambiguous the lines between “us” and “them.”

The research on drag performances presented here thus clarifies and complicates theories of identity. Drag shows demonstrate how a collective, gay identity is constructed at the same time that it is deconstructed (J. Gamson 1996). Participants recognize drag shows as “gay space” but note that the performances also appeal to heterosexuals. This research suggests that cultural performances and entertainment may be particularly useful strategies for movements to form coalitions or build identity among allies.
Stirring up Injustice

In addition to the joy, sorrow, and empathy that facilitate the construction of a collective identity, drag queens also use music to convey anger and rage. By expressing these emotions through music, drag queens transform their individualized feelings of anger into collective outrage and a sense of injustice. Drag performers use music to discuss the structural causes of their own personal troubles. However, the drag queens are not always successful in communicating this message of injustice: only rarely do audience members discuss this aspect of the show in the focus groups.

Nonetheless, the analysis of these numbers demonstrates how emotions are salient in music and performance. The passion described by performers and audience members in drag shows is what makes these performances effective in building collective action frames. As Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) suggest, framing processes involve “transforming emotions at the same time as cognitive beliefs” (p. 17). In particular, I find that drag shows mobilize anger to address the injustice confronted by gays and lesbians in a homophobic culture and also critique the dominance of masculinity. Drag queens undermine dominant gender relations in which femininity is devalued and masculinity valorized, and they demonstrate the range of emotions that emerge from these structural arrangements. Drag performers also criticize the concomitant marginalization of gay men, effeminate men, and others who transgress gender norms.

The message of injustice articulated in drag performances demonstrates that drag queens do not merely mock femininity and reify dominant gender relations, as some scholars have suggested (e.g., Dolan 1985; Feigan 2000; Schacht 2000). Rather, drag queens use music and women’s voices to formulate a critique of the dominant gender
order. Drag shows demonstrate an interesting case in which men use femininity and women’s voices to form an oppositional consciousness. Scholars have explored the way that gender permeates social movements (e.g., Taylor 1999; McAdam 1988; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Taylor and Rupp 2002). For example, McAdam’s *Freedom Summer* documents widespread sexism in the 1964 campaign by civil rights activist to register Black voters in Mississippi. Regardless of their job preferences, most women involved in freedom summer were assigned to such stereotypically feminine jobs as clerical work or teaching. By contrast, McAdam writes, men did the more explicitly “political” work (1988: 108). McAdam’s discussion thus implies that women’s contributions were less political and that overt protest is associated with men and masculinity. By contrast, drag shows demonstrate the oppositional, political use of femininity. Other scholars note that women’s cultures can foster social movement activism, documenting how women’s movements make use of feminine ideals of love, cooperation, and compassion to form political communities (Taylor 1999; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Taylor and Rupp 2002; Meyer and Whittier 1994). The drag shows presented here similarly demonstrate the mobilizing power of femininity. In this case, however, men appropriate aspects of femininity in order to formulate a political statement about gender in American society.

Drag queens’ use of women’s music also provides an empirical example of “spillover” (Meyer and Whittier 1994). In particular, drag queens appropriate songs originally recorded by African American female musicians. Drag performers draw from the long tradition of oppositional music within African American culture (e.g., Morris 1984; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Rose 1994). This study therefore documents how social movements “spillover” into one another not only by sharing members,
organizational structures, and protest tactics, but also by emerging from communities that share such cultural resources as music.

This research shows the complex ways that social movements can draw from various oppositional cultures – and sometimes dominant culture – to establish a “toolkit” with which to challenge the status quo (Swidler 1986). Drag performances are not the only instances in which oppositional cultures may appropriate music from other political causes in order to formulate a collective action framework. For example, civil rights activist Nina Simone recorded numerous songs challenging the status of African Americans in the United States, one of which was “Pirate Jenny,” a song written by Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht to address the injustice faced by Jews in Nazi Germany. Also, the widespread use of “We Shall Overcome” by both civil rights activists and labor activists around the world provides another example of how diverse movements may borrow music from other movements and cultures in order to mobilize support (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Because marginalized groups may share common grievances, they also may draw from a common repertoire of songs to express those grievances. Scholars must therefore analyze the context in which forms of artistic expression, such as music, are performed in order to understand their meaning.

Expanding Agency

In addition to building identity and a sense of injustice, drag performances use music to intensify audience members’ feelings of empowerment. Drag queens often perform songs that describe powerful, assertive women in order to provide viewers with a model of self-efficacy. Drag queens also strategically select music to amplify their
contradictory self-presentations as both masculine and feminine. By disrupting such dichotomies, drag queens expose the audience to ways of breaking free of sex and gender constraints. Likewise, drag shows open up new sexual possibilities by utilizing eroticized music as a script to arouse audience members—often in ways that contradict their own self-identified sexual orientations. Drag queens thus serve as role models for everyday acts of resistance to gender and sexuality norms, leaving audience members with the perception that drag is about “doing whatever you want.”

By analyzing the sense of “freedom” and “liberation” described by drag show participants, this research utilizes a broad definition of collective agency. Agency includes not only the belief in the possibility to change an external target, such as the state, but also the belief that changing the self can change the social order. This expansive conceptualization of agency is applicable not only to gay and lesbian liberation but to any social movement that utilizes “life politics” (Giddens 1991) to effect cultural change.

Narrow definitions of agency may overlook the individualized, personal political strategies important to many new social movements (Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Melucci 1989). As Estelle Freedman writes in her history of feminism, “To refer to feminism in terms of social movements may conjure images of people marching in the streets or rallying around political candidates, but it may also mean individual participation, such as enrolling in a women’s studies class or engaging in artistic or literary creativity that fosters social change” (Freedman 2002: 7-8). Such everyday acts of resistance may lead to broader cultural changes and thus constitute forms of social movement participation. The broad conceptualization of agency used in this research may be applicable to protest
in other movements that focus on changing everyday behaviors, including such diverse
groups as environmentalists, feminists, animal rights activists, and religious activists.

Looking Beyond Drag

The research presented here explicates the relationship between cultures, communities, and social movements. Prior research has documented how movements emerge out of pre-existing communities (e.g., Morris 1984; McAdam 1982). Movements gain strength from organizational structures, communication networks, and leaders that already exist in community settings (McAdam 1982). In addition, movements can recruit entire groups of people, rather than isolated individuals, in a process called “bloc” recruitment (Oberschall 1973). Much of this prior work, however, has sidestepped a systematic analysis of the role of culture in indigenous communities. Here, I document how cultural resources – including music and performance – are used by community actors to generate frameworks conducive to protest.

This research also reveals some of the cultural ingredients necessary to construct a collective action frame. The performances analyzed here are successful toward this end because they use a wide variety of popular music – songs with which many audience members are familiar. Drag queens also use songs that appeal to emotions such as sympathy, joy, and anger to build both a sense of solidarity and a perception of injustice. The collective identity that emerges in drag shows is also enhanced by the frequent interaction between drag performers and audience members. This interaction makes audience members a part of the show; it also frequently puts heterosexual audience members in situations where they experience same-sex desire. These situations enhance
audience members sense of agency by showing them that they can experience desires that they formerly believed were off limits.

In addition to gay and lesbian communities, other groups may use music and performance to mobilize constituencies. Some scholars have documented the use of music in the Black church to galvanize support for the civil rights movement (Morris 1982) and for the election of African-American politicians (Patillo McCoy 1998). Shippers (2002) documents the construction of oppositional gender norms among participants in the alternative, “grunge” rock scene. Eyerman (2002) suggests that rock music has also been used to recruit members to white power movements. Future research might explore the political implications of other musical venues. For example, Lillith Fair – the traveling music festival popularized by Sarah McLachlan in the 1990s – contained an explicit feminist message. Not only did Lillith Fair host only female artists – a deliberate attempt to counter male privilege in the pop music industry – but it also merged entertainment with the distribution of pamphlets and leaflets about such issues as rape and violence against women. Future research might explore whether such politicized forms of entertainment are successful in mobilizing protestors or spreading movement ideology. Likewise, scholars might examine if the growing popularity of “Christian rock” draws participants into Christian right movements.

This study also suggests that cultural performances, such as drag shows, may be important to studying specific moments in movement history. Taylor (1989) discusses movement evolution and cycles of protest and suggests that culture may be particularly salient during moments of movement “abeyance,” when the political environment is too hostile for more overt forms of protest. The cultural processes that I identify here may be
important not only to movements pursuing cultural change, but also to all movements
during specific times of mobilization. The data presented here suggest that music,
performance, and other cultural expressions are useful to social movements when
collective action frames are created or when movements reach out to bystanders.

In drag shows, music and performance alter viewers’ perceptions of sex, gender,
and sexuality. Audience members believe that drag shows teach observers to be less
homophobic, more tolerant, and more expressive of aspects of their own sexualities that
transgress dominant norms. This politicized view of sexuality not only constitutes a
framework conducive to the mobilization of the gay and lesbian movement, but it also
puts into practice the very goals of gay and lesbian liberation. That heterosexuals
identify with gays and lesbians and become more tolerant as a result of these
performances suggests that drag shows represent an outcome of gay and lesbian protest,
rather than just a pre-cursor to movement participation. Thus “frame transformation”
(Snow, Rochford, Worden, Benford 1986) is both a mobilization tool and an outcome of
social movements. Movement scholars (e.g., Giugni et al. 1999) argue that future
research should more clearly document the outcomes of social movements and the factors
that contribute to movement success. Because cultural performances disperse social
movement frameworks to diverse audiences, these settings are of primary interests to
researchers who seek to understand the cultural goals, outcomes, and successes of social
movements.
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