

THE DRAG PARADOX

by

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## ABSTRACT

### THE DRAG PARADOX

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Why are so many of us intent on defining ourselves in terms of those anatomically well-protected, discrete, and proportionally insignificant parts of our bodies we choose to keep covered up in the first place? Drag, the deliberate performance of gender contrary to societal expectations related to genitalia, cannot be defined in terms of any one construct, though the essential nature of such performances, however elusive the mapping may be, is constant. Because drag represents a transgressed boundary between masculinity and femininity, the act of accessing this transgressed boundary in and of itself provides agency because the performance of drag is a permeable visage where a supposed gender reality is simultaneously revealed and obliterated through an artificial performance.

This thesis will enact a study of drag from three perspectives. First, a theoretical framework will be established largely by reviewing the work of Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam. Second, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* will be reviewed to illustrate the role of the audience in relation to the performance of drag. Finally, the role of identity and audience will be examined from the field work enacted at the 1851 Arlington, where weekly drag shows take place every Friday and Saturday night.

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CHAPTER 1  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

1.1 Drag

Why are so many of us intent on defining ourselves in terms of those anatomically well-protected, discrete, and proportionally insignificant parts of our bodies we choose to keep covered up in the first place? Indeed, the essential structure of normative fashion often emanates from and reifies concealed genitalia. Of course, fashions change as do cultures, though encoding difference (both subtle and overt) between men and women is arguably a constant. In Western modernity, this delineation certainly reifies notions of gender—those cultural assumptions and practices ascribed to men and women. From this springboard of sartorial expectation, a great many assumptions establish the construct of both the feminine and the masculine. Though many consider gender to be essential, a respectable body of theory argues that, like fashion, gender is donned in order to categorize individuals into the one, consistent, and great divide of the human race: male and female. In addition to ignoring certain biologic variations, this categorization is done regardless of the obvious fact that some, perhaps even all, do not fit exactly into the segregating rubric of femininity and masculinity. One vehicle that exploits such deviations is drag.

Yet even within drag, the temporal, cultural, and historical variations seem limitless. Laurence Senelick's encyclopedic *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* describes the mode and circumstances surrounding many of these manifestations. For example, Senelick presents Aristotelian precepts concerning "mimesis, [or] the dynamic imitation of a turn of mind, or a propensity to a certain behaviour" in regard to cross-dressing practices (Senelick 51).

Traversing continents and centuries, Senelick also describes the role of cross-dressing in Japanese mythology: “Japanese religion is rife with talismanic congeries of sex magic, cross-dressing and performance. The primal creation myth relates that the goddess of music Ame No Uzume dressed in men’s clothes, yet exposed her breasts and vagina, in a bawdy dance to lure the sun goddess out of her cave” (81). As one might expect, official resistance emerged against cross-dressing. Though, as in the case of Japan, the reason for this resistance is frequently surprising: “the *bakufu* or military authorities were troubled by the growing popularity of the boy actor and female impersonation, not for moral reasons, but because of the *promiscuous mingling of the classes* [emphasis added]” (Senelick 86). In China, conversely, “the theatre was the institutionalized form of an idealized homoeroticism; its actors, unlike those of [Japanese] Kabuki, did not so much borrow from and then inspire female courtesans as rise superior to them, impersonating women who never did and never could exist” (Senelick 109). Indeed, the boy as cross-dresser is familiar to many cultures. Moral proscriptions of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in England famously demanded that Shakespeare’s women roles be played by prepubescent boys. Nevertheless, roles like the titular Cleopatra are so complex some scholars suggest that only more mature men could have done justice to them (Senelick 131). Responding to increasing concerns about gender, the eighteenth century reigned in cross dressing performances through a process of social regulation:

Twenty years earlier, the fop had been taken to be a man of mode, a fashionable if extravagant figure, engaged in the same chase for an heiress or a tasty bedmate as the other male protagonists. With the cleansing of the theatre and the leveling of its audience, the fop underwent a similar *embourgeoisement*. Now he was taken to be a dim-witted social climber. His foolish fondness for adornment began to be associated with the ‘molly’, the effeminate homosexual whose subculture was becoming increasingly conspicuous. (Senelick 232)

Summing up his excursion through eighteenth century European theatrical cross-dressing, Senelick explains that “by the late eighteenth century...male actors...played men, and if they



ventured into petticoats it was as a figure of fun, invariably grotesque, a burlesque Medea or Polly Peachum” (258). Beyond the theatre, Senelick confronts the complex associations of effeminacy and Christ. Describing what a tourist sees in a chapel in Chimayo, New Mexico, the author states that “behind the main altar there hung an agonized baroque Christ wearing a crown of thorns and an aquamarine party dress, trimmed with lace” (Senelick 56). These cross-cultural, trans-historical, and trans-temporal “fe”-manifestations indicate that a great deal more was taking place than what would today be strictly classified as cross-dressing. Though cross-dressing is essential, social forces were also at work in shaping these performances. Indeed, the conflation of performance and public reaction continues to be necessary in the production of drag. Of course, cross-dressing is one permutation of drag, an all-encompassing rubric which is remarkably difficult to nail down.

Drag appears to be nebulous, though it is material; drag is a distortion, difficult to grasp. Drag does not require words, though they are effectively employed. Drag is not comedy, though laughter is frequent. Drag is not female impersonation, though it is; nor is drag not male impersonation, though it just as assuredly is. Drag is not universal, though its effect is consistent. Drag is not cynical, though nothing is sacred. Drag does not challenge the patriarchy, though masculinity and femininity are laid to waste. Drag has no history, though we’ve seen this before. Drag is not culturally bound, but we get the jokes. Drag is not biology, yet we know the truth. Drag is not male or female, though both are manifest. Drag does not necessarily represent a specifically sexual expression, though admittedly sex cannot be discounted as either a factor or motivation for many performers. Drag is not temporally bound, though it can only exist in “the naked now”—the great cataclysm of desire and fear.<sup>1</sup>

Drag, the deliberate performance of gender contrary to societal expectations related to genitalia, cannot be defined in terms of any one construct, though the essential nature of such

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<sup>1</sup> The famous episode “The Naked Time” from the original *Star Trek* series revolves around a phenomenon that causes the crew to lose their inhibitions and run amok, which threatens the safety and security of the Enterprise, their celebrated space ship. The episode “The Naked Now” is from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and concerns the same plot device, though inferiorly presented.

performances, however elusive the mapping may be, is constant. Though admittedly problematic, establishing definitional boundaries is useful because dressing counter to cultural norms is multifaceted: “transvestites or cross-dressers, generally straight men who wear women’s clothing for erotic purposes; preoperative male-to-female transsexuals; and transgendered people who display and embrace a gender identity at odds with their biological sex” (Taylor and Rupp 114). While the individuals who perform these roles are important, the intent of the performer is not significantly important—if at all. Judith Halberstam, discussing her theories concerning drag kings, explains the problematic nature of attempting to establish intent on the part of the performer: “I have also become aware through the interview process that many performers are not necessarily that interested in the theoretical import of their acts or even in identifying a larger context” (*Female Masculinity* 242). Drag represents a transgressed boundary between masculinity and femininity. The inadequacy of explicating personal intent combined with a lack of consensus discursive prerequisite indicates a want of agency; yet, the act of accessing this transgressed boundary in and of itself provides agency because the performance of drag is a permeable visage where a supposed gender reality is simultaneously revealed and obliterated through an artificial performance. Thus, the paradigms of the patriarchy are distorted; the social proscriptions are no longer able to oppress. This distortion is the result of the simultaneity of both genders in one form, a paradox—the drag paradox. Further, the extraordinary power of this singular rupture caused by the drag paradox confounds multiple aspects of the patriarchal social construct.

Since the performance of drag is in conversation with societal precepts, defining the patriarchy is critical. Though any definition of the patriarchy will inherently draw fire, for the purpose of this analysis, a brief, operational definition should suffice: the patriarchy is the social apparatus, a largely discursive apparatus, that maintains power and authority via the presumed superiority of the male sex as revealed through masculinity. What is most troubling is that no really good reason is given for the primacy of this structure. In this paternal hierarchy, the masculine male is above the feminine female, and both are above recombinations—the

masculine female and the feminine male.<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, references to patriarchy will simply refer to societal precepts and constructs that favor masculinity over femininity.

Establishing a theoretical model, this chapter will first examine the role of uniforms in regard to military philosophy and practice as well as the role of drag in actual combat situations from the First and Second World Wars. The role of uniforms will be expanded to include ROTC training for the US Air Force. This approach will also help inform the role of clothing in the 1975 film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The discussion of these two seemingly dissimilar themes will highlight the fact that cross-dressing in and of itself is not as defining or as stable as a military uniform. Having established that drag represents more than the clothing that is worn, the work of Judith Butler and others will be questioned in regard to the limits imposed on drag. Further, Judith Halberstam's concept of the drag king, though critical to the overall arguments about drag, will be critiqued in terms of the wall she constructs between gay male drag and lesbian drag, thereby refusing any universalizing principle. This chapter will conclude by formulating a theory that proposes drag to be a paradox that distorts, subverts, and liberates those who access its agential qualities.

### 1.2 Military Drag

According to the official website for the U.S. Marine Corps, the dress blue uniform is historically symbolic: "The buttons featuring the eagle and anchor have been on the uniform since 1804, making them the oldest military insignia in continued use"; the red "blood stripe" on each trouser leg originally "honored those Marines who fell in the Battle of Chapultapec"; and "the collar of today's dress blues reflects the original Marine uniform of the American Revolution, which had a high leather neck to help protect Marines from sword blows" (marines.com). This analysis in no way intends to suggest that uniforms representing dated combat techniques are, in and of themselves, anachronisms; nor does this analysis seek to

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<sup>2</sup> A useful visual representation of the patriarchy would be a pyramid because within the upper levels of this hierarchy, a reductive competition is constantly being waged. The deployment of power is always downward resulting in the subjugation of men as well as women in terms of feminization. Weak men, weak regions, are feminized.

malign those who wear military uniforms, or any uniform in general. In fact, acknowledging the role of uniforms is critical in understanding drag, especially when the performance of drag, as a deviation from entrenched strictures, is encouraged by those who wear a military uniform.

Laurel Halladay discusses cross-dressing performances, as well as their continued influence, in the Canadian military during World War I: "Having in more recent years been given long overdue credit for being the earliest form of a Canadian national theatre, the Dumbells [a particularly famous troupe] and similar groups became a prototype for entertainment during the Second World War and set the standard for those troupes established in the first part of that conflict" (21). Continuing her analysis, Halladay employs the term "drag" in an unsubstantiated conclusion: "Perhaps contrary to more modern expectations, drag performers were not the least bit threatening to the taken-for-granted heterosexual practices of their comrades and both contributed to and enjoyed the homosociability of the battlefield" (23). Though on the surface this statement appears innocuous, and beyond glossing the traumatic intimacies associated with the battlefield, this proposition is problematic for three reasons: first, though discussed exclusively in relation to performativity, drag is introduced as an absolute synonym for cross-dressing; second, the statement assumes that drag is otherwise threatening to heterosexuals; and third, the statement reinforces Halladay's previous argument that drag performance supplants a remarkably narrow and undefined version of Canadian heteronormativity: "female impersonators became the primary representation of Canadian womandhood...and thus their presence allowed the CEF and opportunity, in the midst of chaos the recreate a community comprised of both sexes" (21).

Since these performances were communally performed, the term drag is actually more appropriate than cross-dressing, especially considering that, while cross-dressing can be representative of individual expression, drag involves a public aspect in regard to the performance. Further, the notion that drag is threatening is primarily negated by the fact that these performances were so well accepted by troops in the field. Finally, assuming that drag, functioning in a specific environment is meant to reproduce those qualities of home implies a

sexual dimension, which was not, according to the author herself, a function of these performances. Nevertheless, these performances certainly had a function:

For most Canadian participants in the Great War, enlistment was an initiation into the only highly organized bureaucracy they had experienced in their lives—reversals and parodies on the military stage promised the possibility of escaping the rigid confines of conduct within that institution. Further, the camaraderie could actually be said to have been strengthened by the community's acknowledgement that both the audience and the performers were dumbbells for having let themselves be swayed by the ambiguously construed calls to Empire that had landed them in a situation increasingly absent of any redeeming features and apparently without end. (Halladay 22)

Rather than reinforce notions of home, the performance of drag in this instance actually allowed for a secondary and less tolerated form of subversion to enter the public domain: "In the happy despondent, head shrinking way, it pointed out the in-joke of Canadian involvement in a European war" (Halladay 22). This specific permutation exemplifies the fact that drag can function on a variety of different levels within different communities. Certainly, drag also performed a similar function for a broader audience in the next World War.

Though the trench warfare of World War One was quite horrific, the Second World War introduced a truly global cataclysm with civilization itself in the balance. The uncertainty of this conflict combined with the spectacular devastation contributed to what must have been an often untenable situation for the troops in the field. In *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*, Allan Bérubé devotes a chapter to Drag and explains that "from Broadway to Guadalcanal, on the backs of trucks, makeshift platforms, and elegant theater stages, American GI's did put on all-male shows for each other that almost always featured female impersonation routines" (67). Noting once again the terms employed in Bérubé's analysis, his use of the term "female impersonation," though technically accurate, is not as sufficient a term as drag to incorporate all the aspects of subversion and social interaction he describes. For example, Bérubé explains, "Generally overshadowed in histories

of the war by coverage of the USO shows and their more famous stars, these shows produced by and for soldiers were as vital to the war effort" (67). As expected, the issue that reared its head was homosexuality. However, the desire of the troops to support this outlet is indicative of the importance of drag in such dire times. Bérubé explains that "during World War II, military officials, pressured by GIs, their own morale personnel, and leaders in the civilian theater would sponsor an organized soldier show campaign found themselves not only tolerating makeshift drag but officially promoting female impersonation as well" (68). Unfortunately, Bérubé's imprecision with the term drag is somewhat distracting in his analysis; however, his focus on gay men and women both in the military and in these shows does explain this occasional lapse.

Indeed, homosexuality was (and apparently still is) problematic for the military leaders. Bérubé explains that though "the popular belief that civilian female impersonators were effeminate homosexuals threatened to stigmatize these performers as well as worried their superiors," this fact was somewhat mitigated "because female impersonation seemed too vital to the war effort" (68). Nevertheless, "soldier-entertainers and military officials, with the help of the press, found ways to use drag entertainment for the duration while walking a fine line between its homosexual and heterosexual meanings" (Bérubé 68). The presumption of homosexuality was challenged by the soldiers themselves: "The impulse to put on shows and perform in dresses generally came from the men themselves—soldiers without women, as well as gay men, had long traditions of spontaneously dressing up in women's clothing" (Bérubé 68). One of the most famous shows was Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army*, which, according to Bérubé, "became the prototypical World War II soldier show and established the three basic wartime styles of GI drag," which were "the comic routines, chorus lines or 'pony ballets' of husky men in dresses playing for laughs; the skilled 'female' dancers or singers; and the illusionists or caricaturists, who did artistic and convincing impersonations of female stars" (69-70). The men in uniform throughout the two World Wars sought release in shows that challenged the conventions of their realities. As far out of a uniform one could get, drag show represented the freedom to subvert the strictures of the uniform. But this also raises the

question. Does drag represent a uniform? Are the accoutrements of comical wigs and glamorous frocks symbolic in the same way as the Marine Corps buttons and collars? The question would appear to be one of specificity. The Marine uniform references specific battles or modes of battle. But should that not also be said of the drag persona? Since most of these performances are the result of cultural pressure, the drag performance must represent or at least reference some cultural phenomenon. The specific nature of that reference is not consequently important—indeed, I had no idea what the symbols on the Marine’s uniform meant exactly before I began researching the project; I simply understood they were supposed to mean something, and that knowledge was sufficient. If the purpose of the uniform is to reference past events, past forms, then drag, even in the most basic cross-dressing category, qualifies as a uniform because drag must involve public interaction and reference. The symbols must already exist to be challenged.

### 1.3 The Horror, the Rocky Horror

As explained in the 2006 edition of the *Air and Space Studies 100: Air Force ROTC* freshman textbook, the visage of the uniform is informed by internal and external forces.

Air force dress and grooming standards are a mixture of tradition and practicality. The uniform draws attention to the individual. The image you present will leave a lasting impression about you and the entire Air Force on everyone you meet. Any large business or organization that wants to be recognized as professional sets certain standards of dress and grooming for its personnel. The Air Force is no different. The American public draws certain conclusions about military effectiveness based on the image that the Air Force members present. It’s been said that a military officer can be picked out of a crowd just by the image he/she presents. Certainly, one’s weight control, military bearing, and confidence are part of this image. The image of a disciplined service member who can be relied upon to do the job excludes the extreme, the unusual, and the faddish. (15)

The role of appearance emerges from this excerpt as a complex and inconsistent standard. After placing the uniform in terms of tradition, the textbook describes how the uniform focuses attention on the “individual,” only to negate this fact by positioning the wearer of the uniform as a representative of the “entire Air Force.” The most notable fact about this duality is that it is absolutely true. A person wearing a military uniform represents something unique outside of one expected setting and a part of another. Indeed, the uniform does represent an individual who is inscribed with multiple cultural assumptions. Consequently, the next statement projects those cultural assumptions onto the public at large—actually, the claim about “any large business or organization” seeking recognition as professional by setting “standards of dress and grooming” is interacting with cultural assumptions (perhaps even anachronistic ones) that are not necessarily valid. The business suit is not indicative of any one particular company or organization. It does, however, tend to demarcate a class of people that may be assumed to have achieved a degree in higher education or who have attained a certain level of financial stability or comfort, or who were born into wealth. This remarkable paragraph concludes with a significant complication to the role of the air force uniform. For the person to be worthy to wear the uniform (this motif is well known), they must exhibit “weight control, military bearing, and confidence”; however, the uniform is also supposed to transform the person wearing it.

The behaviors and attitudes associated with wearing the uniform are transformative; the uniform is inscribed onto the person. By virtue of this inscription, they can always be identified as having served in the military. Apparently, even when not in uniform, it is still disrespectful to be “extreme,” “unusual,” or “faddish.” Most interestingly, the qualities expressed as most desirable seem to have nothing to do with the uniform. The real qualities deal with character. Since the worthiness of wearing the uniform is the real measure, is the actual wearing of the uniform in any way materially valuable? To approach the issue of uniforms from a slightly different perspective, this analysis will now make the entirely logical turn to the iconic 1975 film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.



This longest running film of all time confronts the role of dress as early as the lyrics in the opening song, "Science Fiction/Double Feature," which contains the lines, "and Flash Gordon was there / in silver underwear." The main action of the film begins at a wedding where two central characters, Riff Raff and Magenta, are depicted as husband and wife in Grant Wood's painting, "American Gothic." Though much has been made of Wood's take on American roles and American-ness in general, the roles of male and female are certainly familiar in as much as the man is wearing both overalls and what appears to be a suit coat. The woman, of course, wears a cameo and appropriately efficient dress or apron. In the film, this evocative image is referenced on at least two other occasions. The second reference is nearly missed as it takes place in the castle in which Brad and Janet, two newly engaged youths, find themselves after their car breaks down on a stormy night. The painting itself hangs on a wall outside the door leading to the "odd" assortment of people gathered at the castle. This scene leads to their eventual introduction to Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the "Sweet Transvestite from Transsexual Transylvania."

Immediately before they meet Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Janet proclaims, "It seems unhealthy here," to which Brad eventually responds, "They're probably foreigners with ways different from our own" (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Frank-N-Furter arrives on the scene wearing a costume pearl necklace, sequined corset, satin underwear, garters, fishnet stockings, and high heels. Frank-N-Furter launches into his introductory song that includes overtones, which indicate that, while Brad and Janet's arrival was not expected, their presence may well be inevitable. One line states, "So you got caught with a flat / Well, how 'bout that" (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). The noticeable sarcasm with which that line is sung contrasts with another, less obvious lyric that calls into question their circumstance: "But maybe the rain isn't really to blame" (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Brad and Janet, soaking wet and seeking refuge from the rain, are then stripped to their undergarments with noticeably little protest of their part. The clear implication is that Brad and Janet's clothing removal is the result of a more

fundamental desire than the need to dry off. And while the sexual component of that desire quickly becomes clear, the shedding of their traditional garments, or uniforms, is also relevant.

The figure of Dr. Frank-N-Furter is the most controversial because his visage is a distortion. He indicates that he is a transvestite, and he is certainly clad in apparel typically expected for women. However, Frank-N-Furter's outfit, though sometimes compensating for his "male-ness" also highlights many "male" aspects of his physique. For example, some attempt is made by virtue of a pearl necklace to disguise the Adam's apple of Tim Curry, the actor portraying Frank-N-Furter; however, the necklace appears comically large and comes across as more of a parody of the "June Cleaver-ish" 1950s housewife. Additionally, the sequined corset features matching long gloves, which are used to help disguise the presence of a "man's" hand; yet, this combination serves to highlight Curry's non-chiseled-yet-distinctive upper arms. Of course, though he dons ladies underwear, the fact of his male genitalia is apparent. This transsexualism, this cross-dressing, this drag is about simultaneity—not androgyny. This gender simultaneity also extends to Frank-N-Furter's behavior.

The character of Frank-N-Furter is expectedly complex. So complex, in fact, that until the very end of the movie, he comes across as almost invincible. But this invincibility, if this is indeed the correct term, is not the product of some supernatural or technological prowess. Rather, Frank-N-Furter shifts between blatantly stereotypical masculine and feminine personas. For example, Frank-N-Furter cold-bloodedly murders Eddie, an ex-delivery boy, with a pick axe (conveniently located in the laboratory); however, Frank-N-Furter is immediately squeamish at the sight of Eddie's blood and begs assistance in removing a pair of bloodied gloves from his hands. The scene that Eddie's entrance and murder interrupts involves the creation of Rocky Horror, a sculpted young man "with blonde hair and a tan" (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). After an extended song celebrating Rocky's chiseled male attributes, the assumption is one of virility and dominant youthful prowess; yet, a later scene depicts Rocky lying in a bed in a pose indicating that he has been the penetrative recipient of his "wedding night" encounter with Frank-N-Furter. As continued proof of Frank-N-Furter's pan-sexuality, he famously seduces

both Brad and Janet that same evening. Such behavior proves threatening, and resentment builds against Frank-N-Furter to the point where Riff Raff and Magenta ultimately betray and kill him with a weapon that, in this third permutation, looks remarkably like the pitchfork in Wood's "American Gothic" portrait.

But before Frank-N-Further meets his doom, Brad, Janet, Rocky and Columbia, Eddie's girlfriend, are dressed in sequined uniforms much like Frank-N-Furter's and perform in a floor show. The song addresses the shattering of illusions resulting from the destabilization caused by Frank-N-Furter. For example, Columbia sings that

It was great when it all began

I was a regular Frankie fan

But it was over when he had the plan

To start a-workin' on a muscle man

Now the only that gives me hope

Is my love for a certain dope

Rose tints my world keeps me safe from my trouble and pain. (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)

Rocky, who, along with Frank-N-Furter, has experienced carnal pleasure with both a man and woman during the evening distills his experiences into one result:

I'm just seven hours old

Truly beautiful to behold

And somebody should be told

My libido hasn't been controlled

Now the only thing I've come to trust

Is an orgasmic rush of lust

Rose tints my world keeps me safe from my trouble and pain. (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)

Conservative Brad, whose only sexual experience has been a homosexual one, ironically appeals to a matronly figure to help negotiate his conundrum and restore his masculinity. These lines also can be interpreted as an appeal to a female to help him understand an experience he recognizes as feminine:

It's beyond me, help me Mommy

I'll be good you'll see, take this dream away

What's this, let's see

Oh I feel sexy

What's come over me?

Oh here it comes again. (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)

Finally, Janet, through the power of this gender subversion has gained access to her freedom.

Oh I feel released

Bad times deceased

My confidence has increased

Reality is here

The game has been disbanded, my mind has been expanded

It's a gas that Frank has landed

His lust is so sincere. (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*)

These different perspectives are all accurate from each character's point of view, and this multiplicity is the conundrum. Frank-N-Furter represents a power, an agency, which seems unwieldy to the point where sexual liberation, cruelty, betrayal, and murder all intersect. In fact, Frank-N-Furter drag does not necessarily work for the four characters wearing the uniform. Both Brad and Columbia's nipples are not contained within the corset, while Rocky is washed out and marbleized from the makeup. Though drag, in the form of Frank-N-Furter, has liberated these characters, drag is not one permutation, but a multiplicity that requires the interaction of individualism and cultural inscription. While the amateur drag shows strive to emulate what appears on the screen, they also incorporate deviations that reflect individual and regional

preference. But the effect is the same, and has been since 1975. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* created a rupture that has torn across the Reagan Era, the Clinton Scandal and multiple Middle Eastern Wars.

#### 1.4 The Butler Did It

Judith Butler argues that “the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (187). In the case of the Canadian military, the constructed femininity (via the cross-dressing) of the performers provided a point through which a larger criticism could be expressed. The subversive nature of these drag performances, already in conversation with the constructs of the patriarchy, allowed for a broader criticism of one specific permutation of masculine folly: the fighting of a futile war. Yet Butler views drag exclusively in terms of deconstructing gender: “I would suggest ... that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (186); however, the manner she describes in which drag functions in order to achieve this deconstruction is problematic. Two specific arguments can be made against her claim that “as much as drag creates a unified picture of a ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler 187). First, drag does not create a “unified picture” of either gender. In fact, the ability of drag to subvert depends on the paradox of masculine and feminine simultaneity. Further, limiting the notion of gender to a “fiction” is not only inaccurate, it might actually be dangerous. While Butler argues that “the parody [of drag] is of the very notion of an original,” the fact that gender is one of the most—if not the most—powerful forces in society cannot be discounted (188). Gender is the foundation for public and private institutions and identities. While gender may well be a consistent cause of oppression and some violence, as well as a host of other societal ills, this very fact means that gender is inherently not fictional because it has achieved a level of perceived truth. Further, the notion of fiction implies some agency in its creation. Michel Foucault argues that “there is no

power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject" (95). Gender is the apparatus that regulates social power, but it is too broad, too complex, and too entrenched to be considered fictive. Further, until the post-modern era, fictions imply that something is refutable by some truth; realities, complete with supporting power structures, are subject to subversion.

In order to be subversive, drag must operate within the system it subverts. Richard Niles explains, "Even with drag's increasing presence in mass culture during the 1990s, it still has the power to subvert. By subversion, I mean the ability to foreground gender roles and relations, thereby undermining the received notion of gender's essentialism" (38). Niles takes an odd approach when discussing the specific drag permutations of the performances of Charles Busch in relation to Harvey Firestein and Divine: "When he [Busch] is in drag, he does not present a visually off-putting appearance. Rather, he uses gestures, line deliverances, and physical stances to suggest a fascinating theatrical diva, foregrounding personality rather than the ability to create character per se" (37). The implication is that Charles Busch, when in drag, appears to be more of a woman than others. While this may be true, the performance is still drag because the biological truth is still apparent. Since Busch is essentially a man engaged in the performance of a woman, he is still employing humor "based on a body that is comically at odds with the glamorous image of femininity" (Niles 37). Further, since drag's subversive performance is based on socially constructed gender, drag queens are, arguably, not typically engaged in outright character creation; rather, those characters, like Busch, are interacting with the predominant gender expectations. Rather than focusing on static creations, drag performers establish interactive personas. Niles argues that "while the fit is not perfect, there are enough traits that Busch has in common with drag queens to warrant his inclusion in their company" (37). Based on this description of Busch's performance, no other conclusion can possibly be drawn other than he is performing drag. The only delineation appears to be one of perceived beauty, which, by anchoring beauty in terms of Hollywood standards, only serves to align Niles' argument with a gender aesthetic that drag ultimately subverts. Additionally, the

physical distortion of beauty through size or the exaggeration of makeup is essentially no different from the presence of male genitalia dressed in women's clothing. Therefore, variations in drag performance occur from medium to medium, region to region, and venue to venue across the country and across the globe. Articles by Richard Niles, Laurel Halladay, and Keith McNeal all present fascinating depictions of specific drag permutations; however, each article's focus on the origin or intent of the drag performance proves problematic. In fact, these articles demonstrate the secondary paradox that, while the performers of drag are complex individuals who work hard at the various arts involved in performance, these preparations, this effort, this intent, are made irrelevant in light of the larger implications of drag. In fact, these theorists demonstrate how focusing on intent actually distorts the importance of drag.

Though grounding his argument in intent, Richard Niles provides a critically important understanding of how drag functions. In line with Judith Halberstam, Niles explains that drag performances are often unaware of the theoretic implications of their work: "Busch saw himself as a clown with a mandate to entertain. He was stirred by movies from the golden age of Hollywood, not by the writings of Nietzsche" (40). Regardless of what the performer intends, the implications of the performance reveal the import. Keith McNeal also supports the notion that intent is essentially irrelevant in drag performance: "motivation toward drag has to do with the concern and ambivalence about the models and their internal psychic conflict and juxtaposition, rather than stemming directly from goals implicit in the models themselves" (348). In drag performance, the performer is subsumed into the performance. Though the implications of drag and drag performance extend well beyond the gay community, modern drag is heavily influenced through an association with homosexuality.

The intent of the emergent gay community in western society, especially in venues where performance was possible, provided an outstandingly functional venue for drag performers to cultivate their personas in front of an interactive crowd. The gay bar, the gay club, the gay theatre, and even the gay home all became liminal spaces where gender proscriptions were challenged. Just at the Canadian, and later American, military appreciated

the societal critique fostered by gender subversion, the gay community found a similar outlet. Paraphrasing Foucault, Butler explains that “to be sexed...is to be subjected to a set of social regulations, to have the law that directs those regulations reside both as the formative principle of one’s sex, gender, pleasures, and desires and as the hermeneutic principle of self-interpretation” (130). Gay men experience the duality of being able to locate their public identities within the patriarchal structure while simultaneously being unable to find a positive or empowering expression of their private realities within that same structure. The result is explained by McNeal: “Multiple, conflicting gender messages delivered to homosexuals create what we might think of as the *double-bind of gay selfhood*—a double-bind which generates profound gender ambivalence” (349). The gay community offers proof that the performance of drag is actually a space of gender dystopia. Even before the modern gay movement, Halladay explains this understanding in the Canadian military performances: “On stage, cross-dressers [men engaged in drag performance] embodied the abnegation of this conception of the male gender, if only for a short time” (23). Moving forward, the gay community attached their own meaning to the performance of drag as explained by Taylor and Rupp: “the body of the performer highlights the social basis of gender and sexuality and becomes a weapon to contest dominance heterosexual gender codes” (116). Western society dictates that gender is formed around sex and sexual desire. Indeed, the association between the gay community, which deviates from the expectations of sexual desire, and drag performance, which deviates from mandated codes of appearance, is a foregone conclusion.

The important aspect of drag revealed through these permutations is the requirement of an audience, specifically, an interactive audience. A great deal of time has been spent discussing the fact that the performance of drag in regard to the context of intent is largely irrelevant to the function of drag. In modern permutations of drag, as supported by the gay community, external factors are important in two ways: first, drag is in conversation with the precepts associated with the patriarchy; second, drag is in conversation with the dissidents who do not fit within gender norms. Eve Sedgwick explains why drag had become such a specific



space for this interaction: “there is a large family of things *we know* and need to know about ourselves and each other with which we have, as far as I can see, so far created almost no theoretical room to deal” (24). Sedgwick is absolutely correct in her argument about the extremely limited space with which a discourse can be conducted concerning gender, the patriarchal structure, sex, and sexuality. The power of the patriarchy to limit discourse actually empowers drag as a site of rupture.

### 1.5 Halberstam Drag

Any discussion of drag without including the theories and formulations of Judith Halberstam would be incomplete.<sup>3</sup> Her groundbreaking work, *Female Masculinity*, not only brings to light the underreported and burgeoning permutations of the drag king culture, her analysis also demonstrates the incredible power of gender as a social construct—so strong, in fact, that a person’s chromosomal sex may require surgical modification in order to accommodate a perceived misalignment. The final part of *Female Masculinity* is reserved for Halberstam’s personal observations concerning her own development as well as some theorizing about the construction of the present binary gender system. She explains how, at the age of thirteen, she became aware of certain prohibitions against activities, like boxing, that resulting from the fact that she was a chromosomal female (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 266). Expanding upon her analysis, gender is constructed from a series of binary choices with which each person is confronted. Arguably, many of these choices, through the advent of

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<sup>3</sup> Recent studies by theorists like Judith Halberstam have demonstrated the presence of a burgeoning drag king culture. However, Halberstam’s advocacy for a separation of drag cultures (drag king vs. drag queen) is problematic. She explains that her decision to focus on drag kings is due to the fact that she seeks to “avoid always collapsing lesbian history and social practice associated with drag into gay male histories” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 238); nevertheless, since the purpose of this analysis is not to seek an understanding of how drag functions within the gay community, Halberstam’s overall theories about the representation of drag remain important, as the main thrust of *Female Masculinity* is to analyze the role of masculinity and women. Though she does include heterosexual women, the bulk of her work actually focuses on the role of masculinity within the lesbian community. Therefore, her intent is derived from her desire to remain focused on the lesser known drag king performances. Regardless, this analysis seeks to universalize drag performance in terms of function. Consequently, her theories concerning drag are certainly applicable. Her arguments support the overall notion that drag is a point of rupture that is culturally visible and currently accessible to a few courageous individuals; ironically, individuality is irrelevant to this function.

prenatal technology like the sonogram, are being made before birth. For example, *in utero* genitalia may determine what color the infant's room is painted: pink or blue. Further, the earliest images a child may see on television as well as the toys given to that child will inform what end of the gender binary spectrum that child belongs. The most apparent outcome of this analysis is the understanding that gender is separate from sex and sexuality, even though gender is often a tool used to negotiate those boundaries. As Halberstam herself negotiates these boundaries, her analysis clearly illustrates that, while theory shows gender to be constructed, the individual understands gender as an essential part of their person.

Though female-to-male cross dressing also has a long and interesting history, Halberstam's analysis of the modern variant of these performances is, nevertheless, prescient. Also, while her intent to isolate drag kings from drag queens due to her desire to separate gay and lesbian issues is problematic, a clearer presentation of theory and application does emerge due to a relative lack of contextual baggage. Different permutations of male-to-female cross-dressing have a tendency to "muddy the waters" of analysis. In other words, the cultural specificity of the drag king performance allows for a more precise theoretical model to emerge that subsequently becomes applicable to the overall concept of drag. Halberstam argues:

"Drag" and "performance" have recently become key words within contemporary gender theory, and they are generally used to describe the theatricality of *all* gender identity. "Drag," as Esther Newton suggests, describes the discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality but refuses to allow this discontinuity to represent dysfunction. In drag performance, rather, this discontinuity becomes the site of gender creativity. (*Female Masculinity* 236)

Halberstam continues, through her analysis of Newton, to argue a significant difference between the way drag queens and drag kings operate within the respective gay and lesbian cultures. For example, in regard to the concept of camp, Halberstam argues, "I do think that because camp is predicated on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender, it tends to be the genre for an outrageous performance of femininity (by men or women) rather than rather

than outrageous performances of masculinity” (*Female Masculinity* 237). Three problems emerge with Halberstam’s analysis: first, the definition of camp is elusive—even if it cannot be directly applied to the drag king performances, as such an essential aspect of the performance, at the very least a lesbian equivalent could be performed; second, this narrow definition of camp reifies the notion that only femininity is performed—masculinity MUST also be a performance; and finally, through her own analysis, Halberstam demonstrates a temporal difference in the origin and evolution of drag queens and drag kings. Throughout most of *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam demonstrates the fact that notions of female masculinity are not only in flux, but that permutations are currently evolving at an exceptional rate. However, the most important aspect of Halberstam’s work is proof that, despite perceived differences, the parity being established between the function of drag queens and drag kings affirms many of the overall theories about the function of drag.

Ironically, Halberstam herself would disagree with this assertion. For example, she argues forcefully that “the difference between men performing femininity and women performing masculinity is a crucial difference to mark out: the stakes in each are different, the performances look different, and there is a distinct difference between the relations between the masculinity of the performance and the femininity and performance” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 238). Again, Halberstam’s argument is problematic because of the assumptions it makes about the differences between masculinity and femininity. She argues that the performance of femininity lends itself to theatricality and the performance of masculinity is consequently downplayed (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 238-239). This assumption presumes that having a restrained personality is inherently natural. Further, the elaboration of “feminine” characteristics during the performance of a drag queen are successful, not because they play off essential truths, but because they prove the artificiality of the construct. While this analysis appears to be in line with Butler’s concerning the fictive nature of gender, this analysis posits the different notion that the artifice of gender is so entrenched that it cannot be typically confronted, that the unique agency of drag emanates from the fact that it is one of the few venues where the artifice is

revealed. The very fact that a man is playing a woman proves that, when it comes to the socially constructed gender, many women are playing women and many men are playing men.

Halberstam also works very hard to delineate between different levels of drag performance: “Butch Realness,” “Femme Pretender,” “Male Mimicry,” and “Fag Drag” (*Female Masculinity* 246-253). Critiquing Halberstam’s method of classification, Thomas Pointek states: “Halberstam’s work suffers from one highly consequential limitation: it focuses exclusively on the drag king scenes in New York, London, and, to a lesser extent, San Francisco” (126). Speaking directly to Halberstam’s theories, Pointek’s article “Kinging in the Heartland; or, The Power of Marginality” indicates that, just like drag kings, the permutations of the drag king culture are not limited to large urban areas. Focusing on a troupe of players in Columbus, Ohio, Pointek demonstrates that, like drag queens, drag kings have the ability to locate themselves at the intersection of many different cultural issues:

The troupe has always been racially mixed and performances frequently cross racial boundaries...H.I.S. Kings’ shows are not limited to performances of female masculinity but also include complex commentary on the construction and performance of femaleness, since members of H.I.S. Kings also perform a variety of femininities. Through their approach to the drag performance—including the ensemble character of their shows and the deliberate crossing of racial and gender lines—H.I.S. Kings manage to forge connections between popular culture, subcultural styles, and theoretical discourses. H.I.S. Kings’ shows, I argue, not only reflect current debates about performativity of gender in feminism and queer theory; they also complicate them in productive and entertaining ways. (128)

This Pointek quote about the H.I.S. Kings troupe could almost function as a manifesto for why drag queens (and now kings) have been, and continue to be, critically important to the gay and lesbian community specifically. Though examining the differences among drag performance is interesting, any analysis should not lose sight of the fact that these are permutations. Further,

Halberstam's work has clearly revealed that drag kings and drag queens are permutations of the same thing.

### 1.6 The Nature of the Beast

One critical issue that must be addressed revolves around Halberstam's conceptualization of crossing chromosomal sex because drag, specifically her notion of drag, calls into question some of the claims used in her own support of transgendered persons. Before this analysis continues, I intend to make clear that sex reassignment is an absolutely and even necessary procedure for some individuals. That being said, Halberstam's analysis of transgender theory, especially in light of her powerful analysis of drag culture, must be critiqued. Throughout this analysis, I have striven to draw a clear distinction between drag as a cultural phenomenon and individual intent or interpretation—as those represent only permutations, minor variations of the whole. This topic necessitates confronting individuals, not in terms of how they constitute a drag culture, but how drag performance constitutes them. In fact, though some transgendered people do function as performers of drag, for the purpose of this analysis, transgendered people will refer to those people who seek or have successfully modified their chromosomal sex.

Halberstam makes two specific and questionable claims in regard to sexual reassignment surgery. First, Halberstam asserts, "I want to analyze here the surprising continuities and unpredictable discontinuities between gender variance that retains the birth body (for example, butchness) and gender variance that necessitates sex reassignment" (*Female Masculinity* 143). If gender is a social construction, a notion that is reinforced by drag, then how large a role should gender play, if any at all, when it comes to sex reassignment. Halberstam's entire book deals with the permutations of gender variance. The way her statement is phrased, transgendered individuals are actually marginalized from a group whose inclusion they probably need. Essentially, Halberstam shifts the fulcrum to the point where all permutations of gender variance fall under one category while only transgendered people fall under another. Another statement made by Halberstam concerns the medical procedure itself:

“The technological availabilities of surgeries to reassign gender have made the option of gender transition available to those who understand themselves to be tragically and severely at odds with their bodies” (*Female Masculinity* 143). While this statement is meant to preface her argument concerning the differences between male-to-female and female-to-male reassignments, the tone implies that this (or any) medical procedure is routine and perhaps even common. Not to mention that the risks associated with any surgery are inherently steep. Further, for many transgendered people, due to the fact that they materially function on societal fringes, the cost of these operations, as well as follow-up and a perpetual regimen of medication, is prohibitive.

Another distinct possibility, or implication, emerges. Is it possible that sex reassignment procedures represent a method of correcting a gender variance that is perceived as a disability? Lennard Davis states that “historical specificity makes us understanding that disability is a social process with an origin” (2403). The “origin” Davis refers to is actually “tied to complex social forces” much like those forces much like those understood in relation to gender construction. The fact that there is an origin, of course, does not suggest any level of validity (2403). The body becomes significant in light of Halberstam’s analysis. Though she certainly does not ascribe to any level of simplicity to the process of sex reassignment surgery, the lack of discussion concerning the possibility that this medical procedure might be an unnecessary consequence of societal alienation is troublesome. Davis explains: “The coding of body parts and the importance attached to their selective function or dysfunction is part of a much larger system of signs and meanings in society” (2404). The improper use of the body is a relatively standard charge leveled against members of the gay and lesbian community. Additionally, the misuse of the penis in regard to the phallus and in terms of the physical penetration and subjugation of women is well referenced.

Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price also discuss the body in terms of social utility: “Insertion of bodies into systems of utility – be they at the service of capitalism or patriarchy – devolves on forms of power that are localised over the singular body, and that rely not on brute

force but on quasi-voluntary acquiescence” (433). This observation is salient because gender is absolutely connected to the function of capitalism and patriarchy, especially as capitalism subordinates the patriarchy. Shildrick and Price argue, like so many others, that the body is culturally inscribed and controlled through social forces (433). Is it possible, in certain instances, that the desire to cross genders is an extraordinary reaction to society disabling the gay or lesbian body? Shildrick and Price address this question: “Our topic is disability; and we want simultaneously to hold in mind the experience of disability as an experience of a supposedly ‘broken’ body, and that disability as precisely one of those transgressive categories that demand that we rethink not simple the boundaries of the body, but equally those between sameness and difference, and indeed the self and the other” (432). The authors directly attach the notion of the “broken” body to notions of sameness and difference. The difference is that, while Shildrick and Price are discussing how a body perceived to be disabled is encoded in light of cultural expectations, the gay and lesbian body is disabled as a result of cultural expectations.

Though Halberstam demonstrates how drag kings effectively interact with societal and patriarchal constructs, she does seem to accept societal encodings with a little too much ease: “It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be resewn” (“F2M” 127). While the need for sex reassignment surgery is necessary for some individuals, resewing skin is not the equivalent of putting on a new frock. Halberstam also proposes “that we call all elective body alterations for whatever reason (postcancer or postaccident) reconstruction, physical disabilities, or gender dysphoria” *cosmetic* surgery and that we drop altogether the constructing terminology of the crossing” (“F2M” 130). The problem associated with gender reassignment surgery is that of illusion. Halberstam is correct in as far as skin and cloth can both be perceived as false. A person who changes their sex may be perceived as a charlatan just as easily and a person confronting sartorial expectations. Though Halberstam seems to imply that sexual reassignment is just another form of drag, the procedure represents a wound,

an attempt to correct a disability. If the best analogies Halberstam can muster are “postcancer” and “postaccident” then enough evidence is present to question the whole endeavor. Ironically, the path to freedom, the means of liberation, are discussed at length within the body of her work: drag.

Modern drag represents the entrenched power of the patriarchy through the masculine as well as burgeoning resistive power of the feminine: drag deconstructs its construction and consequently constructs a deconstruction. This duality, this distortion provides drag with its power—the power to confound. If Foucault’s argument is correct that “for two centuries now, the discourse on sex has been multiplied rather than rarefied; and that if it has carried with it taboos and prohibitions, it has also, in a more fundamental way, ensured the solidification and implantation of an entire sexual mosaic” (53), then arguably, drag, drag queens and drag kings, represents the site—perhaps even the only all-encompassing site—of this solidification.

Dealing with issues relative to power and divergent communities, Judith Butler forcefully argues, “power can neither be withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed. Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossibility fantasy of its full-scale transcendence” (169). Again, the strength of Butler’s individual arguments potentially has the strength to overturn her overall thesis because her argument implies that power is finite. This notion is seductive because, if the engagement with power represents a zero-sum game, then the redeployment of power, the parodic redeployment, has extraordinary potential. Butler, herself, confirms this notion: “Practices and parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and on that appears as derived, phantasmic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were” (200). Parody, including the parody of drag, according to Butler, has the power to confront and defeat “privileged” and “naturalized” genders, like masculinity. Therefore, drag, the site of rupture and the transgressed boundary, is a conduit of power with astonishing strength—the strength to obliterate an artificial construction.



This strength is necessary because confronting the patriarchy is a daunting proposition. Sedgwick explains the multivalent nature of the oppression caused by the patriarchal oppression: "The second and perhaps even greater heuristic leap of feminism has been the recognition that categories of gender and, hence, oppressions of gender can have a structuring force for nodes of thought, for axes of cultural discrimination, whose thematic subject isn't explicitly gendered at all" (34). Geography seems irrelevant when constructing the map of the world since, regardless of the terrain, the use and exploitation of that terrain is governed by modes of thought that have been and continue to be inscribed onto cultures. Steven Schacht and Doris Ewings' *Feminism with Men* states explicitly that "Five thousand years of ever hegemonic forms of patriarchy have resulted in a world gender where male dominance and female subordination are the moral fabric of every contemporary society" (171). So many theorists have argued that the implementation of colonialism inherently takes the form of gender control (in that native populations are feminized and subjugated) that the model must be considered an axiom.

With startling vividness, Julie Peteet analyzes one example of the cataclysm resulting from the conflict between indigenous and colonial masculinity. Explaining the Israeli/Palestinian situation, Peteet explains that "Arab masculinity (*rujulah*) is acquired, verified and played out in the brave deed, in risk-taking, and in expressions of fearlessness and assertiveness" (321). The very nature of the value of this masculinity is at odds with the colonial position that seeks to dominate an occupied region for a variety of purposes. Peteet elaborates on many instances of the violent colonial domination of Palestinian men. In order to examine the cause of extraordinary violence against these men, Peteet explains, "The young male is a metonym for Palestinian opposition and struggle against domination, the idea and symbols of which must be rooted out and silenced" (319). This seemingly separate issue of colonial occupation in the Middle East is being raised for three reasons: first, to demonstrate how traditional methods of colonial (and therefore patriarchal) resistance are not only futile, but also self-perpetuating; second, to initiate a discussion about the origin and application of psychoanalysis by

simultaneously contextualizing Freud and demonstrating how drag confounds his tenets; and third, to foreground the argument that drag represents such a fundamental source of power and agency that these violent cycles can be obliterated. The (re)establishment of the Israeli state is the result of colonialism with biblical origins. The primary lesson to be learned from this ancient narrative of tribes being conquered and dominated until a resistance could be mounted is that the cycle, of course, is never ending. This fact is proof of Foucault's argument that the patriarchy is an essentially mindless apparatus as opposed to a government or militia (not that governments do not often engage in mindless activity). The person, or group of people, who access the oppressing strength of the patriarchy in order to combat it is actually being subsumed into the structure itself. At this point, the only possible outcome concerns relative positioning within the paternal hierarchy.

The Jewish displacement combined with further persecution eventually led to a state of perpetual feminization. Daniel Boyarin discusses the fact that Freud, facing the fact of his Jewish heritage, experienced a doubling of the self—the colonized subject recognizes his status while simultaneously rejecting it. According to Boyarin, this self-alienation “marks the precise historical moment making psychoanalysis possible” (275). Part of this doubling is experienced with Jewish custom: “Here circumcision for the Jewish colonial subject resembles a moment of displaced castration” (Boyarin 283). The author persuasively argues that castration led to Freud's fixation on the Jewish penis, his own circumcised penis, and gave rise to the phallus as the emblem of the patriarchy (Boyarin 279-282). The dominance of the phallus and the language of the phallus as a means for understanding and constructing society are unquestioned. The phallus is a slippery adversary because it ties a constructed source of power, the phallus, to the biological penis. Therefore, the penis, an exclusively male feature, grants privilege to those who possess the appendage (regardless of skill or proclivity in its deployment). Further, sex is the literal iteration of the phallus. Thus, social dominance is inextricably tied to sexual penetration, and sexual dominance is consequently the literal exercise of social control. However, Michel Foucault argues that sex, with its multiple

permutations, became desirable in and of itself and provided a source of confrontation to the paternal hierarchy:

Medical examinations, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. (45)

As discussed, the performance of drag is the communal site of sexual multiplicity. Foucault negotiated the intersections of the patriarchy and dissent. Reclaiming the body, something which occurs in drag, is critically important due to the frequency with which the body is made an object. The power of this objectification is demonstrated when Butler engages with Lacan: "For women to 'be' the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to 'embody' the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through 'being' its Other" (59). Butler also engages with other theorists like Wittig who "understands 'sex' to be discursively produced and circulated by a system of significations oppressive to women, gays, and lesbians" (154). Though this argument cannot be refuted outright, the performance of drag exemplifies how this discourse can be confronted (if not defeated) because the physicality of dress does not require a discourse to exist, only a discourse to comprehend. Understanding this, often elusive, role of discourse in creating oppression falls within the purview of feminist theorists. Butler's discussion of Irigaray edifies this discursive construction, "In her view...the Other is but the negative elaboration of the masculine subject with the result that the female sex is unrepresentable" (140). In light of this argument, I suggest that this negative elaboration actually represents the transition (or dispersing) of the energy from the subject, those who benefit from the patriarchy (typically, white heterosexual men) to those oppressed by it (typically, everybody else). Many gay men have already engaged in the voluntary surrender of the Phallus because the dynamic of power is not always suitable to non-patriarchal relationships. Thus, the drag queen can be seen as the reliquary, perhaps even the tabernacle, of the Phallus that has no purpose. Consequently, the

drag queen, unlike the woman, is an inherently positive elaboration of the masculine subject. If this occurs for gay men, is it also possible that it may occur for heterosexual ones?

### 1.7 The Drag Paradox

Though the paradox of drag is the simultaneous presentation of both the masculine and the feminine, the more profound irony—a direct result—is the fact that so many different intentions and such various implications converge on one figure. Drag is not a deception. In fact, audience awareness and participation is expected. Through the performance of drag, the audience appreciates and accepts its artificiality. Through this rupture, other forms of subversion have historically been given light. However, these theories of drag reveal a site of material as well as cultural signification.

Though often relegated to the margins of society and looked upon with curiosity, drag should be seen as a reasonable and effective way to interact with and combat the structure of the patriarchal hierarchy. As demonstrated by the military personnel who fought in two world wars and viewed drag performances as a release from masculine proscriptions, drag is a powerful form of subversion. The patriarchy, as understood in light of the performance of drag, is also revealed as a mindless template of a hierarchal structure where individuals are placed according primarily to their genitalia. Further, the corrupt and corrupting nature of this structure is revealed as the hierarchy is further subdivided in terms of class and race. Thus, while the argument for the patriarchy is one of essentialism, the arbitrary nature of the masculine/feminine depiction in regard to non-genital factors utterly collapses the presumption of an essential quality based on chromosomal sex. Also, as demonstrated by modern conflicts within the patriarchy, drag stands opposed to the violent oppression that can result from struggle within the oppressive structure.

Drag is a site of awareness. No falsehood is foisted upon the audience. No deception is being perpetrated. The drag performer and the audience are aware and interacting with the fact that either a man or a woman is performing a version of the opposite sex. This uniqueness

causes a distortion in the discursive apparatus of the patriarchy. The patriarchy does not have a method to properly address this rupture. Simply occupying the space is agential. Consequently, some individuals who occupy this space are benefiting from this unique agency.

### 1.8 *Angels and Villains*

For all intents and purposes, honing drag from theory to practice would seem to be a nearly impossible task to achieve—a tool too unwieldy and imprecise to be critically effective; however, drag creates one thing: a rupture. Through this rupture, unexpected combinations and recombinations are possible that allow new understandings, new possibilities, and new directions to be established. To achieve this very effect, Tony Kushner uses drag in *Angels in America* to forge new understandings of America during the AIDS epidemic. Chapter 2 will focus on how Kushner's methodology for both defining and deploying drag corresponds with the rubric of the drag paradox in terms of simultaneity and audience awareness in order to imbed additional context and even advocacy into the play. Consequently, the ability of drag to be deliberately constructed for a specific purpose will be discussed.

The role and construction of everyday drag will be the subject of Chapter 3. The role of identity and audience will be examined from the field work enacted at the 1851 Arlington, where weekly drag shows take place every Friday and Saturday night. Again, while the performances vary and the audience, at least at this one venue, is anything but homogenous, the rupture is, nevertheless, singular. The distortions and subversions recounted from the field research serve to reinforce the Kushner's use of the form—not to mention to theory of the drag paradox itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANGELS IN AMERICA

#### 2.1 The Other Side of the Equation

As argued in Chapter 1, drag *does* a great deal by virtue of the fact that several socio-cultural tenets and proscriptions intersect at a singular event: a cultural rupture caused by the deliberate and simultaneous performance of both genders in one figure. In the case of the military, the performance of drag allowed for a broader criticism of the two World Wars to be enacted by the soldiers in the field; in these incarnations, the drag performances were typically obvious and comical—a standard drag trope. Seeking new ground, new directions, and new understandings of the deployment of drag, this chapter will focus on Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* in an effort to suss out the broader implications of the multiple and multivalent deployments of drag. The focus will expand to include the audience, which, in regard to *Angels in America*, can include the people sitting in theater seats, the characters in the play, or any person reading the text. Remarkably, each level reveals differences, complexities, and even ethicalities both within and outwardly associated with the play. Having established a rubric for drag in Chapter 1—gender simultaneity and audience awareness/interaction—this chapter will focus on Kushner's deployment of drag, while broadening the discussion to include the role of audience awareness as a component of the drag paradox.

Much has been made of Kushner's epic work, which exists in two parts: *Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Part Two: Perestroika*. Both plays are set in the mid-1980s, the early years of the AIDS crisis in America. Art Borreca's review of an early 1992 London production of *Millennium Approaches* deftly encapsulates the larger themes of the first play:

But such is the nature of Kushner's experiment that his play is at once about what Roy Cohn represents socially and historically and not 'about' Cohn—the historical person—at all. Kushner employs Cohn as a symbol around whom the lives of several non-historical characters dramatically (and symbolically) revolve. Working in the same halls of justice with Cohn are two men: Joe Pitt, a Cohn protégé, a Reagan conservative, a Mormon, and a married man who discovers his homosexual identity as the play unfolds; and Louis Ironson, a word processor, a vague liberal, and a homosexual who gradually abandons his partner, Prior Walter, while he is dying of AIDS. The play intertwines several strands of action: Cohn's relationship with Joe; Cohn's confrontation with AIDS, Joe's sexual identity crisis; Prior's gradual decline; Louis' failure to come to terms with his partner's imminent death. (235)

With all this intermingling of characters, identity seems key to Kushner's whole enterprise. Yet, remarkably, within the play there is a convergence of not only different actors playing different roles, but the characters themselves (as well as the actors portraying those characters) experience modulations of identity. In *Perestroika*, questions of identity are even more pronounced as the scope of the action expands to include Heaven and Hell. These multiple and multivalent personas, as well as the myriad themes and motifs presented throughout both plays edify and challenge; however, virtually without question, Kushner's significant achievement is in the very fact that *Angels* manages to cobble these multiplicities together into, not a unified whole, but a transcendent mosaic.

It is through drag that certain aspects of this mosaic are revealed to contain information—nodes of knowledge that add deeper meaning to a targeted demographic in the audience. This chapter will begin with a review of David Savran's critical study of ambivalence within *Angels* in order to frame the argument concerning how the deployment of drag actually serves as ethical and contextual guideposts. Next, the dream/hallucination sequence involving Prior and Harper will be examined to illustrate how Kushner establishes drag as a motif for increased contextuality. In order for this paradigm to properly function, this chapter will also

study the role of the audience interaction by expanding on the concept of the “aware” audience introduced in Chapter 1. These two aspects of the drag paradox, the context enhancing performance and the role of the “aware” audience, will then be combined to contextualize certain aspects of Kushner’s approach to the AIDS epidemic as well as those otherwise ambiguous characters whose elucidations are made possible with the rubric of the drag paradox.

## 2.2 Savran

One fruitful way to approach Kushner’s methodology is with David Savran’s influential article “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” which is referenced continually throughout the canon of *Angels* scholarship. Curious about the praise and status so quickly heaped on Kushner’s play, Savran opts to examine the binaries and dualities as a thematic structure in and of itself:

The opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true: *Angels* valorizes identity politics; it offers an anti-foundationalist critique of identity politics. *Angels* mounts an attack against ideologies of individualism; it problematizes the idea of community. *Angels* submits liberalism to a trenchant examination; it finally opts for yet another version of American liberal pluralism. *Angels* launches a critique of the very mechanisms that produce pathologized and acquiescent female bodies; it represents yet another pathologization and silencing of women. (208)

Savran argues that the play also proves difficult to classify in terms of form due to Kushner’s propensity for drawing references from familiar and iconic texts only to bend them to his own ends: Prior Walter is depicted as an avatar for the “physically blind yet spiritually insightful” trope (exemplified by Oedipus and Gloucester) in order to situate his thematic importance; Shakespeare is evoked in both Roy Cohn (emblematic of the opportunistic and titular Richard III) and Louis, whose predicted physical abuse revealed by the end of the second play calls to mind the “fate motif, reminiscent of *Macbeth*”; and the deployment of God evokes both early modern and absurdist theatre (209). Savran argues that central to understanding *Angels in*



*America* is recognizing the importance of ambivalence, that “the play’s ambivalence...is not simply the result of Kushner hedging his bets on the most controversial political unconscious, playing itself out on many different levels: formal, ideological, characterological, and rhetorical” (208). While Savran’s essay appears to be a discrete sequence of analyses, this approach actually underscores a larger argument focused on Kushner’s pluralist utopian vision.

Inherent in the construction of communities, decisions in regard to ethicality and culture must be made. Savran, himself, briefly makes the argument that, while the play presents binaries and ambiguities, the cultural milieu combines with the cultural circumstances of the actual production to establish that “binaries are always hierarchal”; therefore, “ambivalence turns out to be not especially ambivalent at all” (215). Society is in conflict. For example, the pill-popping, Mormon, and neglected wife Harper Pitt draws heavily on the damaged woman trope exemplified by Eugene O’Neill’s *Mary Tyrone (Long Day’s Journey into Night)* and Edward Albee’s *Honey (Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?)*; however, though Harper is indeed a drug addict who lies about a pregnancy, her hallucinations are visionary and highlight some of Kushner’s primary themes (215). Savran forcefully pronounces, “I will argue that the play’s undecidability is, in fact, already resolved because questions that appear to be ambivalent in fact already have been decided consciously or unconsciously by the text itself” (209). The ambivalences, the binaries, the conundrums, and the intersections laid out by Savran unquestionably exist within *Angels in America*. Yet, as Savran himself points out, larger meanings as well as a certain amount of advocacy emerges amongst all this confusion.

Rather than view the play in terms of ambivalence, perhaps it is more productive to consider many of these issues as confluences, or as simultaneities—where answers are multifaceted and the solutions are recombinant forms of multi-present permutations. Such recombination’s are also constitutive of drag. Not surprisingly, Kushner deploys drag motifs in association with the different characters, in many different ways, and to remarkably different effects. His deployment of drag serves to highlight an expanded deployment of the power of simultaneity, the watchword of drag. As such, this analysis of *Angels in America* intends to

interrogate the ambiguities and dualities of the play through the lens of drag with the intent of forging new rubrics for understanding Kushner's ambitious work. To achieve this result, much of the focus must be placed on the role and permutations of the audience as a concept.

### 2.3 Millennium Approaches

The most obvious and deliberate performance of drag occurs in Act 1 scene 7 of *Millennium Approaches*. The stage notes indicate that "Prior is at a fantastic table, having a dream, applying a face" (36). As Prior begins speaking, he references the Golden Age of Hollywood:

PRIOR: *(Alone, putting on makeup, then examining the results in the mirror; to the audience):* "I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille."

One wants to move through life with elegance and grace, blossoming infrequently but with exquisite taste, and perfect timing, like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid....One wants....But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One ... dies at thirty, robbed of ... decades of majesty.

Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit.

*(He almost crumbles; he pulls himself together; he studies his handiwork in the mirror)*

I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you've hit rock bottom when even drag is a drag. (36-37)

The reference to Norma Desmond recalls the conclusion of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd*. Layered within this motif is the failure of Norma Desmond to recapture her lost glory. Prior's words speak directly to this meaning; he has lost the ability to "move through life with elegance and grace." On another level, Prior possesses such insight by virtue of the fact that he was once a drag queen himself. Like Norma Desmond, material realities have encroached on his ability to find personal escape through performance. Those realities are later revealed in Act 3 scene 2 when Prior describes his physical circumstances to Emily, his nurse:

Ankles sore and swollen, but the leg's better. The nausea's mostly gone with the little orange pills. BM's pure liquid but not bloody anymore, for now, my eye doctor says everything's OK, for now, my dentist says "Yuck!" when he sees my fuzzy tongue, and now he wears little condoms on his thumb and forefinger. And a mask. So what? My dermatologist is in Hawaii and my mother ... well leave my mother out of it. Which is usually where my mother is, out of it. My glands are like walnuts, my weight's holding steady for week two ... (103)

The realities of Prior's existence are so bleak that his last bastion of drag performance seems only able to occur in a liminal dream space. Yet even this space, according to Prior's own admission, is beginning to fail. Just like one of the tenets of the drag paradox discussed in Chapter 1, that intent is irrelevant to the function of drag, Kushner posits Prior as failing to find solace in this performance, only to demonstrate, through Harper's arrival, that drag is also a site of insight and agency. Though the paradigm of drag as a vehicle of personal redemption or retreat is called into question, a greater function is quickly established.

Into Prior's dream of drag, Harper enters while experiencing one of her own patented hallucinations. Believing the space to be the exclusive provenance of her imagination, she proceeds to question Prior's presence:

HARPER: Are you ... Who are you?

PRIOR: Who are you?

HARPER: What are you doing in my hallucination?

PRIOR: I'm not in your hallucination. You're in my dream.

HARPER: You're wearing makeup.

PRIOR: So are you.

HARPER: But you're a man.

PRIOR: (*Feigning dismay, shock, he mimes slashing his throat with his lipstick and dies, fabulously tragic. Then*): The hands and feet give it away.

HARPER: There must be some mistake here. I don't recognize you. You're not. . .  
.Are you my . . . some sort of imaginary friend?

PRIOR: No. Aren't you too old to have imaginary friends?

HARPER: I have emotional problems. I took too many pills. Why are you wearing  
makeup?

PRIOR: I was in the process of applying the face, trying to make myself feel better . . . I  
swiped the new fall colors from the Clinique counter at Macy's. (*Showing her*)

HARPER: You stole these?

PRIOR: I was out of cash; it was an emotional emergency! (37)

Harper, who wants to be in a good Mormon marriage, and Prior, who desires to be a healthy gay man in a "healthy" relationship, meet in this liminal dream/hallucination space. Unable to achieve either of these desires, both Harper and Prior have retreated to this place of comfort and reprieve merely to find the space inadequate to achieve solace. However, by virtue of their simultaneous appearance, they are both able to recognize essential and critical realities about each other. Obviously, Prior is able to recognize that Harper is unhappy. Such perceptiveness is not unexpected in a place of simultaneity as the associated camaraderie logically provides insight; they are in the same pace for the basically the same reason. Yet Prior is also able to understand further aspects of her reality. Specifically, he knows that her "husband's a homo" (39).

For the drag paradox to exist, gender simultaneously must be present within one figure. In this instance, Prior is performing drag. Another tenet of the drag paradox requires that no deception is perpetrated on an "aware" audience. As such, Harper immediately knows that Prior is a man. The drag paradox also posits a cultural distortion through the awareness of the collapse of gender boundaries. Therefore, in this instance, Harper becomes a member of the "aware" audience. Drag is not expanding to incorporate new paradigms or characteristics; rather, Harper's reality, certainly based on a gendered social construct, is being affected by her proximity to Prior's drag, by being his audience. Therefore, unlike virtually everyone else,

Harper, who is not in drag, is nevertheless able to see beyond Prior's illness: "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the inner most part, entirely free of disease. I can see that" (40). The remaining question concerns Harper. Since she is not in drag, in what manner is she performing that allows Prior to understand the truth about her husband? The answer, as will be explained in the subsequent section, deals with Harper's association with drag; or, specifically, with the actor who plays Harper's performance as a drag king.

Kushner also posits drag as a system of codes—symbols that manage to convey enhanced meanings of their own, and to a specified audience. The language associated with drag is deployed back in Prior's "reality." When Prior is in the hospital following a medical crisis, Belize greets him with an offering of a "folk" remedy for his sores. Both men, each a former drag queen, use the language of drag to navigate through difficult subject matter.

PRIOR: Miss Thing.

BELIZE: Ma Cherie bichette.

PRIOR: Stella.

BELIZE: Stella for star. Let me see. (*Scrutinizing Prior*) You look like shit, why yes indeed you do, somme la merde!

PRIOR: Merci.

BELIZE: (*Taking little plastic bottles from his bag, handing them to Prior*): Not to despair, Belle Reeve. Lookie! Magic goop!

PRIOR: (*Opening a bottle, sniffing*): Pooh! What kinda crap is that?

BELIZE: Beats me. Let's rub it on you poor blistered body and see what it does.

PRIOR: This is not Western medicine... (65)

Belize's bringing of non-traditional medicine for Prior belies a deeper truth that "Western" medicine is not working. To mitigate the stark facts of this reality, the coded language of drag eases the difficulty associated with the conversation. Rather than discuss the issues at hand in a clinical way, the dialogue is tinged with the refinements of French. Additionally, Tennessee

Williams' fictional Belle Reeve, conjured from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, evokes the dreamlike plantation of the Old South.

Prior initially resists the temptation to engage in this drag-coded conversation, but soon acquiesces; however, when Belize suggests that it is time to change the tone, "All this girl-talk is politically incorrect, you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag," Prior responds emphatically, "I'm sick, I get to be politically incorrect if it makes me feel better" (67). Yet the language of drag in this instance does more than offer a rhetorical structure for addressing some of the realities associated with AIDS. It plants a seed that is not resolved until the final act of the second play. The seed relates to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which, among many things, is a tale of two sisters: Stella, who negotiates life on a visceral level, and Blanche, an ethereal creature easily damaged by brutality (and reality). Though Stella is evoked in the previous passage, the character reference, depending on the presentation of the scene, could refer to either Prior or Belize. However, in Act 5 scene 7 of *Perestroika*, Blanche's signature line is channeled by Prior, who proclaims, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (271). In response, the stern Hannah Pitt responds, "Well that's a stupid thing to do" (271). Even within this rudimentary drag performance, where men really do nothing more that recall the lines of iconic women, drag still points to an ethic, or resolve. It is foolish to live like Blanche, retreating in fear from illuminated realities. The context associated with drag transmits complicated themes to the appropriate audience. During the conversation between Prior and Belize, the performance is to each another.

#### 2.4 Audience

The definition and role of audience is critical in understanding how the reference to *Streetcar* works. What is the audience expected to know in order to "get" the intended meaning of this aspect of *Angels in America*? Certainly, a theater-going audience will likely understand the reference to one of Tennessee William's most iconic plays. Some theorist, like James Fisher, argue that "in Kushner's plays ideological debate emerges from a composite of rhetorical rationality, literary and cultural imagery drawn from the dogmas of the past, and wildly

imaginative fantasy to unfold the complex cross-currents of history” (*Theater* 3). Fisher is not alone in this assertion as it is the core of Savran’s argument as well. However, either intentionally or unintentionally, something additional is happening, especially in terms of drag. Certain members of the audience are receiving specific information that is specifically coded to them.

To illustrate this point, I turn to Neil Jordan’s 1992 film, *The Crying Game*, in which Fergus, an Irish man, falls in love with Dil, hairdresser and performer, only to discover that Dil is actually a man successfully donning the visage of a woman. To Fergus, of course, Dil appears to be female, therefore the character, at least in terms of the film’s plot, does not conform to the operational definition of drag as proposed by this thesis. However, in at least one crucial scene, the film becomes meta-cinematic, even though the fourth wall is not broken *per se*. The scene in question occurs immediately before the “reveal” scene where Fergus is literally confronted with the fact of Dil’s male genitalia. Prior to this moment of revelation (the threshold of revelation), Fergus is standing next to the bar in the pub where he first met Dil. The bartender attempts to give some information to Fergus, but is only able to say, “She’s on.” (*The Crying Game*). Dil walks onto the stage in a gold sequenced dress and begins to sing the title song; Fergus, along with the rest of the crowd in the pub, is depicted as being entranced by the performance. Yet, the film’s audience sees Dil’s hand moving throughout the number. This hand moves in time with the music and is in constant motion. This hand, this “man’s” hand, is larger than one would expect on a chromosomal female. Though not immediately recognizable to many in the theater audience, the continual presence of this hand throughout the performance is arguably intended for a select group, specifically the gay members in the audience. Those people who might be familiar with drag performances are clued into the “reveal” a few minutes before the actual moment. Consequently, certain members of the audience are granted unique and privileged access to the action. Some (like myself) could then look around them—to gaze expectantly—at the reactions others in the theater will inevitably have.

In terms of drag, *Angels*, like *The Crying Game*, is meta-performative. For example, the scene where Prior and Belize engage in a drag-type dialogue evoking *Streetcar* points to the importance of the later scene in *Perestroika* where Hannah indicates to Prior that reliance on strangers is foolish. Because drag has already been posited as a “threshold[s] of revelation” in the Harper/Prior dream sequence, the deployment of drag-type dialogue indicates that further meaning can and should be gleaned from the conversation. Therefore, a flippant comment by Hannah at the end of the play is elevated to reveal a larger theme, the theme of self (or community) reliance. Where the “man’s” hand in *The Crying Game* offered a point by which the audience became a part of the film, Hannah’s character becomes an access point for, if not an outright member of, the audience. The multiple levels at work on Prior and Hannah’s one exchange is remarkable. The unaware member of the audience will simply mark the exchange as an appropriate, if ironic, response by Hannah to Prior. He was, after all, helped by Hannah, who was a stranger. A standard theater (or slightly literate) audience will recognize the lines and their implied meaning. On a third level, to the drag aware audience, who understands their role as an interactive audience, Hannah’s statement is recognized as a response to the performance. Hannah has become the access point for the “aware” audience. Then again, the question arises as to what gives this particular character the sufficiency to function in this capacity. Like Harper, the actor playing Hannah also engages in drag king performances.

Not only is drag performed as “straight” drag during the dream/hallucination sequence; but drag is also performed as different characters are frequently played by the same actor and often contrary to the expected gender throughout both plays. Admittedly, this cross-dressing may not be immediately recognized by the audience—as is certainly the case of Meryl Streep portraying the rabbi in the film version.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, being meta-performative, such cross-dressing is apparent to a person reading the play (even to a person reading the playbill). As a result, the audience experiences degrees of drag awareness, even in the most minute and

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<sup>4</sup> But even this illusion is revealed during the credits at the end. The truth of the performance is eventually known.



infinitesimal way. This awareness grows by degrees and can include theater reviews, conversations during intermission, and all the way to classroom conversations.

One critical example of this interaction occurs in Act 2 scene 6, when Roy and Martin Heller, a character that appears in this one scene only, perform what appears to be a choreographed routine for Joe in an attempt to lure him into taking a job in Washington in the hopes that Joe will illegally help Roy out with his mounting troubles. As an enticement, Martin expounds:

It's a revolution in Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the Senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be block-solid Republican appointees, and the Federal bench—Republican judges like land mines, everywhere, everywhere they turn. Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine. And we'll get our way on just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. We have the White House locked till the year 2000. Any beyond. A permanent fix on the Oval Office? It's possible. By '92 we'll get the Senate back, and in ten years the South is going to give us the House. It's really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan. (69)

The most interesting part of this speech is that the actor playing Martin is also the actor who plays Harper, Joe's wife. Like the Meryl Streep performance, the audience may be completely unaware of this secondary performance. However, even if the actors subsume themselves into paradigmatic Brando-esque method virtuosities, Martin Heller remains a drag king performance.<sup>5</sup> Kushner does this for a reason.

As an avid believer in the Reagan era and its promise of a homogenized, strong, and conservative America, Joe is faced with the subversion presented in the form of his wife in drag.

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the more the performance emulates a reserved masculinity, the more in line the performance would be with the Halberstam ideal.

In this instance, it points out to Joe, or the “aware” audience members, or the reader of the play that the path offered by Roy and Martin is a duplicitous one. As Joe explains to Roy in an earlier scene, “What scares me is that maybe what I really love in her is the part of her that’s farthest from the light from God’s love; maybe I was drawn to that in the place. And I’m keeping it alive because I need it” (59). This darkness within her reflects what Joe perceives to be a darkness within himself:

JOE: There are things. . . . I don’t know how well we know ourselves. I mean, what if? I know I married her because she . . . because I loved the way she was wrong, always doing something wrong, like one step out of step. In Salt Lake City that stands out. I never stood out, on the outside, but inside, it was hard for me. To pass.

ROY: Pass?

JOE: Yeah.

ROY: Pass as what?

JOE: Oh. Well. . . . As someone cheerful and strong. Those who love God with an open heart unclouded by secrets and struggles are cheerful; God’s easy simple love for them shows in how strong and happy they are. The saints. (59-60)

Harper, as Joe admits, cannot pass as anything other than her essential nature, which apparently was cause for some trouble in Salt Lake City; her truth, or her inability to deceive, has already been associated with Prior in the dream sequence and the “threshold of revelation.” The effect of this drag paradox plays out on multiple levels. Joe is connected to his wife, especially to the darkness he sees in his wife—a darkness that reflects the darkness he believes to exist within himself. Therefore, Joe’s essential nature, the nature he keeps covered up is actually opposed to the ideals espoused by Martin. By this construction, Martin and Joe mirror each other. Though Martin is not Harper in drag, rather the actor playing Harper in drag, the connection is still clear for the “aware” audience. Since drag has already been established as revelatory, then an argument can be made that the Martin drag king performance also points

back to Joe, whose essential nature is also one of difference and searching—the very qualities he is attracted to in Harper.

This scene in terms of drag isolates and separates the components from the audience in an unexpected way. While the expected audience should be Joe, it is actually the audience in the theater (or the audience reading the play). While Joe is oblivious, the “aware” audience understands the message that is supposed to be transmitted to Joe. Therefore, Joe becomes an avatar for the audience, a way to access the performance. In this instance, Joe is ironically the “straight” man and becomes part of the performance. The subversion of the Martin Heller drag king performance actually reflects a more sympathetic version of Joe to the audience. Reagan-era ideology, something to which Kushner is opposed, is presented as seductive. The audience, now distanced from that time period, recognizes the underlying message being conveyed, while also understanding (perhaps through a veiled reference to their own experience) that Joe’s situation is not without complexity.

### 2.5 Perestroika

Beginning almost immediately where *Millennium Approaches* left off, *Perestroika* is a much different play. Told in five acts instead of three, *Perestroika* attempts something entirely different from the first play: resolution. To this end, Kushner devotes the first act to reacquainting the characters to each other and to the audience: Prior emerges from his encounter with the angel; Roy is admitted to the AIDS floor of a hospital; Belize and Roy engage in the first of their confrontations that ultimately lead to Roy’s redemption (of sorts); Harper still finds refuge in her hallucinatory version of Antarctica; and Joe and Louis begin their doomed and escapist relationship. The first clue that things have changed is revealed in the opening stage notes for Act 2:

*Prior and Belize after the funeral of a mutual friend of theirs, a major NYC drag-and-style queen. They stand outside a dilapidated funeral parlor on the Lower East Side. Belize is in defiantly bright and beautiful clothing. Prior is dressed oddly; a great long black coat and a huge, fringed, matching scarf, draped to a hoodlike effect. His*

*appearance is disconcerting, menacing and vaguely redolent of the Biblical. (In all the scenes that follow in which Prior appears, this is the costume—he adds to and changes it slightly but it stays fundamentally corvine, ragged and eerie. It should be strange but not too strange.) (167)*

Prior is donning the visage of a prophet; however, he is not dressed like a prophet; rather he dons a “fringed” scarf that is “draped” to form a hood. In fact, when Prior later travels to heaven, the stage notes state that “he is dressed in prophet robes reminiscent of Charlton Heston’s Moses drag in *The Ten Commandments*” (252). Yet, at this point, Prior is not dressed as a prophet, nor is he wearing masculine street apparel that might be allegorized as prophet attire.<sup>6</sup> Prior is wearing a scarf, an arguably feminine accessory, to evoke a prophet motif. This association with drag is perhaps a more tangential analysis of drag within the play, as is this portion of the chapter concerning the deployment of drag in regard to AIDS. However, if it has indeed been established that Kushner uses instances of drag to reinforce illustrative or revelatory aspects of his work, then certain AIDS-related themes are definitely elucidated through an analysis of the deployment of drag. Yet once again, Prior begins by calling the whole enterprise of drag into question:

PRIOR: It was tacky.

BELIZE: It was divine,

He was one of the Great Glitter Queens. He couldn’t be buried like a *civilian*.

Trailing sequins and incense he came into the world, trailing sequins and incense he departed it. And good for him!

PRIOR: I thought the twenty professional Sicilian mourners were a bit much.

*(Little Pause)*

A great queen; big fucking deal. That ludicrous spectacle in there, just a parody of the funeral of someone who *really* counted. We don’t; faggots; we’re just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world’s waking up. And he’s *dead*.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, he is not wearing a hooded sweatshirt; nor is he wearing “priestly” attire.

*(Little Pause)*

BELIZE: Lately sugar you have gotten very strange. Lighten up already.

PRIOR: Oh I *apologize*, it was only a for-God's-sake funeral, a cause for fucking *celebration*, sorry if I can't join in with the rest of you death-junkies, gloating about your survival in the face of that . . . of his ugly little demise because unlike you I have nothing to gloat about. Never mind.

*(Angry little pause)*

BELIZE: And you *look* like Morticia Addams.

PRIOR: Like the Wrath of God.

BELIZE: Yes. (167-168)

Prior's concern seems in line with Judith Butler's argument about parodic redeployment. Thus, Prior sees nothing beyond the simple transference of power through subversion. However, not only does Belize confront Prior on this note, he actually maintains a consistent faith that drag, even in death, is a site of resistance. In this scene, drag is directly tied to the AIDS epidemic. Ironically, though Prior is adopting the accoutrements of drag, this is not a drag performance, at least not in accordance with the rubric laid out for the purpose of this analysis. Through this prophet performance, something the angels actually convince him he needs to do, Prior is subsuming the reality of AIDS—along with the associated miseries, personal and social—into the guise of a prophet, a warning of the destruction of mankind in general. At the end, when he rejects the role of prophet, it is not a rejection of the drag of the prophet; it is a rejection of the role of prophet, as well as the condemnation associated with AIDS. He takes off the prophet uniform with all of its personal inscriptions and social implications. Yet, the strength and insight required to address the disease is actually found in drag motifs.

## 2.6 Epidemic

The physical realities of the AIDS virus are inscribed on the body. Showing his first KS lesion to his boyfriend, Prior states that it is “the wine-dark kiss of the angel of death” (27). Of

course, there were and are physical manifestations of other plagues. The ghost of one of Prior's ancestors visits him and explains the circumstance of his death:

PRIOR I: The pestilence in my time was much worse than now. Whole villages of empty houses. You could look outdoors and see Death walking in the morning, dew dampening the ragged hem of his black robe. Plain as I see you now.

PRIOR: You died of the plague.

PRIOR I: The spotty monster. Like you, alone. (92)

The difference between these two generations concerns the type of transmission and the association of disease with one identity category: the homosexual. Thus, the markers of AIDS subsumed the person into an identity fraught with a multiplicity of social implications.

Discussing the response to photographs of people with AIDS, Douglas Crimp explains that

For those of us who have paid careful attention to media representations of AIDS, none of this would appear to matter, because what we see first and foremost in [Nicholas] Nixon's photographs is their reiteration of what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their "inevitable" deaths. (118)

Crimp proceeds to explain how the media coverage of the AIDS epidemic only served to reinforce any and all negative stereotype due to a desire to cover the most salacious aspects of the disease. Even PBS was not immune to such coverage. Reporting on the story of Fabian Bridges, Crimp recounts that an episode of *Frontline* that tells "the story of the degradation of a homeless black gay man with AIDS at the hands of virtually every institution he encountered" (121).

From a more historical context, the America still fighting the final non-battles of the Cold War viewed AIDS as a social disease. This concept is underscored by Daryl Ogden's

fascinating analysis connecting “the ideological similarities between the McCarthyite 1950s and the Reaganite 1980s” (243). Ogden formulates a two-pronged argument:

On one hand, reading Kushner’s play within the context of the history of medicine highlights the central importance of the immune-virological metaphor to the political, social, and sexual identities of Kushner’s characters and to the discourses of disease and identity generated by AIDS; on the other hand, reading *Angels in America* with an eye on the history of immunology and virology and their ideological relationship to American politics in the 1950s helps us to see the saturated Cold War consciousness of those two medical disciplines. (243)

Much like the clothing worn by men and women to reify expectations in relation to gender, the quality of AIDS as a very visible disease also reified certain cultural assumptions. For example, “When AIDS was first diagnosed, homosexual men were widely accused of excessive promiscuity, drug abuse, and unnatural sexual practices that overloaded their immune systems to the point of exhaustion” (Ogden, 246). Reinforcing this assertion, Amy Schindler recounts that “the specific nature of the judgment and stigma associated with AIDS is related to the prevalence of AIDS among people who are already viewed as threatening the ‘moral majority’s’ core social values concerning sexual behavior, morality, and religion” (57). Yet, this majority opinion was also inscribed within the gay community, making AIDS problematic on multiple fronts. Author Ron Caldwell recounts his experience with a friend:

The problem with sick people is that they lose their decorum. Some people, of course, never have it and it’s no surprise when they get sick. But other people who hadn’t been completely self-absorbed before, suddenly become so, and the whole world, or what is left of it for them, begins to revolve around them. Allen has lost, with his health, his feeling for pleasing other people. Somewhere he probably feels, with his health, his feeling for pleasing other people. Somewhere he probably feels that it would take too much energy, that perhaps he only has enough spirit to make himself up for the doctors. It hurts, really, to feel that all of the power in my friendship with him—even

through I'm the healthy one—rests with him, and that he isn't using it honorably. He is afraid and he's gathering himself together for this metaphorical battle he's fighting. Instead of fighting just the disease and continuing his love affair with the world, he's firing on everyone. Some of the volleys are hitting their mark. (301)

The person with AIDS, during the 1980s, carried the stigma of the outcast. They became pariah's to the society at large, a strain on those who cared for them, and a marker of the disposability of the gay community.

Similar to Prior, Roy is attempting to disguise the reality of his disease with another form of illness, one much more socially acceptable. Not surprisingly, Roy considers illness in general to be un-American. Confessing his concern to Ethel, Roy explains: "The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for the sick. Look at Reagan: He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred if he's a day, he takes a slug in the chest and two days later he's out west riding ponies in his PJ's. I mean who does that? That's America. It's just no country for the infirm" (192). Though *Millennium Approaches* posited AIDS as representative of a simultaneous negation, Roy's statements indicate that, while illness may not be feminized, health is associated with masculinity. Also, the "slug in the chest" and "riding ponies" references are evocative of the "wild west," certainly a masculine motif. Thus, in this one instance, Ogden's point about a social disease and the gay community is given remarkable validity. Roy's very awareness of this reality is also illustrated through a character engaged in a drag king performance.

The actor who plays Hannah also plays Henry, Roy's doctor. Consequently, where most characters are easily thwarted by Roy's verbal smokescreen, Henry, a character in drag, is able to confront Roy, who represents a form of weaponized-linguistic politics, directly. Henry, on the other hand, is one of the few characters throughout both plays to have a conversation that is both direct and (though admittedly threatening) civil with Roy:

HENRY: Roy, you have been seeing me since 1958. Apart from the facelifts I have treated you for everything from syphilis...



ROY: From a whore in Dallas

HENRY: From syphilis to venereal warts. In your rectum. Which you may have gotten from a whore in Dallas, but it wasn't from a female whore.

ROY: So say it.

HENRY: You have had sex with men, many many time, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS. (50-51)

This doctor in drag is able to confront Roy in a direct analysis of those things that Roy would normally obfuscate due to his rejection of the gay identity category—the social disease. James Fisher argues that “it is Roy’s self-loathing that is most unsettling and is most vividly shown in his scathing denial of his own homosexuality” (“Fructification” 21). As proof of this self-loathing, Fisher offers an extended quote that includes the following admonition: “Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying to cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows” (51). While Roy is certainly loathing, his self-loathing is only one direct manifestation.

Roy is a sexual being. The consequences of that sexuality are rejected both internally and externally. Fisher’s insistence that “Roy represents a kind of trickle-down morality in *Angels* – Kushner’s notions that if there exists corruption, and bad faith in the ruling class of a society, it will ultimately seep down to each individual within it” belies Fisher’s own political stance as opposed to Kushner’s (“Fructification” 22). While the dialogue is certainly combative, Henry is able to speak directly to Roy in a way that circumvents his protestations. In fact, like a person in drag, Henry is able to understand Roy’s coded language concerning the perceived weakness of homosexuality and the problem of public association with AIDS. Henry fully understands Roy’s speech about the realities of association: “This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I’m screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand” (52). Ultimately, Roy forces Henry to diagnose him with liver cancer to cover any

association with the gay community. Yet, Henry is still able to negotiate Roy's constructed veneer:

Well, whatever you have, Roy, it's very serious, and I haven't got a damn thing for you. The NIH in Bethesda has a new drug called AZT with a two-year waiting list that not even I can get you into. So get on the phone, Roy, and dial fifteen numbers, and tell the First Lady you need in on an experimental treatment for liver cancer, because you can call it any damn thing you want, Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news.  
(52)

Again, this scene plays out on multiple levels. Since this doctor is in drag, he is able to negotiate Roy's smokescreen. He is able to accept the persona adopted by Roy and still discuss the realities of the obfuscated circumstance. The doctor accepts Roy's adopted diagnosis of liver cancer and still offers him the correct treatment. Roy is seeking refuge in masculinity—not masculinity as oppose to feminine in the form of effeminized homosexuality; rather, the channels of political power that reinforce masculinity.

Throughout the play, both Prior and Roy appear, for all intents and purposes, to be different characters altogether. However, they both attempt to escape the social reality of their association with AIDS by donning another visage. Prior suffers by virtue of being abandoned by Louis. Roy suffers the loss of power, something he cannot maintain without at least the perception of virility. This visage is transparent; only one reality is clear. In fact, drag reveals the correct proscriptions in relation to both characters. Roy confronts his illness by ultimately listening to his doctor, a drag king. Prior, on the other hand, is depicted as being able to occupy spaces that offer the threshold of revelation. Though the route is circuitous, the impetus for both men's transformation is revealed, overtly and to a select audience, in relation to drag.

### 2.7 Departures

*Angels in America* is a critically important artifact of twentieth century American drama. Fisher explains that "critics, even those of a conservative bent likely to resist aspects of *Angels*, were uniform in their praise of the ambition and aesthetic qualities demonstrated. Most

rhapsodized with abandon about the plays themselves and Kushner's promise as a dramatist" (*Theater* 87). As productions began to be mounted across the country, there was, as expected, resistance in locations like Charlotte, North Carolina; the Catholic University of America; Wabash College in Indiana; and (surprise, surprise) Kilgore College in Texas (Fisher, *Theater* 89-90). The play does inspire controversy; at the outset, the play deals with themes of AIDS, homosexuality, and American politics. Interestingly, these themes remain largely intact in the film version directed by Mike Nichols—with the exception of drag.

Some elements of drag do remain in the film. Meryl Streep, for example, still portrays the rabbi in the opening scene; however, she does not play Henry, Roy's doctor.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the scene with Roy's doctor, played by a male actor, is significantly transformed. The character of Henry becomes marginalized due to his limited screen time. No longer is there any potential for subtext in this scene. Roy comes across as nothing more than a bully who brow-beats his doctor into a false diagnosis. The lines, the exact same lines, spoken by the doctor do not resonate as they might if the doctor were played by the same actor playing Hannah, or (more significantly) Ethel Rosenberg. In the film version, the doctor is a caricature, not a foil to the mighty Roy Cohn. The scene, consequently, does little more than advance the storyline, and reinforce a one dimensional and confrontational persona.

On a similar, but much more pronounced note, the character of Joe Pitt is significantly transformed by his disassociation with drag. Joe is ironically both stalwart and enigmatic throughout the course of the two plays. He is a closeted homosexual who ventures into a relationship with Louis only to physically assault him toward the end of *Perestroika*. By the end of the play, Fisher explains,

The final scene of *Perestroika*, is set at Central Park's Bethesda fountain four years later. It is 1990, and a newly created family made up of Prior, Hannah [Joe's mother], Belize, and a repentant Louis relax there enjoying the bracing cold weather. A stronger,

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<sup>7</sup> Even though Streep portrays the rabbi to remarkable effect, this transformation is more of a stunt intended to showcase Streep's acting prowess, which is astonishing, and the skills of the makeup artists associated with the production.

wiser Hannah asserts Kushner's view of the interconnectedness of all humanity regardless of race or sexual preference and the primacy of loyalty and commitment to others. (*Theater* 86)

Yet, Joe is noticeably absent from this newly formed community. In fact, if Savran's argument about a pluralist utopia holds true, the elimination of a prominent and conflicted gay character seems a little harsh on Kushner's part. Arguably, Joe's departure at the end of the film version of *Angels* is actually a result of the certain drag aspects being removed. Consequently, the character of Joe remains ambiguous to the point of unresolved.

The overall ambiguity in relation to this character—indeed, some ambiguity is intended for Joe—is directly correspondent to the audience. He is recognizably conflicted to virtually every member of the audience; however, the one scene where the character playing his wife also plays Martin Heller obliterates the conservative solution for Joe. Correspondingly, and more to the point, Joe's homosexuality disqualifies him from access to patriarchal authority. To the aware audience, this paradigm helps mitigate some of the character's ambiguity. The potential for the self-realization of a closeted gay man is offered as all the clues are contextualized in scenes like the Martin Heller drag king performance. In fact, in this moment of realization, blame is distributed to the social construct of Reagan-era conservatism. The reason for Joe's internal conflict becomes shared with the social structures that prohibited a gay public sexual identity. All this information is communicated through the rupture created by drag. Consequently, this same information is lost in the film.

Another small alteration, Roy's doctor being played by a male actor, proves to be a significant modification. The figure of Hannah, or more importantly Ethel Rosenberg, appearing as the doctor introduces an unexpected depth to Roy's condition. Roy is consequently constructed as confronting the demons of his past, demons of his own creation that establish his association with the gay community, as opposed to simply battling AIDS. Without this complex layer of conflict, the message that comes across can be interpreted as Roy being humanized exclusively by virtue of his having AIDS, which excludes a thematic reconciliation

with the gay community. Without these drag references, when, in Act 5 scene 4 of *Perestroika*, Roy's ghost (for lack of a better word) appears to Joe and states, "You'll find, my friend, that what you love will take you places you never dreamed you'd go" (259), any potential hopefulness in the tone is altered into absolute condemnation; Joe's life will be as embittered and hard-fought as Roy's. This troubling alteration might explain why Act 5 scene 4 was cut from the film entirely. In its place, a scene involving Joe and Hannah is added, during which she makes a faltering attempt to comfort him. Again, not only does this scene seem to mitigate her transformation in the epilogue, but it also reinforces the idea that Joe's potential for happiness best resides in the company of women, of traditionally constructed women no less. However, Joe's best chance for happiness is in the company of men.

## CHAPTER 3

### FIELD WORK

#### 3.1 Once More unto the Breech

My interest in drag begins and ends with the lived experience. This final chapter will explain some insight into the specific formulation of my working theory of the drag paradox, especially in relation to the inspiration and insight I gained from Judith Halberstam's work. From that starting point, I will briefly discuss my acculturation and how it informed my initial experience watching a drag performance. Having established a personal and theoretical framework, this chapter will conclude with fieldwork projects involving the 1851 Arlington, a gay bar only a few miles from UT Arlington with a weekend drag show. Those Saturday nights I stayed up well past my bedtime in a state of sobriety and observed how the occurrences of one tiny bar confront, weekend after weekend, many of the paradigms on which society so comfortably rests. The final section will theorize on the broader implications of drag by enacting an extended theoretic metaphor.

#### 3.2 The Origin of the Thesis

Two words proved the impetus for the paper that inspired this thesis. The words are "permeable" and "simultaneous," both of which I discovered while reading Judith Halberstam's inspirational *Female Masculinity*. For example, "permeable" appears twice in Halberstam's theorization of transsexuals as border crossers: "The terminology "border war" is both apt and problematic...On the one hand, the idea of a border war sets up some notion of territories to be defended, ground to be held or lost, permeability to be defended against. On the other hand, a border war suggests that the border war is at best slippery and permeable" (*Female Masculinity* 163). Engaging with the work of Jay Prosser, Halberstam constructs nodes of permeability as constitutive of queer and transsexual peoples, where the boundaries of each individual's sexual

identity combine with their chromosomal sex in order to challenge patriarchal paradigms. Later, when addressing identity and performance within the drag king venues, Halberstam explains that the “blending of onstage drag and offstage masculinity suggests that the line between male drag and female masculinity in a drag king club is permeable and permanently blurred” (*Female Masculinity* 244). Essentially, the creation of drag king personas is a natural progression of evolving identities within the communities. The permeability takes place within the nurturing environment of masculine performance. Yet another instance involves sexual identity and drag performance: “Layering really describes the theatricality of both drag queen and drag kings acts and reveals their multiple ambiguities because in both cases the role playing reveals the permeable boundaries between acting and being; the drag actors are all performing their own queerness and simultaneously exposing the artificiality of conventional gender roles” (*Female Masculinity* 261). Halberstam argues in this instance that permeability occurs when the performer’s sexual identity is allowed to be seen through certain aspects of the performance; both realities appear simultaneously.

This thesis begins at a point where Halberstam’s work leaves off, or takes a path she chooses not to follow. Indeed, Halberstam engages in acts of definition and advocacy. For instance, she is unapologetic in her advocacy for a stable, reserved, and universal (perhaps even stoic) masculinity. She states that “within the theater of mainstream gender roles, femininity is often presented as simply costume whereas masculinity manifests as realism or as body,” that “the theatrical performance of masculinity demands a paring down of affect and a reduction in the use of props” (*Female Masculinity* 258). In other words, ideal masculinity is equivalent to reserved behavior and minimal dress. *Female Masculinity* is also a manifesto; Halberstam advocates for the expansion of a burgeoning drag king culture, which she depicts as decidedly inferior to the drag queen culture. Yet with all the talk of permeabilities—of the boundaries between personal and public performance as well as the male and female located on the queer and transsexual body—and simultaneities, Halberstam does not reduce her argument to a centrality. I propose that drag itself is the centrality. Multiple permeabilities—

male and female, masculinity and femininity, parody and agency—appear simultaneously. Thus, drag, a paradox itself, becomes a site where multiple paradoxes appear. It is the resulting awareness that has the true power.

### 3.3 Confessions of an Ugly Duckling

I always believed that movies spoke to me, that they addressed the part of my person I knew I needed to keep secret. The first time I watched *South Pacific*—on a ten inch television on PBS on a summer evening in a small un-air-conditioned house—I was about ten years old. I was beginning to lose friendships—male friendships—through awkward questions and gestures that, though perfectly natural to me, were affronts to their acculturation into the American patriarchy. Toward the beginning of the film, I remember the screen being washed over with a red tint while Bloody Mary (Juanita Hall) sang “Bali Ha’i” to Lieutenant Joe Cable (John Kerr):

Most people live on a lonely island  
Lost in the middle of a foggy sea  
Most people long for another island  
One where they know they would like to be.  
Bali Ha’i may call you, any night, any day  
In your heart, you’ll hear it call you,  
Come away, come away... (*South Pacific*)

Looking back, this moment of realization, the realization of desire (though not quite one of sexual desire) represents the first paradox with which I was confronted. Just like Joe Cable, I longed for the other island; but I also, paradoxically, wanted to know Joe Cable, to have him present in the Fort Worth, Texas of the early 1980s I knew so well. Only a few years later, as my sexuality formed, my sexual identity as a gay man somehow stayed in that imaginary place where longing (something I equate with happiness) and desire (associated with sexual pursuits), though seemingly synonymous, could not be publically manifested simultaneously—homosexuality always being the other paradoxical half that cannot exist with anything valued by the society at large. Even today, it is a paradox to be a gay-Catholic, a gay-athlete, or a



successful gay-American. But on a personal level, paradoxes can be quite functional. As I entered high school, I discovered that it is very possible to be a sexually active gay man and a conservative, athletic, and relatively popular all at the same time. While being secretly gay and publically heterosexual (for lack of a better word) should be as simple as walking and chewing gum at the same time, the consequences to the individual are interesting, and will be examined.

One result of these consequences involves the inextricable role of media in American history. Discussing the apparent lack of gay people on film during the early and mid-twentieth century, Vito Russo explains: "Technically, homosexuals were just as invisible onscreen as they were in real life. They continued to emerge, however, as subtextual phantoms representing the very fear of homosexuality. Serving as alien creatures who were nonetheless firmly established as part of the culture in every walk of life, they became the darker side of the American dream" (63). Like so many others, I was villain (because it was better than being the victim). As a white man, I found refuge, success, and advocacy by accessing the various social structures that support the patriarchy. As a gay man, I found personal validation and empowerment (a sadly appropriate word from the early 1990s) through the expression of sexuality in relatively clandestine venues and scenes. Communicated through cinema and television, my beliefs in my performance were reinforced through what was communicated to me; while I celebrated the hidden hopes in Hollywood musicals, I knew that, as a gay man, I could publicly be nothing more than an extra in the chorus. I also understood that any road to success meant that I must be predatory.<sup>8</sup> But during these years in the early 1990s, I also discovered referential material that proved revelatory.

My first experience at a drag show officially occurred at a movie theater, at a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the now demolished Forum 303 Movie Theatre. Russo finds this film strangely affirming because "it becomes the living horror of making deviant

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<sup>8</sup> There is now, thankfully, a more open willingness to address gay and lesbian (and transgender) topics on the screen. But these new access points that really took hold throughout the 1990s were also subject to public interaction and pressure. Consequently, for every film as revelatory as *Brokeback Mountain*, there is the egregiously stereotype-reinforcing *Will and Grace*.

sexuality visible and tangible in the only kind of setting in which it could possibly work, an old dark house populated by lesbians, transvestites, acid freaks and goons who sing rock and roll as they seduce the innocent youth of America” (53). Indeed, this very subversion seemed to be happening because people were performing a stage version of the film right in front of the screen. However, the release, though sensual, was arguably not sexual in nature. Like the film, gender itself was being deconstructed for an audience of willing participants. This interactive performance was the expression of the clandestine half of my living paradox, the negative iteration of my participation in and performance of the patriarchy. Indeed, this live performance of *Rocky Horror* was a drag show, but a regulated and structured formulation of one, which might explain why these shows are still running thirty three years after the film’s release.

My personal affection for this film caused a certain amount of shock and embarrassment when a member of the English faculty at UT Arlington explained that she disliked all the references to “sluts” and “whores” throughout the film. I was astonished that I had not picked up on this considering how many times I have viewed the film as research for this thesis. However, I emailed her a question for clarification after I realized that I have not actually seen a live performance in almost twenty years. Her response proved to support one of my theories about drag. The references to “sluts” and “whores” were from the audience responses during the film and live performance. While a certain amount of misogyny certainly continues to thrive in just about every civilization, there are actually very few nationwide public outlets where shouting “slut” and “whore” are acceptable; however, in the space where social norms collapse, such expression is possible.

#### 3.4 Is that a ten gallon hat? Or, are you just enjoying the Show?<sup>9</sup>

I must make three confessions before continuing this analysis: 1) I have been to many drag queen shows; 2) I have never been to a drag king show; and 3) I have never participated

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<sup>9</sup> A line from a song performed by the Madeline Kahn—in a performance that can best be described as drag—in Mel Brooks’ 1974 film, *Blazing Saddles*.

in a public performance of drag.<sup>10</sup> Before I began a process of analysis at an actual drag show, I consulted many sources, three of which greatly inform the methodology for my research and analysis: Judith Halberstam's study of the Hershe Bar in 1995-1996; k. bradford's anecdotal essay about her fixation on and performance of the 1970s version of John Travolta; and Keith McNeal's disconcerting psychoanalytic study of one drag bar in Atlanta, Georgia.

### 3.4.1 *Some Theory*

Halberstam's analysis is designed to reinforce her advocacy for a hierarchal understanding of gender expression that is grounded in a reserved masculine norm. To this end, she categorizes a category she terms as "femme pretenders" as being "more like drag queen shows, not simply because the disjuncture between biological sex and gender is the basis for the gender act but because irony and camp flavor the performance" (*Female Masculinity* 248). Further, in discussing a category termed "denaturalized masculinity," Halberstam states that it "plays on and within both butch realness and male mimicry but differs from butch realness in its sense of theatricality and hyperbole and remains distinct from male mimicry by accessing some alternate mode of the masculine" (*Female Masculinity* 253). Halberstam argues that "denaturalized masculinity in many ways produces the most successful drag king performances" (*Female Masculinity* 253-255); but according to whom? Halberstam does not offer a measure of success beyond her agenda; however she does pose a rubric for her interpretation:

The drag king demonstrates through her own masculinity and misogyny. The drag king demonstrates through her own masculinity and through the theatricalization of masculinity that there are not essential links between misogyny and masculinity; rather, masculinity seems bound to misogyny structurally in the context of patriarchy and male privilege, the rewards of misogyny are few and far between, and so she is very likely to perform her masculinity without misogyny. But sexism makes for good theater, and the

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<sup>10</sup> In regard to confession No. 3, I am not counting the Laura Ingles Wilder Halloween costume circa 1991.

exposure of sexism by the drag king as the basis of masculine realness serves to unmask the ideological stakes of male nonperformativity. (*Female Masculinity* 255)

Several questions arise in light of Halberstam's analysis in regard to my field research: How do I measure success in a review, a series of performances? How do I approach the different types of performances (especially since there seems to be an evolutionary process involved)? Is the most successful drag queen the one who best impersonates femininity? And whose version of femininity?

In regard to femininity, k. bradford seems to agree with Halberstam: "As opposed to drag queens, however, drag kings have historically found it a challenge to camp up the performance of masculinity"; however she does proceed to offer some fundamental caveats to Halberstam's formulations:

Generally, there is less paraphernalia, less garb, less goo to put on and quite a lot to cover up in female-to-male drag performance. Kinging in a business suit seems inherently serious, refined, controlled and (on the surface) difficult to camp up. But there are ways to parody the stiffness, seriousness and constrained cockiness of white upper-class masculinities, thus creating vital, transgressive critiques of the ways wealth and privilege are performed, especially by white men. (18)

The beauty of bradford's essay is her lack of decorum because, much like what happens at a drag show, s/he peels back any polite façade of gender. S/he seems to be in character throughout the essay, which is astonishingly liberating. She explains how John Travolta is a central figure (including the derivation of the initial "T") in the creation of her drag persona, Johnny T. S/he explains: "In his early years, Travolta was a walking display of testosterone (or, what is constructed out of testosterone). He played a range of masculinities, and for all of his hetero machismo, there was always a mix, a queering of the masculinity he represented" (bradford 17). Indeed, she continues to argue that "in fact, he seems more butch than macho—and I mean butch in the lesbian derivation of the term—because underneath the tough veneer you could almost see a woman (well okay, a fag)" (bradford 17). For bradford, this type of

masculine camp qualifies as the reclamation of that space of agency previously occupied by men (19). The performance by a drag king of this blatant artifice of masculinity, or camp, is “the act of revealing gender for what it is—something made up, produced—as we go about making our own mixes and variations of gender” (bradford 18-19). Additional questions arise from bradford’s analysis: To what extent are local drag performers engaged in deliberate gender subversion? Does the audience play a key role in this subversion?

Keith E. McNeal believes that the audience plays a central role in the performance of drag. However, his approach to drag seems to be limited by the scope of his central argument:

I argue here that the genesis and maintenance of drag in U.S. gay male subculture is a ritually sanctioned performance genre in which gay men can safely gather to watch, explore, and participate in symbolic transformation of gender ambivalence in the psychocultural arena of the show. Here they observe and indeed laugh together at what society tells them they are. In the drag show, it seems that we encounter the silent, intersubjective agreement on the part of the audience members in which the drag queens unabashedly act out and perform on stage many of the conflicts, attributions, and ambivalences of being gay and male in the United States. (346)

McNeil argues, as do I, that the ultimate intent of the performer is not as important as the result of the audience interaction; however, while McNeil believes these non-deliberate consequences are the result of dark psychological problems, I argue that drag is a non-negotiable site of liberation. Of course, it is quite possible, even probable, that McNeil’s formulation is correct. Yet, Halberstam’s formulations can be just as valid as are bradford’s. Based on these multiple formulations, I argue that analyzing drag as a symptom of any one marginalized community fails to meet the universalizing nature of the construct. Therefore, when I approached my study of drag I sought to find new and unexpected aspects of the performance (and interaction) that I had not noticed before. To this end, I explained my project to several friends and colleagues who I brought along to the performances. These associates proved invaluable sources to both help observe and debate ideas. I chose to operate clandestinely in order to be as impartial as

possible, though I suspect that my note taking was sometimes detected. While I feel that my thesis was validated by my findings, I am excited to report, after almost two decades since I first watched some amateur actors performing *The Rocky Horror* in front of a movie theatre, odd interactions and new permutations I had never really noticed before.

### 3.4.2 1851 Arlington

The 1851 Arlington sits on Division St. in Arlington, Texas at the outer edge of what can best be described as “skid row” complete with multiple two-story motels, used car dealerships, train tracks, gas stations, and bars. The building is nondescript with only a sign labeled “1851 Arlington” indicating its presence. This sign is a relatively recent addition to the property. The fact that this bar caters to GLBT clientele, as it has for a long time, is not apparent. Though the location of the bar can easily be found in the many publications and websites available to the gay community, it is still obvious that once upon a time a person had to know the bar was there to know it was there.

Walking in the door, the one and only bar is positioned to the right with the dance floor/performance stage directly in front. A visual inspection reveals that the 1851 Arlington’s interior is a rectangle with the widest part, the area with the cocktail tables (the lounge), approximately 25 feet wide. The lounge takes up about one third of the length of the one room interior of the bar with the dance floor/stage (stage) and the pool table area (the billiard room) being roughly equally divided. The billiard room, to the left and containing only one pool table, is considerably narrower than the stage and lounge as space has been modified to accommodate two restrooms and a changing room/closet for the performers.

In the lounge, a person of average height can reach up and touch the ceiling. The billiard room, being a step down from the rest of the establishment would require a tall person to reach high enough. There is a vault above the dance floor where the mirror balls, color lights, and speakers are located.<sup>11</sup> A coin operated cigarette machine is located in the billiard room

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<sup>11</sup> There is also non-religious stained glass window abutted against a wall that appears connected to some former function of the building. I am forever transfixed by this window.

along with the coin operated pool table. The table itself is often covered with cigarette ashes (the space under the bumpers is always covered with these ashes)—there is apparently a brush available to those patrons who wish to clean the table themselves. Cigarette smoke is an issue. I never went home after an evening at the 1851 without stinging eyes and clothes that had to be washed immediately. The lounge and billiard room are floored with large white ceramic tiles that are cracked in the heavily trafficked areas. The stage floor is old and pitted parquet. The pits are actually reminiscent of the deck of the Pequod in that the pits are the worn-in auger holes of stiletto heels. Though indicative of age and repetition, when I witnessed a 250 pound man spinning in place, I realized those pits could have been formed in an instant. The bar itself is fully up to date, fully staffed, and fully stocked. The 1851 Arlington is a dive by all accounts. But it is a place where I belong because the 1851 is a gay bar and therefore a place of refuge for those of us that seek shelter in the suburban wilderness—and on the weekends, when the drag queens take the stage, it becomes something even grander.

### *3.4.3 Performers*

The performers at the 1851 are booked in advance and listed on the website. As performers, they tend to fall into three categories: 1) developing; 2) established; and 3) slightly past their prime. The developing performers are experimenting with makeup, song, and costume. For example, the attempts of the youngest performers (whose stage name I respectfully omit) to channel outright femininity often fail to achieve the desired result. Cosmetics are applied in the fashion of a department store makeover as opposed to exaggerated designs of the more experienced performers. The result serves only to highlight his strong jaw line. The outfits of this young performer, though they continue to evolve week after week, are not well suited to reflect a visage of femininity. From shoulderless gowns to bikinis, it is astonishing how the softest of young men by virtue of an angular skeletal structure and genetically chiseled musculature transform him into the most mannish of women. He is becoming a drag queen, though as opposed to being a paradox of masculine and feminine simultaneity, he is clearly a man in a gown and makeup. But even though he occasionally

forgets the words to his songs, the audience cheers for this burgeoning talent. In fact, many of the other performers come to the side of the stage offering dollar tips to compensate for the comparative lack of fiduciary support from the audience.

The performers in their prime have established a makeup template to transform their faces. They have learned to use lip liners to extend and exaggerate the upper lip, to make the eyes brighter with extravagant eye makeup that is reinforced by artificial ashes, as well as contouring artificial cheekbones from varying shades of blush. Their waist lines are elevated through girdles or other corset-like apparatuses. Broad shoulders are mitigated with capes, jackets, or some other drapery. The performers who are past their prime are not necessarily any older than any of the other performers; however, their mode of performance seems outdated. In other words, their level of performance is not in sync with the realities of their physicality. The costumes do not fit as well, which is interesting since most costumes appear to be custom made and certainly tailored. In one instance, I witnessed an attempted fan kick resulting in an unplanned pivot and stumble that could have cause serious injury. These performers do, however, have a strong following and are well tipped for their efforts, and, I suspect, for the memory of their former glory.

I see those performers in their prime, those that most exactly represent the drag paradox, performing in front of enthusiastic crowds waving dollar after dollar along the periphery of the stage. These are the ones people have come to see. They are credentialed by virtue of the quantity and recentness of the various drag pageants they have won. One method for spotting these select drag queens is the ease with which they take the live microphone and interact with the audience. Let me explain this point. There is no backstage. As I will explain in the next section, the performers and the audience constantly interact. Between performances, the drag performers converse with much of the audience in a one room bar. There is no material difference in speaking to a crowd in which nearly everyone is known and speaking to them through the microphone. The difference is that the microphone becomes a space of continued performance, a live interaction following a prepped and rehearsed song and dance



number. The drag performers who can successfully engage in this spontaneous performance—and not every performer is able to though many certainly try—have achieved agency through their performance, by accessing the drag paradox.

#### *3.4.4 The Performance*

At about 9:00pm, the drag performers begin to arrive at the 1851. They are in varying stages of performance dress and carry an array of luggage, hat boxes, and wigs. The bar is not especially crowded, but this is just about the last point in the evening for getting one of the cocktail tables near the stage (of course, only three or four table can fit there in the first place). At 10:00, the music transfers from the juke box to the DJ booth located behind the stage. The bar begins to fill in as cars are directed to park across the street. At 10:20, lighted stars appear along the back top of the stage. At 10:30, the lights come up over the stage and the overture to *Gypsy* is heard. Actually, this begins the first of two shows that involve from three to five drag queens who perform two sets per show. Ultimately, each performer will perform four sets. Observing these performances in a state of observation and relative sobriety, I am astonished at how much effort, time, and money goes into one Saturday evening for each performer.

The first order of business for the emcee is always to identify those in the audience who are gay men, lesbians, straight men, and straight women. Unlike McNeil, I view this ritual as a way to generate broader participation with the audience.<sup>12</sup> By dividing the audience into categories, smaller groups are given access to the performance. Typically, the audience is quite diverse. Unlike some drag shows, however, gay men are a distinct minority. On Saturday nights, the 1851 would be better classed as a lesbian establishment. In addition, there are typically a large number of straight female groups of friends out for an evening of drinking that does not involve the foolishness sometimes present at bars frequented by heterosexual men.

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<sup>12</sup> McNeil argues that some categories of people are singled out to harass and humiliate throughout the performance: “Thus in the theatrical drag arena there is a heavy emphasis not only on determining sexual orientation, but also upon the explicit surveillance of sexual orientation under an inverted moral order of sexuality” (357).

There are also straight men, though they are attached to wives, serious girlfriends, or part of groups. No unattached straight men are typically present.<sup>13</sup>

Another event that happens about 10:00pm, before the show, involves the transformation of the room itself. About this time, a curtain is drawn that partially occludes the billiard room. Thus, the billiard room becomes the back of the stage and the lounge becomes the front. People still play pool, purchase cigarettes, use the restrooms, and take notes for their thesis while the performers wait to emerge from behind the curtains and give their performances. From this vantage point, these audience members are made aware of the last minute preparations, frustrations, and nervousness of each performer. The drag queens are not “on stage” until they are literally on stage. In this space, they are out of character and give warm smiles as this audience encourages them onward. Ironically, the performers play to the fierce and gyrating crowd in the lounge as they perform. One of the most interesting thing that takes place occurs in the half hour between shows. One of two songs is played that is known to the “regulars.” During this song, the stage is filled as these “regulars” perform a line dance to a non-country and western song. The stage (as is it better called a stage than a dance floor at this point) is occupied by men and women of all ethnicities and sexual orientations.

#### 3.4.5 *Odd Permutations*

The first things to collapse are temporalities. The drag performers pick and choose songs as recent as the latest top forty or recreate older performances from Janet Jackson or Madonna. The audience of the 1851 is even witness to interpretations of songs from *Cabaret* and more traditional musical fare. One performer combined the Bob Mackie spiked hair inspiration from 1980s Cher with one of her legendary 1970s hits, “Half Breed” (the blasphemy of this combination going unnoticed by the audience). At the opening of the show, Monique Foster, an African-American performer and Saturday night emcee, not only calls lesbians “carpet munchers” (a term that is cheered by the highlighted group), but bisexuals are also

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<sup>13</sup> Right or wrong, when an unattached man at drag show claims to be heterosexual, we never believe him.

called “confused bitches.” The emcee almost immediately begins the show, her performance going last in each set. After each of her performances there is a break, no doubt to allow time for the other performers to prepare their next numbers, while the emcee converses with the crowd. People celebrating their birthdays are called to the stage when Monique sings a very short birthday song: “[sung] This is your birthday song, it isn’t very long. [spoken] Now get the fuck off my stage.” When there are no birthdays to celebrate, the emcee spends some time revving up the crowd, to the point of threatening the audience if they do not cheer and applaud loud enough.

On one particular (and hilarious) occasion, an audience member’s shoes were discovered abandoned near the stage. Monique Foster took the shoes and auctioned them to the crown (the winning bid was five dollars). The shoes were purchased by a man who was at the 1851 with his girlfriend. When he threatened to withhold payment of the five dollars, Monique Foster made an unusual threat: “I’m going to hit you with my cock.” Essentially, a man in a dress is threatening to assault another man with his genitalia; what’s more masculine than that? In this space of gender distortion, issues of race and ethnicity are also challenged. Monique Foster is never opposed to revealing that she possesses male genitalia. In fact, in acknowledging the elaborate costuming required to transform into a woman, the emcee hyperbolically states that the evening’s farts come out when the constraining undergarments are removed. Engaging in a stereotype about genital length and race, the emcee proclaimed to a white, straight audience member that his dick was tucked so far back that it “touched [his] ass hole.” Race is often broached through other references to penis size, as well as chocolate. The fact that Monique Foster is a chromosomal male is never in doubt. Another instance of racial interaction involves the aforementioned performance of the song “Half-Breed,” one of the most politically incorrect songs ever recorded. However, it is perfectly acceptable to in a drag performance of Cher. Frequently, the emcee approaches women in the audience and asks them what they think about his “fake titties.” These women often touch the emcee’s artificial breasts approvingly. Occasionally, a well endowed woman will offer hers for comparison. In

one instance, the emcee leaned and kissed the woman's breast leaving a large lipstick imprint on one of them. And on several occasions, the emcee placed the microphone between her legs and proceeded to mince around the stage with this artificial penis.

Identity utterly collapses into gender at the site of drag. Halberstam advocates that denaturalized masculinity is the preferable mode of the drag king because this performance resists misogyny. However, misogyny is fully present in the drag performance at the 1851 Arlington. A friend and colleague who accompanied me out one Saturday evening asked if I had noticed the odd interaction taking place along the edge of the stage. While the gay and straight men held their dollar tip offerings out at a gentleman's arm's length for the performer to take at her leisure, the self identified lesbians in the crowd stuffed their dollars into the drag performer's garments (and undergarments) in a scene reminiscent of the misogyny present at exotic dance clubs. Some women even presented the dollars tucked into their unzipped blue jeans having the drag performers bend down and remove them with their teeth. But this is hardly a bacchanalian festival; the women have no designs of sexual conquest on the drag queens. They are simply expressing the agency of dominance allowed in the rupture caused by the drag paradox. This also explains the most astonishing thing I witnessed during my research. During a song performed by one of the premier performers, a young man who had previously identified himself as heterosexual, though he was with a group and not one specific female, walked onto the stage after giving a tip and proceeded to perform a leg humping dance with the drag queen, who smiled politely at first. But when the young man persisted, the drag queen took control of the situation. The young man, like many of us in the audience, suddenly became aware of the fact that a good sized man who can properly balance on five inch heels that elevate him well above six feet is actually a formidable physical presence. The drag queen simply pressed the palm of one hand against the young man and pushed him off the stage. I realize that this leg humping dance was not a genuine sexual advance; rather, he was caught in the distortion of constructed genders, merely behaving in a youthful and inappropriate manner.

In fact, wandering onto the stage seems to be the only boundary that is fiercely maintained by the establishment and the drag performers themselves.

### 3.5 Celestial Bodies

Gender is a Ptolemaic construct, an interpretation of perceived events that are socially, politically, and religiously regarded as essential; such notions are filtered down to and consequently reified by personal beliefs and perspectives. Stephen Hawking explains that “Ptolemy’s [geocentric] model provided a reasonably accurate system for predicting the positions of heavenly bodies in the sky” (3). However, Ptolemy’s system appeared to be flawed at the outset:

But in order to predict these positions correctly, Ptolemy had to make an assumption that the moon followed a path that sometimes brought it twice as close to the earth as at other times. And that meant that the moon ought sometimes to appear twice as big as at other times! Ptolemy recognized this flaw, but nevertheless his model was generally, although not universally, accepted. It was adopted by the Christian church at the picture of the universe that was in accordance with scripture... (3)

The adoption of this theory, though certainly not accepted by everyone, conforms to certain preconceived notions. Indeed, Ptolemy was not working in a vacuum; rather, he was elaborating and working with earlier models, like Aristotle’s. In fact, according to a 2005 article in the *New York Times*, “One adult American in five thinks the Sun revolves around the earth” (Dean). As this number represents only one survey (the methodology of sampling not fully disclosed), I suspect the figure may be somewhat elevated. But the fact remains that some people do hold fast to a geocentric concept so disproven as to be discussed in books and films targeting pre-school children. It seems that entrenched ideologies are difficult to shake.

This thesis begins by theorizing that gender is not what it is made out to be. While it may be true that the human race is divided by reproductive difference, the mappings and trappings of human civilization rely on an anachronistic—even false—social elaboration of this biologic circumstance. This elaboration, this construct, is challenged by drag—the

simultaneous presentation of the accoutrements of socially constructed gender to an “aware” audience. Unlike geocentrism, efforts to challenge the concept of gender have yet to take a foothold.<sup>14</sup> To illustrate how drag challenges gender normativity, this Chapter will conclude with the metaphoric application of some of Hawking’s theories concerning astrophysics.

Gender and gravity are similar constructs, at least metaphorically speaking. Like gravity, gender, or the forces that correspond to gender, governs the properties and interactions of those social realities, models, and regulations that determine how humans should behave in accordance with terms of the most fundamental and essential of divides: male and female. This metaphor of gravity is not merely related to the proverbial apple falling from a tree; rather, the metaphor is best applied to the gravity that governs celestial bodies (though the two definitions admittedly refer to the same thing). Working within the metaphor, the stars then represent those various religeopolitical paradigms that are largely inviolate. While stars vary in size, shape, strength, and color, they are essentially giant balls of burning gas. Similarly, gender, as a social construct, generally operates under the same principle, though the manifestations of the divide vary (at times significantly) from region to region and culture to culture. So strong are the gravitational forces of these religeopolitical stars that most every other celestial body, from the planetary masses of family structures to the cosmic dust of linguistic convention, is affected by these gravitational forces.

When there is the gravitational disorder, Hawking explains what happens:

The gravitational field of the star changes the paths of light rays in space-time from what they would have been had the star not been present. The light cones, which indicate the paths followed in space and time by flashes of light emitted from their tips, are bent slightly inward near the surface of the star...As the star contracts, the

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<sup>14</sup> This statement is in no way intended to discount the efforts of effects of feminist theory, and to a lesser extent, queer theory in confronting oppressive social paradigms. In fact, the main critique of Halberstam in Chapter 1 deals with her concept of a masculine reserved norm. This intent in this instance is to view drag as a challenge to gendered paradigms conceptually.

gravitational field at its surface gets stringer and the light cones get bend inward more.

This makes it more difficult for light from the star to escape. (86)

Likewise, drag is a disruption in the gendered order. This thesis has argued that drag is a point of simultaneity of both benders on one figure. Therefore, it too is a collapse. Drag results from the destabilization of gender, which accounts for why it appeared in the two World Wars—cataclysms resulting from combination of the bellicose machismo and advancement in the science of slaughter. Because two separate things converge on one body, drag can also be considered as a collapse of gravitational forces. Hawking elaborates:

Eventually, when the star has shrink to a certain critical radium, the gravitational field at the surface becomes so strong that light can no longer escape...Thus if light cannot escape, neither can anything else; everything is dragged back by the gravitational field. So one has a set of events, a region of space-time, from which it is not possible to escape to reach a distant observer. This region is what we now call a black hole. Its boundary is called the event horizon and it coincides with the paths of light rays that just fail to escape from the back hole. (87)

Hawking goes on to explain that the events surrounding a black hole are affected proportionally to the distance the observer is from the event horizon (87-89). This metaphoric comparison is reinforced by the discussion of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* made throughout this thesis because two different types of drag are at play within this one reference. Viewing the film in an isolated environment allows for a detached and comprehensive analysis of the construction of drag. The audience, the person viewing the film, views a difference of mediums and decades. Conversely, viewing the film in a theater where the performance is also acted out live produces remarkably different results, especially in terms of the audience. In the theater, the audience becomes much more interactive. This live performance allows for the release of inhibitions as misogynist and homophobic insults are given voice. The proximity to the event horizon of drag demonstrates the distortion resulting from the collapse of the social hold. Hawking's speculates as to why this happens: "According to general relativity, there must be a singularity of infinite

density and space-time curvature within a black hole. This is rather like the big bang at the beginning of time, only that it would be the end of time for the collapsing body...At this singularity the laws of science and our ability to predict the future would break down” (88).

Singularity, the word itself, is intriguing because it is not two, not a duality. Continuing this savaging of Hawking's theories, the drag queen is the singularity, and the boundaries of the performer's body is the event horizon. The identity of the performer, the least important aspect of this whole process, has gone through the event horizon, “the boundary of the region of space-time from which it is not possible to escape,” and disappeared completely (Hawking 89). Of course, this only occurs during the performance, the performance where men are shapely and supple, and women threaten the audience with chromosomally male genitalia. Drag occurs in the naked now, where gay men grope at artificial breasts, where lesbians demand that dollar bills be removed from their zippers with teeth, and where heterosexual men engage in public “leg humping” performances only to be rebuffed from the center of the action.

One significant issue deals with the Ptolemy problem. The central argument is that drag is an artificial construct. However, there are by and large two sexes, a perfectly natural reality. Like the Big Bang, the constructs of gender exploded from this one event, this one rupture, and the human race has been structured accordingly for some time. The perception of gender is one of truth, and no paradigm has yet surfaced to replace the notion of an essential difference between the chromosomal male and chromosomal female. When the stars of the gendered heavens begin to break down, as is inevitable for them to do so, singularities are born—singularities which are the stuff of the Big Bang, of the beginning and the ending of the universe. The ability to see this singularity means being in such proximity that a one cannot escape the effects. Yet proximity is key to the metaphor because some people are at such a distance from the event horizon that the effect of drag is imperceptible. Other people are aware of the singularity and can view it at a safe distance with analytical detachment. Still others are in much closer proximity. Their perception of the heavens is skewed and distorted; they feel



their bodies altered and transformed as they hurtle toward the singularity, which is comprised of two distinct and simultaneous constructs—a paradox.

Drag in and of itself is seldom addressed as something other than a tangential aspect of homosexuality or subversive resistance, as exemplified by Judith Butler. Part of this limited approach may be due to the sheer number of manifestations of drag. Halberstam, though offering significant insight into how drag operates within social structures, focuses on a system of classification in which she assigns values to these different manifestations. This thesis argues that all drag emanates from one thing, from one rupture caused by the simultaneous presentation of both genders. For those groups marginalized due to some violation of gender proscriptions, like the GLBT community, association with this rupture is liberating because the patriarchal order is obliterated. Further, the GLBT community, as well as those others who attend drag performances, become a critical part of the rubric of drag—gender simultaneity and audience awareness. Consequently, participation also affects the performance; thus, the manifestations are created as drag is enacted from culture to culture. As with the collapse of gender onto this one site, those same cultural manifestations also conflate on the site of drag. This site of conflation is exploited by Kushner, who uses themes of drag to both establish and encode additional contextual information into *Angels in America*. The audience, the “aware” audience, is allowed access to certain themes that Kushner has encoded. Further, understanding how this rubric works allows, for the broader audience, resolution of some of the ambiguities listed by Savran. Beyond this analysis, drag continues to be performed and affected by the cultural milieu in which it was performed. While drag has been demonstrated to offer resistance in times of war and for marginalized communities, continued study of drag might one day point to the liberation of those failed and oppressive paradigms of social structures.

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